

Marty Natalegawa: Does ASEAN Matter? A View from Within

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Review by Lukas Maximilian Müller

Former Indonesian Foreign Minister (2009–2014) and former Director General for ASEAN Cooperation (2002–2005) Marty Natalegawa's book "Does ASEAN Matter?" adds to a long line of memoirs by Indonesian politicians seeking to influence public perceptions of their achievements while in office. Serving during Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's second term as President, Natalegawa prominently guided Indonesia's eventful 2011 ASEAN chairmanship. Publically, Yudhoyono's second term is remembered as a relatively outward-looking period in terms of foreign policy. With this book, Natalegawa attempts to cement the perception of Indonesia as a regional leader within ASEAN.

The book lays out an ambitious scope, aiming to deviate from the history-focused ASEAN literature by concentrating on the organization's relevance with a view towards the future. What makes the book worth reading is Natalegawa's perspective on diplomatic choices as the primary driver of regional policy, rather than great power rivalries. This view, certainly influenced by Indonesia's self-perception as a regional power, separates the book from other ASEAN memoirs, particularly those published by Singaporean diplomats.

On seven pages, chapter 1 somewhat briefly lays out Natalegawa's view of diplomatic history from 1967 until 2018. Natalegawa's key argument appears to be that regional dynamics now have a place in global diplomacy. His ideas regarding other crucial diplomatic developments remain less clear, as the chapter veers across a range of topics, such as digitalization, connectivity, multipolarity, populism, and the cultural clash between East and West.

Chapter 2 focuses on ASEAN's intra-institutional dynamics, covering Southeast Asia's pre-ASEAN institutional history, its early treaties as well as its membership expansion. After this preliminary section, the chapter provides interesting anecdotes of Indonesia's maritime agreement negotiations with Malaysia and the Philippines in 2012 and 2014, respectively. The centerpieces of the chapter are retellings of Timor Leste's attempted admission to ASEAN and the negotiations surrounding the 2011 Preah Vihear Temple conflict between Thailand and Cambodia. Both stories provide an Indonesian counterpoint to previous public discussions, all the while illuminating how ASEAN's often frustratingly vague public statements are drafted.

Chapter 3 widens the focus towards ASEAN's external relations. After some introductory remarks on its early external treaties, the ASEAN Plus Three as well as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the chapter concentrates on ASEAN's external relations during Natalegawa's time as DG of ASEAN Cooperation and as Foreign

Minister. Major sections address the emergence and growth of the East Asia Summit as well as the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and the corresponding Code of Conduct. A rather brief section discusses but fails to add novel insight on ASEAN's Bali Concord III and the organization's emerging role in disaster response after Cyclone Nargis.

Chapter 4 seeks to address ASEAN's transition from a state-centered to a people-centered organization. This presumed focus is somewhat misleading, as the chapter rather covers topics that seem to not have neatly fitted into the previous sections. This includes the developmental aspects of the ASEAN Economic Community, the establishment of the Political-Security and Socio-Cultural pillars of the organization, a brief section on Indonesia's mediation role in the Philippines' armed insurgencies, and a lengthy section on how ASEAN has dealt with Myanmar over the years. While this chapter exchanges retellings of shuttle diplomacy for discussions of how certain ASEAN characteristics relate to its citizens, it lacks a thorough analysis of ASEAN's people-centeredness. However, Natalegawa's deliberations in the final paragraph clearly reveal that he has given extensive thought to what a people-centered ASEAN could look like. It leaves the reader wondering to which degree Indonesia (and by association, this book) continues to sweep internal disagreements regarding people-centeredness within ASEAN under the proverbial rug.

Chapter 5 provides a sort of personal manifesto on how ASEAN should proceed in order to sustain its relevance in the future. At this point, I asked myself: Does the book fulfill the expectation of tackling the question of whether ASEAN will continue to matter in the future? In truth, I believe the book should be seen rather as a trove of anecdotes and viewpoints rather than a clearly argued position on ASEAN as an organization.

Given its specialist subject, this book is only recommended for the most avid of ASEAN watchers. A good knowledge of ASEAN's internal dynamics from 2000 onwards is required to appreciate the empirical insights provided by Natalegawa. The author dedicates several pages at the end of each chapter to discussing ASEAN's institutional shortcomings, such as a lack of invocation of legal clauses, the weakness of the Secretariat, limitations of ASEAN's dialogue partnerships, and the lack of organizational unity at the UN-level. Natalegawa's honesty is often refreshing. Still, some of his arguments are difficult to follow, as they tend to rely on insufficient conceptual elaboration. The concept of strategic trust in chapter 2, for instance, remains opaque. Likewise, the discussion of ASEAN centrality in chapter 3 is perfunctory. Still, many of the book's themes remain relevant, as the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea remains hotly debated, the EAS continues to be a key venue in the Indo-Pacific institutional architecture, and ASEAN's people-centeredness appears as questionable as ever.

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