

■ STRATEGIC STUDIES PROGRAM

Regionalism in the Time of Systemic Risk

Potential and Pitfalls in ASEAN's Approach

Te-Anne C. Robles¹

With 2025 fast approaching, ASEAN is once again occupied with discussions on the region's future as it drafts the ASEAN Community Vision 2045. Various stakeholders are reflecting on the institution's path forward—the 2025 Vision underscored the realization of “a peaceful, stable, and resilient Community with enhanced capacity to respond effectively to challenges” (ASEAN 2015, 13). However, ongoing talks have highlighted the emergence of new challenges and the urgent need to adapt and build resilience given rising uncertainty and disruptions (Chongkittavon 2023; Phanthavong 2023).

These concerns are at the core of systemic risk governance, which has also become an important part of ASEAN's policy agenda. That being said, this policy brief evaluates ASEAN's approach towards systemic risk in two policy areas—finance and pandemics—to demonstrate how the institution's construction of

systemic risk creates contradictory effects on regional cohesion. While the findings support other critical assessments of ASEAN during times of crises, focusing on the social and political construction of systemic risk reveals a consistent logic, one that aligns with the understanding of regionalism as a particular form of risk governance (Hameiri 2011 and 2013). Framing ASEAN's approach in such a way means that we can move beyond assessments of failure or futility. This is not done to dismiss the validity of such claims. Instead, viewing ASEAN as an institution guided by a consistent logic helps us develop our assessments and policy recommendations in terms that link ASEAN's strategic objectives and goals of long-term legitimacy to the existence of a more fair and inclusive regional community. The policy brief concludes with insights on the preliminary steps that can be taken in relation to the region's construction and governance of systemic risk.

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The Rise of Systemic Risk

At first glance, the term “permanent crisis” might come across as a misnomer (Hay 1999, cited in Voltolini et al. 2020). Crises are typically associated with distinct events and states of exception, yet there is a growing sense that crises in their myriad forms have exceeded their conventional boundaries and have become more of the norm. There is an increasing awareness that the complexities and uncertainties, wrought by the current series of crises, have created different challenges for the conduct of multilateral governance (Georgieva 2020; Pantuliano, n.d.; Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019). Recent events demonstrate that multilateral governance has been beset by interrelated problems (e.g., rising inequalities, protectionism, and geopolitical tensions) that exacerbate cleavages, while also emphasizing the importance of international solidarity.

This also complicates our understanding of regionalism, which has conventionally relied on the notion of crisis as a critical juncture. Notwithstanding variations in impact, crises are viewed as crucial drivers in the process of regionalism (see Chin 2010; Emmers and Ravenhill 2011; Katada 2011; Yoshimatsu 2016 for the case of East Asia). However, examining regionalism through the lens of crisis imposes analytical boundaries that minimize the transboundary nature of today’s policy challenges. The extent of crisis contagion and the significance of interdependencies have highlighted the need for a different approach. These concerns are better captured by the concept of systemic risk, which is now a prominent feature in regional policy agendas, including ASEAN’s.

Systemic risk has been attracting attention in academic and policy circles alike. It comes in different forms, but general usage of the term highlights its emergence due to modernization and globalization and its embeddedness within overlapping social networks. Early studies define systemic risk as “breakdowns in an entire system, as opposed to breakdowns in individual parts or components, and are evidenced by co-movements amongst most or all of the parts” (Kaufman and Scott 2003, cited in Goldin and Vogel 2010, 5). While this captures the pervasiveness of systemic risk, more recent works address its insidious nature and its extensive but often overlooked social and political implications. Scholars who emphasize these aspects view systemic risk as “potential threats that endanger the functionality of systems of critical importance for society and their scope in time and space” (Renn et al. 2022, 1903).

In contrast to simple risk, the causes and effects of systemic risk are not immediately evident because of feedback effects and unintended consequences that result from such links. This is further attributed to the high degree of complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity in systemic risk (Renn, Klinke, and van Asselt 2011). While its measurement and monitoring are often portrayed as a technical exercise, recognizing these dimensions of systemic risk requires a deeper understanding of its social and political implications.

Acknowledging the social and political construction of systemic risk has several important implications—the extent to which these are considered in ASEAN’s policy agenda should be carefully scrutinized. For instance, measuring and monitoring systemic risk involve an implicit assertion of what counts as a fair distribution of costs and benefits of such risks. It entails determining what is acceptable and tolerable for a diverse range of actors whose links to the production of systemic risk and its effects are not easily determined to begin with (Goldin and Vogel 2010; Renn, Kinke, and van Asselt 2011). It requires managing the “tension between the privatization of benefits and the socialization of risks” (Maskrey et al. 2022, 13), a problematic dynamic evidenced by the bailout of “too big to fail” financial institutions (or systemically-important financial institutions), using taxpayers’ money, while the same taxpayers struggle with austerity measures. In contrast, quotidian systemic risk, or the everyday risk faced by individuals, households, and small businesses, is usually minimized or seen as a general challenge in the case of low- and medium-income countries (Maskrey et al. 2022). Moreover, systemic risk governance tends to be oriented towards controlling global and transboundary risks while overlooking local drivers and impact. As the construction of systemic risk also involves debates over lines of causality and responsibility, the representation of systemic risk in the ASEAN policy agenda should thus be rejected as a depoliticized practice. Instead, it should be further examined to reveal its social and political implications.

ASEAN's Approach Towards Systemic Risk

References to risk management and resilience have long been central to ASEAN discourse; they date back to the first summit where member states agreed to “eliminate threats posed by subversion to its stability, thus strengthening national and ASEAN resilience” (ASEAN 1976). While subversion is no longer seen as the primary threat to regional stability, regional resilience is determined by member countries’ commitment to “remain united vis-à-vis external divisive forces” and how they use the institution as the platform “to effectively engage key partners, in order to respond collectively and constructively to global developments and issues of common concern” (ASEAN 2018).

This rhetorical shift suggests a reframing of risk governance from one focused on internal subversion towards one targeting “external divisive forces” (ibid.) Admittedly, the ASEAN meeting documents previously referred to do not explicitly refer to systemic risk; nonetheless, they give a clear indication of how ASEAN categorizes threats as either internal or external. Following the previous discussion on the nature of systemic risk, assuming a false internal-external dichotomy can be problematic, considering the extent of interdependencies and the complexities, uncertainties, and ambiguities of systemic risk.

Depending on the policy area, significant variations exist in how ASEAN applies this internal-external dichotomy. While an in-depth analysis of ASEAN policy documents is beyond the scope of this policy brief, a review of statements and reports concerning finance and the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the crucial implications of ASEAN’s approach towards systemic risk. These two policy areas were chosen given the region’s historical experience (i.e., the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2002–2003 SARS outbreak), and the politicization of the transboundary effects of these forms of systemic risk.

In the case of financial systemic risk, the reports prepared by the ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office (AMRO) offer insight into the framing of internal-external risks and its effects on regional cohesion. Analysis of the inaugural 2017 ASEAN+3 Regional Economic Outlook (AREO) focuses on external risks, with specific reference to the Trump administration and Brexit (AMRO 2017). However, the role of domestic

conditions and the urgent need for internal structural reform (e.g., lagging productivity and the need for pension system reform)—factors highlighted in a similar report by the IMF (IMF 2017)—are overlooked. Also, the feedback and contagion effects between internal and external risks are given limited consideration (Robles 2019). As such, AMRO effectively draws the lines for causality and responsibility by setting boundaries on external systemic risk.

While the topic of financial systemic risk did not receive the same level of attention in the 2020 and 2021 AREO reports, a similar thread persists in the analysis of risks during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2020 AREO report also foregrounds regional resilience amidst global risks as it underscores the pandemic’s impact on G-3 economic growth and the possible resurgence of US-China trade tensions as the main sources of risk (AMRO 2020). The authors were optimistic about the region’s ability to rebound on the strength of its manufacturing and export sectors; trade and tourism were identified as crucial contagion channels (ibid.). However, there was minimal discussion of quotidian systemic risks that defined the everyday struggles of the region’s citizens at the height of the pandemic.

The 2021 AREO report begins by praising the region’s pandemic policies, which was “a sharp contrast to the situation in Europe and the United States” (AMRO 2021, ix). However, the AREO 2021 report has more reflection on the long-term consequences of the pandemic. In addition to the usual emphasis on external risks, the report notes the uneven impact on different sectors of the economy and the labor market, especially those belonging to already-vulnerable groups. The discussion on post-pandemic policy considerations also notes the importance of improving the healthcare system and strengthening social safety nets. However, these were reduced to a cursory mention; the bulk of the discussion focused on trade and global value chains. As previously done in the 2017 report, the 2020 and 2021 AMRO analyses of systemic risk placed greater weight on what was viewed as “external” or “global” risks and uncertainties. It can be argued that doing so supports regional cohesion and resilience, since such an approach towards systemic risk allows ASEAN to “remain united vis-à-vis external divisive forces” (ASEAN 2018). However, this approach relies on a problematic internal-external dichotomy that contradicts the nature of systemic risk, and leaves gaps

in ASEAN's method of risk governance, thus leaving the region vulnerable to systemic risk.

As for the regional response to COVID-19, the internal-external dichotomy is not as stark. This can be attributed to the weak regional response to the pandemic. Given Southeast Asia's proximity to China and its extensive trade links, the region's immediate exposure and vulnerability—coupled with its experience during the SARS pandemic—should have given ASEAN strong reasons to act quickly and decisively. While some countries like Singapore and Vietnam took the initiative to extend international aid, assessments of regional-level responses were mixed. The Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 was swiftly convened in April 2020, and a slew of supporting statements, guidelines, and frameworks followed (e.g., COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework) to reaffirm “the spirit of a Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN” (ASEAN 2020). However, these fell short in terms of the development of a coordinated and robust ASEAN-level response (Amul et al. 2022; Rüländ 2021; Kliem 2021). As the pandemic raged, member countries prioritized national action and the securitization of COVID-19 (Kliem 2021). This also hastened democratic backsliding in countries such as the Philippines, Thailand, and Cambodia (Rüländ 2021).

In contrast to the approach towards financial systemic risk, the ASEAN member countries' approach towards COVID-19 shows a greater concern about containing the spread of systemic risk within certain sectors of society. Underneath declarations of regional solidarity, the ASEAN member countries' respective national responses established the lines for causality and responsibility. They simultaneously depicted COVID-19 as a “foreign fatal threat” (Kliem 2021, 374) by managing contagion through border controls and the segmentation of “risky” groups. In this instance, reference to external threats served to strengthen state sovereignty while weakening inclusiveness (Rüländ 2021). To the extent that internal risks were identified, these were primarily depicted as threats to the national response that need to be contained. Internal structural deficiencies and the recognition of heightened vulnerabilities of designated risky groups were given limited importance. As with the case of financial

systemic risk, this approach contradicts the nature of systemic risk and results in a deficient method of risk governance. While the case of ASEAN's pandemic response might suggest a weakening of regional cohesion, the application of different perspectives on regionalism can offer alternative readings.

Regionalism Amidst Systemic Risk

The rise of AMRO (Grimes and King 2020) and the shortcomings of ASEAN's COVID-19 response (Kliem 202; Rüländ 2021) have been the subject of several studies focusing on regionalism. Findings suggest varying opinions on whether these recent developments have resulted in changes or continuities in the trajectory of ASEAN regionalism. With respect to COVID-19, scholars have relied on arguments that ASEAN's response is necessarily limited by institutional path dependency² (Rüländ 2021) and by the institution's adherence to norms of non-interference and the primacy of national sovereignty (Amul et al. 2022). Others offer a different explanation by citing the “self-fulfilling prophecy of realism” wherein the persistence of self-help priorities at the national level inevitably “paraly[ze] regional cooperation” (Kliem 2021, 371).

While these studies raise valid points, such assessments promote views that rely on standard depictions of ASEAN as a futile or failed enterprise. In addition to Eurocentric connotations, accepting this frame narrows the scope for constructive criticism and the development of politically feasible policy actions. Persisting with this line of thought dismisses the logic behind the ASEAN agenda, which, while both consistent and problematic, remains central to regionalism in Southeast Asia and beyond.

As the prominence of systemic risk in ASEAN's policy agenda continues, it is worth paying more attention to how regionalism is a particular form of risk governance. This perspective builds on Hameiri's argument that regionalism should be understood as the process of contestation over “the territorial, institutional, and/or functional scope of political rule” (Hameiri 2013, 314). With respect to risk governance, regionalism thus becomes a debate on the representations of risk

² As a concept used in historical institutionalism, path dependency refers to how past policy choices can constrain future trajectories of institutional change.

and the boundaries and governance arrangements that emanate from such representations (Hameiri 2011). At stake here is the location of these boundaries, which are essentially contestable given the complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity of systemic risk (Renn et al. 2011). While the previous discussion of the cases of financial and pandemic systemic risk gives a glimpse of the dynamics at play, a more rigorous dissection of ASEAN policy documents can better illustrate how the institution has used the construction of systemic risk to support its perception of regional cohesion. Additionally, it can show how this construction can and should be contested by problematizing the institution's depiction of systemic risk.

Policy Implications

Understanding ASEAN's approach towards systemic risk as an exercise in establishing and representing the boundaries of political rule and accountability provides opportunities to challenge the institution's methods without contesting the underlying logic. If it is accepted that the evolution of ASEAN regionalism involves contestation over the scope of political rule, and that this process is shaped by the construction and representation of systemic risk, then the need to pursue a different path forward can be outlined through a few key points.

First, political rule does not operate in a vacuum and cannot be unilaterally defined by ASEAN and its member states if it wishes to maintain its long-term relevance and resilience. While the notion of ASEAN centrality places greater significance on the region's role and standing in global affairs, the institution's prioritization of this aspect of its operations has not been well-received by Southeast Asians. A 2023 survey shows that 73 percent of respondents find that ASEAN

member countries have been reduced to proxies in major power conflicts, and that the institution is more of an arena for major power competition. This is supported by another survey finding indicating a strong consensus (83 percent) that ASEAN is ineffective and passive, as it fails to cope with the changing and complex political and economic environment (Seah et al. 2023). If ASEAN continues to frame systemic risk as a fixed and contained external threat, these criticisms of the institution will gain traction and create challenges for ASEAN centrality and legitimacy in the long run.

This relates to the second point on the extent of "organized hypocrisy" in ASEAN. This refers to how ASEAN's attempts to secure survival through its relations with major external stakeholders, while protecting regional practices have widened the gap between the institution's words and deeds (Bae 2023). While Bae concedes that this has helped ensure ASEAN's survival, continuing this trajectory will also lead to "a trap" that will leave the institution dealing with internal and external criticism. The interdependencies and feedback effects of systemic risk mean that ASEAN cannot rely on its problematic construction of systemic risk as internal and external factors that can be isolated from each other.

Finally, while calls for a "whole-of-ASEAN approach" to systemic risk (Bisri and Lutfiananda 2022) are important, genuine cross-sectoral and cross-pillar collaboration requires departing from ASEAN's top-down form of regionalism. The pandemic has shown the potential of alternative forms of regionalism from below (Tadem et al. 2023). ASEAN needs to enhance engagement with the involved communities in its approach towards systemic risk. This is especially crucial given the social construction of systemic risk and the tendency to overlook its quotidian forms.

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