Enduring hypocrisy as ASEAN's organisational problem?
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Abstract

This paper complements the limited scholarly interest in the case of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)'s consistent practice of word–deed gaps, or "hypocrisy" according to some scholars, by employing the insights of organisational sociology. Specifically, it introduces a claim that the gap between ASEAN's words and deeds can be understood as an organisational response to its material and political vulnerability in relation to its major external stakeholders, aiming to ensure its survival and adaptability. Accommodating multiple, or sometimes even conflicting, demands from various external actors, ASEAN may be able to secure its material and diplomatic engagement in developmental and political regionalism within Southeast Asia. However, ASEAN also wants to protect its local identity and practices; or it may want to avoid forced internal reforms at an undesirable scale and pace. In this context, organised hypocrisy would likely become a vital consideration for the complex institution. For ASEAN, this paper notes, these word–deed gaps reflect the way it wants to manage conflicting external demands as an international social agency.

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Introduction

> ". . .judicious use of hypocrisy can, like good manners, provide crucial strategies for melding ideals and interests." (Finnemore, 2009: 61)

The word–deed gaps of socio-political organisations have received much academic attention, particularly from the studies of organisations (Brunsson, 2002; Brunsson and Olsen, 1993; Hill, 1993; Meyer and Rowan, 1991; Oliver, 1999; Steinberg, 2002; Wade, 2002; Weaver, 2008). Within this discourse, quite a few scholars have labelled these gaps as organisational hypocrisy and explored them as such. Theorising the concept, Nils Brunsson (2002: xiii) first defined hypocrisy of organisations as a term "signifying a difference between words and deeds, the eventuality that organisations may talk in one way, decide in another and act in a third." Drawing on his ideas, Weaver (2008) in her work on the Work Bank elaborates on what constitutes hypocrisy. Organisational hypocrisy includes instances in which organisational declarations or mandates are violated in practice. However, Weaver includes the more pervasive cases in which organisations proclaim commitments to certain norms, such as human rights and good governance, but then do not commit the actual financial or institutional resources necessary to put them into practice. In either case, the presence of hypocrisy is a matter of degree, not a question of whether it exists in organisations (Weaver, 2008: 20–21).

This paper addresses such discrepancies, at the organisational level, between words and deeds within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In fact, this practice has been widely noted already by various observers and commentators. Some scholars note that many of the ASEAN's stated goals may not actually matter (Nair, 2010). Several others also observe that, unlike what ASEAN claims, ASEAN's actual practices do not create an integrated social and economic community (Dosch, 2017; Jones and Smith, 2007; Narine, 2002). Or, it is also contended, that its community building and integration projects remain selective and uneven depending on contestations between major social and political forces within member states (Jones, 2016; Nesadurai, 2003). Moreover, ASEAN's stated commitment to the principles of global governance, such as human rights and multilateralism, is practiced differently from global expectations to meet local leaders' interests (Davies, 2013; Rüland, 2011). There was an even more striking claim that the principles of non-interference and sovereignty are neither cardinal nor absolute for ASEAN's business, challenging the consensus (Jones, 2010). For others, ASEAN's rhetoric-action gaps should be understood as rituals that hold self-interested members together (Davies, 2018).[1]

While discussing a range of issues related to ASEAN matters, these observations tend to suggest one of two messages. On the one hand, for those who doubt ASEAN's role in international regional affairs, its word–deed gaps would confirm their cynicism towards this group of self-interested rulers. These practices also indicate that, unlike what optimists of ASEAN's development highlight, a close examination of ASEAN's organisational effort to reform itself, go more liberal and become more incorporated as a part of global governance may have little relevance. That is, ASEAN's stated goals would not matter in any event. On the other hand, those who highlight the attributes of

"successful" organisations, such as consistency, being action-oriented, and efficiency, would elevate their normative criticism by claiming that ASEAN's word–deed gaps are immoral (Bukovansky, 2010: 57–58; Weaver, 2008: 2). Unlike the earlier sceptics, they will want to keep pushing ASEAN to address its bad practices and transform itself into more mature, efficient, and functional organisation.

Despite the ongoing critiques illustrated above, however, the scholarly discussion about why ASEAN's word–deed gaps persist is limited. Although a few studies addressing this question exist, they tend to revolve around rational choice – constructivist divides. Among others, the rational choice school of thought remains dominant within the broader discussion about the organisational hypocrisy of international actors. Stephen Krasner introduced his well-known and much-cited realist discussion about the word–deed gaps of nation-states. In his seminal work, he uses the concept of "organised hypocrisy" to discuss sovereignty as a norm which predominates but is often violated in international politics (Krasner, 1999). Highlighting that the logic of consequences governs international politics where state leaders act as rational individuals, he argues that international norms (e.g., sovereignty) cannot hold legitimate authority in a weak institutionalised international system; thus they stay as instruments to meet the interests of rulers who act through states (Lipson, 2007: 8). Thus, for most realists, the reality of hypocrisy dictates scepticism; it also intensifies a public need to uncover hidden motivations or intentions as the driving forces of international politics (Bukovansky, 2010: 57).

This logic is applied to the dissonance between its words and deeds, something that has been frequently observed in the case of ASEAN. For example, in considering why human rights norms emerged in ASEAN after 1997, Matthew Davies argues that the rational choice framework provides a useful explanation in understanding how ASEAN leaders view these liberal norms as possible instruments to help them secure political goals. He notes that the framework makes sense of the "rhetoric-action gaps" by suggesting that integrating such norms into the ASEAN framework does not necessarily signal a leaders' true commitment to them (Davies, 2013: 208–209).

In particular, Davies' observations stem from his critique of the utility of the logic of appropriateness which gained dominance in the study of ASEAN's norms and institutions starting in the early 1990s. While the constructivist school of thought leads the discourse of norms in this region, he notes, it cannot explain the rhetoric–action gap, which he identifies as the defining feature of ASEAN's human rights journey (Davies, 2013: 217). Rather, constructivist works on ASEAN's normative changes or continuity focus mostly on tracing how new norms (e.g., human rights) have shaped regional identities, interests, and actors' behaviours around the institutionalisation of ASEAN. However, as he argues, these mostly optimistic observations may not help one in understanding the frequent word–deed dissonance and violations of these norms (Davies, 2013).

Admittedly, there is lack of constructivist discussion about ASEAN's word–deed gaps (for an exceptional work, see Jetschke and Rüland, 2009). However, one can get some broader constructivist implications from some existing studies of international organisations (Bukovansky, 2010; Cusumano and Bures, 2022). For example, some political theorists, such as Judith Shklar, claim that the accusation of organisational hypocrisy is

based on problematic assumptions, namely that practitioners and those who accuse them of hypocrisy have a shared understanding of norms or moral values (Shklar, 1985). In this view, it is important that researchers reveal the existence of conflicting sets of norms and social purposes that constitute the reasons for the words and actions of the "hypocrite." These constructivist ideas imply that one "cannot reduce norms to mere covers for interest on the ground that interests are somehow more 'real' while norms are more 'rhetorical'." Instead, both norms and interests can be socially constructed and constitute the reason for actions (Bukovansky, 2010: 56; Kratochwil 1989).

In supplementing the dearth of scholarly interest regarding ASEAN's constant word–deed gaps, this paper aims to discuss them by employing the insights of organisational sociology. Specifically, it draws on the sociological conception of organisational hypocrisy, which has been taken up by several works on international organisations, to examine the functional effects of these diverging practices for the sake of organisational survival and needs. This paper agrees with the rational choice framework's critique that the dominant constructivist examination of ASEAN has not sufficiently addressed open and persistent dissonance between normative declarations and actions. However, it also argues that hypocrisy as portrayed by these rational choice theorists was "largely devoid of organisations" when it was the organisations that were exhibiting hypocrisy (Lipson, 2007: 8).

The paper attempts to augment the existing discussion about ASEAN in three aspects. First, the strategic choice framework is lacking in discussion about social and collective gains that these ASEAN elites can expect to get from such word–deed gaps, despite varying domestic concerns and political orientations towards regional norms and rules. Reducing the concerns about the ASEAN-level gaps to those of individual member state elites whose political goals were assumed to have been set exogenously from their regional interactions is insufficient in understanding these persistent practices of ASEAN as a collective regional organisation. Second, while attributing the rise of these practices to their strategic benefits of ASEAN political elites would help researchers pay attention to individual elites, this paper deviates from the dominant academic interest in identifying individuals' intentions and motivations. Instead, this study examines organisational hypocrisy in itself and how the word–deed gaps might play out functionally within certain social settings. This also enable us to pay attention to both the expected and unintended effects of social practices, a focus that is sometimes neglected in actor-oriented models. Third, this paper seeks to enrich the sociological institutionalist understanding of ASEAN practices by elevating the word–deed gaps to being the main topic of discussion. Sociological perspectives provide useful insights into ASEAN's adoption and localisation of external norms and institutions by identifying various isomorphic or constitutive processes of idea/institution diffusion (Acharya 2004; Capie 2008; Jetschke 2010; Katsumata 2011). This work adds to the literature by examining the extant word–deed gaps, a topic that has been noted but addressed insufficiently by scholars working on ASEAN as a social and political entity.

Drawing on key insights from some organisational sociologists' findings on multilateral international organisations,[2] this paper discusses the organisational nature of the persistent and somewhat growing gaps between ASEAN's words and actions. Specifically, it

examines how social pressures from changing international environments since the end of the Cold War have produced perverse incentives for ASEAN to engage in the word–deed gaps. For ASEAN, as a non-major diplomatic association that participates in the asymmetric international structure, such word–deed dissonance has often been difficult to avoid when it comes to ensuring its survival, particularly given the changing nature of international asymmetry. Not only that, but also the dissonance has been functionally useful for addressing political concerns that ASEAN faces. For organisations such as ASEAN, which pursue both action-oriented and political aims, the disintegrative practice may have been considered an institutionalised solution," instead of a problem or immoral consequence – as some critics put it.

The following sections address these issues. The next segment draws on theoretical insights from organisational sociology to discuss hypocrisy, a concept with which this work seeks to anchor its implications. The following two sections then discuss the case of ASEAN by illustrating how ASEAN's word–deed gaps have been considered not only rarely avoidable but even desirable for its survival and preeminence in a changing international landscape (Brunsson, 2002: xi). This paper concludes by providing ASEAN observers with some conceptual and policy implications.

Organisational Sociology and the Presence of Word–Deed Gaps

Collectively, many works based on organisational sociology follow the open systems school of organisation theory, which emphasises the importance of external environments in understanding the major activities of organisations (Lipson, 2007). This school highlights the malleable nature of organisational interests and actions intertwined with an open environment. Their key research questions thus tend to focus on how or to what extent environmental constraints or incentives affect organisations (Finnemore, 1996). Specifically, resource dependency theorists within this school underscore competitive environment which compels institutions dependent on external resources for their survival to accommodate external pressures (Petrov et al., 2019). Other variants of sociological institutionalism, including the World Polity approach (or the Stanford School's sociological institutionalism), would argue for the importance of societal norms and relational structures for organisations to obtain, from external players, the legitimacy necessary to mobilise resources (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Meyer and Scott, 1983; Weaver, 2008: 26–27). Together, these varying frameworks argue that organisations' internal characteristics (or their outputs) may often end up reflecting their strategic or inevitable responses to environmental demands required for their survival, rather than carefully calculated choices, made within a closed system, for maximising interests – as rationalists tend to claim (Drori et al., 2006).

According to this logic, then, the challenges to modern organisations could emerge from being confronted by inconsistent, conflicting, or contradictory demands. For example, as Brunsson notes, modern states are expected to help families, senior citizens, and developing economies – yet also keep taxes low (Brunsson, 2002: xii). Today's companies are expected to be profitable, but also to offer employees with a desirable working

environment, provide good service to customers, be environment-friendly, and so on. However, achievement in one direction frequently undermines success in another direction. In a complex world in which organisations cannot satisfy every stakeholder, as the school of sociological organisation theories argues, organisations' decoupling of words and actions can function as solutions to conflicting demands; as such, they are quite common and, sometimes, even necessary (Iankova and Katzenstein, 2003). Talking in one direction but acting in the opposite may be inevitable to satisfy conflicting interests, at least to some extent. Conversely, this would also mean that, ironically, talking and acting consistently may be undesirable as it would satisfy one stakeholder but do nothing to satisfy the others (Brunsson, 2002: xiv).

The implications become more relevant if the organisations are not evaluated solely by their services or products. While institutional efficiency and coordinated actions are usually expected in normative theories, there is no guarantee that these expectations will necessarily be compatible with the demands, either from internal or external institutional environments. This means, according to Brunsson, that "two sets of organisational processes arise: one generates action; the other does not, but is kept for purposes of demonstration or display to the outside world" (Brunsson, 2002: 6–7). For those interested in ensuring the organisation's success, the latter process may be as necessary as the former. Whereas the dominant discourse on organisations tends to focus on consistency and efficiency as major requirements for success, the school of organisational sociology provides a counterintuitive implication, namely, that hypocrisy can be useful for maintaining (or attaining) success instead of creating dysfunction. It also imparts an understanding as to why organisations have word–deed gaps as often and persistently as they do, despite the constant criticism and calls for reform (Barnett and Coleman, 2005; Brunsson, 2002: 4–12; Cusumano, 2019; Hansen and Marsh, 2015). As the World Polity school notes, the frequent presence of such gaps in global and regional institutions may demonstrate that their social life cannot simply reflect local conditions (Buhari-Gulmez, 2010: 255).

These theoretical insights provide a useful and alternative perspective in observing persistent word–deed gaps in ASEAN. It differs from mainstream theorists in the discipline of International Relations who tend to base their discussion on the rationalist assumption that (as discussed above) such a gap or hypocrisy is an outcome of an organisational ruler's carefully crafted decision-making aimed at maximise his or her interests (Krasner, 1999: 57). Instead, the sociological perspective questions if such an assumption (which is based on the model of a rational individual) is applicable to international organisations, which consist of a plurality of principals and agents whose interests can easily diverge. Given that organisational interests do not emanate from a fixed set of interests from a unitary and relatively autonomous actor but are constantly shaped by many stakeholders with different demands, these acts of hypocrisy at the organisational level should be viewed differently from those of an individual with a closed set of interests (Bukovansky, 2010: 57).

Instead, the sociological formulation would note that ASEAN's persistent gap between its words and its deeds should fundamentally be about an organisation that is not a unitary actor but a social agency constituted through its interactions with its multiple environments (Meyer and Jepperson, 2000; Scott, 2003). In such an institution, its

dissonant attributes may actually often be unintended and uncoordinated responses to conflicting external demands or environmental pressures (Lipson, 2007: 9).[3] This implies that trying to understand organisational hypocrisy with an actor-oriented model focused on individual actors' intentions or goals may not be as sufficient as the main-stream literature often assumes. Instead, the insights from organisational sociology com-plement the understanding of word–deed gaps by turning scholarly attention from actors' intentions to organisational social outcomes and their effects. Next, the following sections examine the case of ASEAN in more detail.

The Word–Deed Gaps of ASEAN as a Materially Vulnerable *Action* Organisation

While organisational sociology highlights the importance of environmental demands and pressures on observing institutional decisions and practices, it does not mean that these responses are always incohesive. Rather, the degree of the gaps or the responses in general would rely on the organisational dependence on these environmental demands. Resource dependence approaches suggest (1) the importance of the resource to organisa-tional survival, (2) the extent to which external players control resource allocation, and (3) the availability of alternatives as three major factors that affect organisational responses (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Drawing on these approaches, Barnett and Coleman's work further develops a model arguing in more detail that the level of organ-isational insecurity and cultural congruity with the content of the environmental demands can influence organisational choices (Barnett and Coleman, 2005). According to their articulations (see Figure 1 below), the word–deed gaps, or other types of incohesive prac-tices, could be a likelier response if insecurity were high and cultural congruity were low. Organisations might be forced to conform to environmental pressures if the level of depend-ence on external resources and legitimacy were high. However, they would be less able or willing to conform if accepting external players' culturally incompatible demands would harm the organisational rules of the game and identity of their own. Under these conditions, organisations may have to project the appearance that they are conforming while protecting their identity and business-as-usual in practice (Barnett and Coleman, 2005: 601).

Cultural incongruity	Organizational insecurity	
	High	Low
Low	Acquiescence	Compromise
High	Avoidance, manipulation (ASEAN)	Defiance, strategic social construction

Figure 1. Organization's Responses to External Environments.
Source: Barnett and Coleman (2005: 600).

These theories imply that ASEAN's goals and positional characters in relation to major external stakeholders would make its practices of word–deed dissonance a likelier and more necessary response. ASEAN exhibits an example of significant resource dependence on external stakeholders and of low-level congruence with them in terms of cultural and institutional expectations.

On the one hand, as an organisation of states situated among the lower end of the international pecking order, ASEAN needs to secure the material assistance of major external partners to survive as a sustainable "action" organisation – one that continues to institutionalise and expand its mandates for cooperation within Southeast Asia. As noted by several observers (Dent, 2008; Trinidad, 2014), many of ASEAN's substantial cooperative projects, designed for regional governance for major transnational issues, rely on major external stakeholders' assistance.

In addition to the principal countries' relational position, ASEAN's budget and institutional constraints also make such dependence unavoidable. As the priority of member states' equality and sovereign rights is embedded in ASEAN's social interactions, the formal budget is comprised of only members' equal contributions. Given that contributions should be affordable for the least-developed countries, the scope of cooperative initiatives funded by ASEAN alone is far from sufficient. Moreover, the bureaucratic capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat and other related administrative organisations is also limited given ASEAN states' reluctance to strengthen them beyond international organisation.

ASEAN's dependence on external resources is particularly high because of the prevalence of what Christopher Dent termed "development regionalism" around Southeast Asia. Development regionalism broadly refers to "activities that are particularly oriented to enhancing the economic capacity and prospects of less developed countries with the view of strengthening their incorporation into the regional economy" (Dent, 2008: 780). ASEAN's Dialogue Partnership with major external parties has been the dominant channel used for securing external financial and technical support. The majority of major regional initiatives for development and integration around Southeast Asia receives financial, institutional, and technical support from key international organisations and states which have high stakes in regional governance around Southeast Asia. The list ranges from substantive projects for building ASEAN community (e.g., ASEAN Connectivity and the Initiative for ASEAN Integration [IAI]) to those aimed for ASEAN's global integration, such as strengthening capacity building and regulatory frameworks necessary for ASEAN Plus One free trade arrangements and multilateral financial arrangements. They also provide substantial aid in building ASEAN-level regional governance over transnational issues, including health, environment, or disaster management.[4] Moreover, the key multilateral initiatives for enhancing sub-regional development cooperation or responding to regional order transition that comes with intensifying big-power competition (e.g., Mekong Plus Cooperation Funds, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, Lower Mekong Initiative, BIMP-EAGA, and GMS) have been emerging with renewed interest and support of the region's long-time development partners, including China, Japan, the US, and the ADB (Chambers and Bunyavejchewin, 2019; Dent, 2008; Glassman, 2010; Goh, 2007; Ho, 2019; Middleton and Allouche, 2016; Po and Primiano, 2021;

Poonkham, 2022; Rüland, 2019; Tan, 2014). In addition to economic and social partnership, external support further extends to maritime security in the name of capacity building and joint exercises (Agastia, 2022; Mangosing, 2021).

However, its existing rules and principles in favour of autonomous, gradual, and consensus-based institutionalisation make ASEAN less willing or less able to conform to these environmental pressures, both in the pace and direction the external players expect. The so-called "ASEAN Way" of favouring non-confrontation and non-interference is not designed to prevent members from cooperating but reflect the reality that ASEAN cannot have a supranational character which demands any sacrifice of sovereignty (Katsumata, 2003; Narine, 2018; Nesadurai, 2009). Additionally, having consensus is a dominant value within ASEAN, which prioritises equality and comfort among its members. The culture of seeking cooperation in a non-binding manner which "rejects the adversarial posturing, majority voting and legalistic governance prevalent in the West" is embedded in ASEAN (Collins, 2019: 380). Furthermore, as a regional organisation with distinct local characteristics, ASEAN's authoritarian nature of communication and interactions, such as face-saving repertoires and conflict avoidance practices, is quite dominant in ASEAN's internal diplomacy (Nair, 2019). This makes achieving cultural congruence with the diplomatic practices of major external powers, especially those of the dominant players of the current system of global governance, more difficult.

To summarise: as an action organisation with a high level of resource dependency on, and a low level of cultural congruity with, external players, ASEAN would need to ensure the two tasks simultaneously. First, it would need to make a prompt response to external demands to survive and thrive (Cusumano and Bures, 2022: 161). At the same time, the organisation should seek to ensure an internal set of principles that enables members to stay in. ASEAN's organisational culture and routines have evolved to provide internal stakeholders with predictability and certainty about missions, which helps them pursue tasks with the sustained efficiency and confidence required to manage a variety of external demands (Weaver, 2008: 28).

Therefore, when ASEAN's internal culture conflicts with external demands, as organisational sociology implies, ASEAN has created gaps between its formal structures and its actual activities; this has protected the organisation against environmental pressures (Meyer and Rowan, 1977: 340–341; Weaver, 2008: 28). In other words, its growing word–deed gaps would be organisational responses which are both necessary and difficult to avoid.

The Word–Deed Gaps of ASEAN as a Socially Vulnerable *Political* Organisation

The previous section illustrated how ASEAN's relational traits – such as a high level of resource dependence on externals and a low level of cultural congruity with them – could make the word–deed gaps the likely, and often difficult to avoid, choices for ASEAN as an "action organisation" for regional integration. This next section further discusses how

these practices have also been desirable choices for a "political organisation" – that is, an organisation embedding within conflictual institutional environments.

When diverse members and primary donors hold conflicting opinions, consistencies between words and deeds may, ironically, render the organisation incapable of coping with the inconsistent environmental demands, thus threatening its survival as a political organisation (Brunsson, 2002, 205; Lipson, 2007). ASEAN is such a case. Particularly, its word–deed inconsistency has reflected the institution's persistent interest in strengthening its political capacity to pay a balanced distribution of attention to diverse actors' demands. Especially, as ASEAN has had uncertainties since the Cold War ended and has been facing a changing set of relationships among major powers in East Asia, taking an institutionally central position in regional governance and maintaining its capacity to manage the process has been ASEAN's primary political goal (Caballery-Anthony, 2014; Fukunaga, 2014; Ho, 2012).

ASEAN's practice of consistently speaking before (or without) taking any actions has grown more beneficial along with the rise of ASEAN's collective goal of becoming a central regional order manager within East Asia. To achieve this, ASEAN has active engagement with designing regional arrangements. It particularly led regional multilateralism in a way that new institutional initiatives remained concentric, with ASEAN positioned at the centre. ASEAN tried to engage various external actors through layers of multilateral arrangements, which increased the number of partnerships without much concern for being left out of the major discourse on systemic transition in the region (Bae, 2017).

However, as ASEAN allowed more external involvement, it also had to put more energy into communicating with and responding to these diverse interests and multiple concerns. To reduce environmental uncertainties around the changing dynamics of major power relationships, ASEAN has consistently emphasised assuring its diplomatic position as a regional manager of order in East Asia. This has imparted to ASEAN a substantial diplomatic relevance but also has made the organisation more vulnerable to social insecurity vis-à-vis its external stakeholders. The growing accusations coming from major donors (or the latter's disengagement altogether) could disrupt the legitimacy it needs to secure "social" worth as well as its utility as an action organisation aimed at building regional community. Therefore, ASEAN had to act responsibly to these externals by constantly doing something to signal that ASEAN is attentive and accommodating. Additionally, ASEAN's institutional traits of favouring consensus and fairly accommodating all member states have made word–deed inconsistency or qualified acceptance of new action proposals relatively easy.

The timings and patterns of ASEAN's major declarations to reform or eschew the old principles consistently illustrate this point. Among others, the ASEAN's announcement about its decision to build regional Communities would be one of the most ambitious initiatives. Observers have argued that it is worth noting ASEAN's declarations about turning itself into an organisation committed to economic liberalisation and to global liberal principles were made when major ASEAN stakeholders' material and social vulnerabilities had intensified due to the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. As a sign of

reform, ASEAN declared that it would embrace good governance, transparency, economic liberalisation, and institutionalised interactions. Notably, these were the very principles that external lenders and global international organisations had pushed ASEAN countries to accept to prevent further economic turmoil. Likewise, establishing regional human rights arrangements (e.g., the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration), despite constant intra-ASEAN division and scepticism, became a reality around the time when China's unprecedented economic growth and its prominent leadership in the region made ASEAN stakeholders become more concerned about losing its regional relevance and diplomatic leverage. Enmeshing other major Western powers in the regional affairs was found to be all the more necessary to mitigate these concerns (Goh, 2007/8). For ASEAN stakeholders, ASEAN's announcement regarding its liberal turn was a useful response to these external players' calls for change.

In short, ASEAN's goal of reinforcing its norm of "ASEAN Centrality" amidst the changing major power dynamics of the post-Cold War era has made ASEAN stand out, both diplomatically and as a socially vulnerable entity. In fact, the word–deed dissonance has been found to be politically desirable for ASEAN's organisational survival and prominence in such a transitioning international context.

Admittedly, such an understanding is compatible with rationalist choice explanations in that hypocrisy is strategic. However, while both views seem to account for the functional values of word–deed gaps, this paper's claim does not necessarily follow a rational choice perspective, which highlights the instrumental aspect of the ASEAN leaders' engagement with liberal norms (e.g., Davies, 2013: 222). While the rational choice argument highlights these gaps between words and deeds, as an aggregate decision that ASEAN stakeholders could agree with in advance, the perspective derived from organisational sociology observes such gaps as reflecting the diverging concerns among ASEAN stakeholders. Specifically, it considers the gaps' desirability for ASEAN's survival by reducing the distributional concerns about whose demands are met or unmet. These are political concerns coming from the organisation level, rather than from the individual state level. Bringing these concerns which are intrinsic to each organisation into consideration, this sociological approach can thus pay attention to how actors' interests may reflect social expectations and interactions in the multi-layered diplomacy around ASEAN, thereby differentiating itself from conventional rationalist choice assumptions.

In summary, ASEAN's partnership diversification and what Evelyn Goh (2007/8) calls "omni-enmeshment" practice allows for a wide range of internal and external players with divergent preferences and stakes to make voices regarding organisational matters. Additionally, as the number of external donors grows in ASEAN's post-Cold War governance, the likelihood of contradictory expectations has also been growing (Weaver, 2008: 6). Facing environmental complexity, making a verbal note of these conflicting demands has become a tool for ASEAN's survival.

ASEAN's role was largely to appear responsive to internal and external demands by producing diverse forms of ongoing organisational talks and decisions that are difficult to

measure. What is more, given that many problems that ASEAN is expected to address are hard to resolve in the short-term, ASEAN (as the primary international organisation in Southeast Asia) ends up spending much of its energy on diplomatic gatherings and declarations. These practices can bring political momentum to diverse issues with regional implications, but also can give stakeholders the impression that their concerns are not being overlooked but have been noted in a prompt manner.

In this respect, in addition to its material vulnerability, this study notes that ASEAN's growing social vulnerability has also rendered organisational hypocrisy a recommendable option, at least for those overseeing the organisation's survival (Collins, 2019; Cusumano and Bures, 2022). For political institutions aimed primarily at social reassurance and trust building among stakeholders, evaluating their performance cannot be based solely on the efficiency or consistency of their actions (Brunsson, 2002). Rather, demonstrating a political capacity to address and balance inconsistent internal demands through the ritual showing of concern may compensate for inconsistent actions and diffuse pressure to change such actions (Lipson, 2007: 10–18).

Conclusion

The World Bank scholar Robert Wade argued that anyone concerned with protecting the scope of international organisations may have to focus on how to improve the organisation's ability to be hypocritical and get away with it or to reduce the need for such hypocrisy (Wade, 2005: 3). In responding to Wade's comment, this paper has tried to address how the word–deed inconsistency, or what ASEAN critics would label as hypocritic practices, has been found necessary, and sometimes even desirable, by ASEAN's managers.

Anchoring to existing studies of organisational hypocrisy, this study claims that ASEAN's word–deed gaps can be understood as a response to its high level of material and social vulnerability in relationships to its major external stakeholders; in other words, its aim may be to ensure its survival and adaptability (Lipson, 2007: 13). Accommodating multiple, or sometimes even conflicting, demands from various external actors, ASEAN may be able to secure their material and diplomatic engagement in developmental and political regionalism within Southeast Asia. In this context, then, hypocrisy would likely become a vital consideration for such a complex organisation (Cusumano and Bures, 2022). For ASEAN, the distance between their words and their deed reflects the way it wants to handle conflicting external demands as an international social agency (Brunsson, 2002: xii–xiii).

One of the purposes of this paper is to identify these overlooked effects of organisational hypocrisy in the discourse of ASEAN practices. While the existing academic discussion about its word–deed dissonance has centred around either realist scepticism over state leaders' rhetoric or around normative, and mostly liberal, criticism in favour of organisational efficiency and consistency, there has been little attention paid to identifying other benefits that the dissonance could have provided ASEAN. This paper thus aims to pay attention to this and to complement scholars' earlier understanding of ASEAN's ongoing word–deed gaps.

Moreover, if hypocrisy were identified as a problem, as many commentators note, recognising various sources of the problem would be the first step to address it. As the importance of social environment has been spotlighted relatively little in the existing studies of ASEAN's pathology, this study has tried to underscore that this problem cannot necessarily be attributed to ASEAN's internal traits, but rather to the effects of its interactions with externals as an actor with material and social vulnerabilities.

This paper aims neither to defend nor to excuse the persistent gaps between ASEAN's words and deeds, which have frequently been emphasised by critics. Indeed, this study agrees with the voiced concerns that ASEAN's word–deed dissonance can also become a trap that is easy to fall into but difficult to get out of (Weaver, 2008: 7–8). Given ASEAN's developmental path as an organisation, such a trap can also cause ASEAN to face an unexpected backlash from both external and internal forces. This is where ASEAN's dilemma lies.

Specifically, as ASEAN's pursuit of becoming a central hub in East Asian regionalism grows, its word–deed inconsistency can also become a source of ASEAN's dysfunction in the longer term (Lipson, 2007: 13). Especially over the past two decades, ASEAN has opted for regional community, a decision whereby more roles as a service organisation have been expected, both internally and externally. If its pledges to evolve into such an action organisation replete with a functional capacity keep separating from the actual delivery of its promises, then ASEAN's legitimacy as a credible service organisation will also weaken in the long term. Indeed, organisational hypocrisy may be useful for attaining its goal of becoming successful, as both an action and a political organisation at least for the near future. However, if ASEAN truly wants to evolve to become a more institutionalised service organisation that addresses transnational and international affairs in Southeast Asia (as its vision statements claim), the functional benefits of practicing word–deed gaps may also become constricted due to growing social dissatisfaction with ASEAN's weak performance legitimacy. Thus, social demands and expectations can change over time. The effects of organisational hypocrisy would not be straightforward but would keep changing. ASEAN's gap between its words and its deeds has served to ensure its survival. However, it could also lose its relevance, depending on the path that ASEAN's evolution takes and the (re-)constitution of the social environment wherein ASEAN operates (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. This does not mean that all ASEAN observers would agree with the claim that ASEAN has not achieved its own stated goals. Instead, some argue that it might be fairer to consider these inconsistencies as ASEAN states' qualified acceptance of external norms, highlighting that, in ASEAN's numerous official documents, ASEAN member states always prioritise national sovereignty over other principles.
2. This paper draws on the works of Lipson (2007), Weaver (2008), and Brunsson (2002) in particular and attempts to extend their insights to understand the case of ASEAN.
3. For the various and divergent demands of external actors around ASEAN, see Ba, 2009; Narine, 2018.
4. There are numerous external funding schemes through Dialogue Partnership. To name a few, there are Australia–ASEAN Development Cooperation Program, Australia–Asia Program to Combat Trafficking in Persons, China–ASEAN Investment Cooperation Fund, China–ASEAN Public Health Cooperation Fund, China–ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund, Japan–ASEAN Solidarity Fund, Japan–ASEAN Integration Fund, Japan's Indo–Pacific quality infrastructure projects, US-initiated Inclusive Growth in ASEAN through Innovation, Trade and E-commerce (IGNITE), US–ASEAN Connect, USAID–initiated Regional Development Cooperation Agreement, Enhanced Regional EU–ASEAN Dialogue Instrument, Enhanced ASEAN Regional Integration Support from the EU (ARISE+), EU-initiated ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility, EU Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (EU SHARE), etc.

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