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The EU at ARF interacting with ASEAN and Myanmar: the complementarity of the analytical variables put to the test

Conference presentation

Original citation:

Marchi, Ludovica (2016) *The EU at ARF interacting with ASEAN and Myanmar: the complementarity of the analytical variables put to the test*. In: Annual Conference of the European Union Studies Association Asia-Pacific 30 Years After the Single European Act, 29-30 Jun 2016, Hong Kong, China.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/67518/>

Available in LSE Research Online: August 2016

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The EU at ARF interacting with ASEAN and Myanmar: The complementarity of the analytical variables put to the test

In this presentation I will discuss the method of investigation that I employed in my paper, which concerns the EU's role at ARF to encourage ASEAN as well as Myanmar to link with security cooperation.

As we remember, Myanmar became a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997; and concerning the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF, the multilateral arena for security cooperation), the EU is a participating actor, whereas ASEAN was its founding member (in 1994), and Myanmar became a member 2 years later;

What has the European Union done when it participated in the ASEAN Regional Forum?

I have 2 assumptions in my paper:

The 1st is that

- a) the EU made efforts to motivate ASEAN to undertake responsibilities, such as 'crisis support'; & I will discuss here how Checkel's social theory justified ASEAN's crisis support for Myanmar;

my 2nd assumption is that

- b) the EU tried to inspire Myanmar to engage in security cooperation; & I will discuss how March and Olsen explain the logic behind Myanmar's acceptance to cooperate;

In order to discuss my assumptions, I also need to employ another analytical tool, which are the observations derived from the interviews I conducted in Southeast Asia and in Brussels in 2013-14 and 2015.

Now, you have understood that my method of investigation is shaped by three elements, Checkel's social theory, March and Olsen's logic and the explanations provided by the Interviewees.

I stress that the value of these variables, in my case study, lay in their joint relationship; the extended debate on 'whether any of these frameworks possess greater causal weight than the other' is a discussion that you find in the paper;

The context within which my case study takes place is the context of Cyclone Nargis which devastated Myanmar in 2008 and caused several thousands deaths;

◆ Hence, concerning my first assumption: (why ASEAN provided crisis support for Myanmar in the aftermath of the cyclone), I explored whether Checkel (and his social theories) could offer answers;

Checkel (1999) explained that there are processes whereby actors acquire new interests and preferences through contact with other contexts, either discursive structures or norms.

My question is: is this argument persuasive?

Three points deal with this issue: 'group learning', 'ability to persuade' and the 'crisis' and 'policy failure' argument.

◆◆ Point one: 'group learning'

I have to say that 'transformative discourses' developed at the ARF meetings through which to encourage 'group learning' and dispense norms – as vehicles of new interests (Checkel 1999, 548). The Inter-sessional Support Group on Confidence Building Measures, the Peacekeeping groups, and those related to Search, Rescue and Disaster Relief, received growing support from the personnel from the EU External Service, and from the Crisis Response and Operational Coordination section (Interview (B), 2014), as well as from the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) (Interview (C), 2014).

These personnel, while interviewed, confirmed that the frequency of the networking promoted new learning, and interactions developed new interests (Interviews (A) & (B), 2014).

And this result is congruent with Checkel's belief that 'where a group met repeatedly, and where there was a high density of interactions among participants', new interests were most likely to be generated (p. 549).

◆◆ Point two: the 'ability to persuade'

The 'ability to persuade' was a further factor contributing to develop new preferences and goals. The interviewed ASEAN leaders close to the ARF organisation (Interviews (D), 2013) and Southeast Asian security policy analysts (Interviews (E), 2014) have acknowledged that the persons involved in the Forum's activities (training and assistance in the practical exercises) (the EEAS and ECHO personnel, and those from OSCE), in most cases, had an enhanced persuasive capability, which they accredited to the authority of their position, and had the power to influence the actors' inclinations (Interviews (D), 2013 & (E), 2014).

This explanation too, obtained from the interviews, matches Checkel's suggestion that, when the persuader was an authoritative member of the group to which the persuadee belonged, or wanted to belong, persuasion was most likely to materialise (p. 550).

◆◆ Point three: the 'crisis' and 'policy failure' argument

Also, the 'crisis' and 'policy failure' dynamics was able to develop new commitments and roles. ASEAN leaders (Interviews (F), 2013) suggested that during the 'crisis' of the cyclone, the ASEAN group felt an added responsibility, and the role of dealing with the crisis emerged as an obligation. In addition, the foreign policy of Myanmar's junta refusing the help of external donors, and lacking the capability to provide assistance to its own people was evidence of 'policy failure' (Selth 2008).

These reasons, provided by the above leaders, reconnect with Checkel's proposition that the development of new purposes and roles was more likely 'where the group felt itself in a crisis or was faced with clear evidence of policy failure' (p. 549).

Now: I have seen that Checkel's argument –substantiated by the comments of the people I talked to– provided reasons for ASEAN taking up new interests, commitments & roles, which were key to back its crisis support for Myanmar;

And, yet, concerning the assumption of my paper, I ask:
has ASEAN responded to the EU's encouragement at the Forum to undertake responsibilities?

The officers I enquired, this time in Brussels (from the EEAS and ECHO) confirmed that their own activity within the ARF groups and sub-groups was intended to transmit new norms, that would be assimilated and lead to others' undertakings (Interviews (B) and (C), 2014).

The interviewees outlined a scenario which agreed with Checkel's notion that social dynamics created 'new drives' (responsibilities, duties, obligations, tasks), which grew *via* contact with other contexts.

Having discussed this, I focus on my second assumption:

◆ Myanmar's acceptance to cooperate –in the field of security;

what was the instance of cooperation?

it concerned Myanmar's acceptance of the disaster relief assistance provided by ASEAN;

what was so special regarding this?

it implied a change of the military junta's attitude to refuse any sort of external interference in its own affairs

To interpret this change (the junta's relaxed stance), I looked at March and Olsen's theory. These scholars' logic of expected consequences suggests that the strategic calculation of rational bargaining of a government's protection and defence of what it perceives as its national interest confronts,

but frequently, also, becomes reconciled with the position of other states on the same policy issue (March and Olsen 1998, 950).

In the post-Nargis situation, the strategic calculation of rational bargaining by Myanmar's junta challenged the position of the other actors, specifically ASEAN, and the ASEAN Secretariat which was willing to network with Myanmar's government. The rational bargaining challenge was, firstly, manifested by the junta's rejection of external help, and the defence of what it perceived to be the national interest (Selth 2008; Haacke 2008; Cook 2013).

Only subsequently, a different logic emerged (that March and Olsen explain as the logic of appropriateness (1998, 951-2; 2004)). With the help of the interviewees, I suggested five reasons (that you find in the paper) to justify the change in logic. A strong motive (proposed by a Southeast Asian security analyst) (Interview (G), 2014) was the confidence factor that the ASEAN's assistance mission was to remain under Myanmar's junta's own control – which was key to its acceptance. This assertion merely recalls the EU's efforts, at ARF, to develop confidence-building dialogues and generate reliance on security and humanitarian operations.

Now, I ask: *Could, really, this result, Myanmar's acceptance of ASEAN's (and others') assistance (i.e. cooperating with the group) have any relation with the EU's efforts in terms of inspiring Myanmar to undertake multilateral [security] options?*

& I found that the relation lies in the fact that the 'incentives to Myanmar's change' (highlighted by the interviewees) are the proposals that the EU discussed at the Forum.

Which means what? It means that:

With no doubt, the ethical dimension of the responsibility to protect its own people (that the interviewees indicated as a duty of ASEAN & Myanmar there within) is distinct to the EU;

and similarly the belief in the value of collective regional security;

likewise, the trust in reinforcing regionalism in Southeast Asia is key to both the EU's idea of security and participation in the ARF.

That Myanmar's junta should engage in reforms, as advanced by the interviewees, has always been demanded by the EU;

and, also, the principle of continuing cooperation among the regional partners is something that the EU predicates at all times.

In the end, the motivations supported by the interviewees appear to be connected with what I observed in the paper to be the EU's encouragement of Myanmar to accept multilateral security solutions.

◆ In conclusion,

in this presentation, we have considered how these analytical variables operated in their joint relationship while they provided answers to the assumptions:

concerning ASEAN, Checkel suggested how social mechanisms lead to the development of new responsibilities;

with regard to the junta, March and Olsen shed light on the logic informing actors' behaviour;

& the interviewees have been key to confirm how interests can be exposed to processes of transformation;

The extent to which the complementarity of the three analytical elements was relevant to the discussion of the assumptions is an issue that you find more thoroughly debated in the paper.