The Contested Meaning-Making of Diplomatic Norms: Competence in Practice in Southeast Asian Multilateralism

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Abstract: The “ASEAN way” is both celebrated and maligned as a fixed set of norms in Southeast Asian diplomacy. In this article we contest this orthodoxy through a practitioner-near account of ASEAN diplomatic norms in practice. We find that the “ASEAN way” is best understood as a rhetorical commonplace, a well-established topological resource that social agents use to advance and contest claims of competent diplomatic practice in the ASEAN community of practice. We build on and bridge insights from norm contestation, practice theory, and discourse literatures to develop an original framework for the study of contestation in communities of practice. Drawing from documentary evidence and 61 interviews with practitioners of ASEAN diplomacy, we illustrate our argument by examining contestation in practice in the context of the organization’s response to the Rohingya crisis and the South China Sea disputes.

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Introduction

The “ASEAN way” is as much celebrated as it is maligned as the essential quality of regional relations and the conduct of diplomacy in Southeast Asia. It is typically described as a set of norms including non-interference, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and consensus-based decision-making (e.g. Acharya 2014). For its proponents, the “ASEAN way” makes possible regional integration and “long peace” (e.g. Kivimäki 2001). For detractors, strict adherence to ASEAN’s norms limit regionalization and render the organization fragile, if not futile (e.g. Jones and Smith 2007). Beyond debating the good and the bad of these norms, there are growing claims that this normative core of regional relations is in trouble as the organization fails to address important challenges. In 2012, ASEAN foreign ministers were unable to arrive at an agreement regarding the South China Sea and, as a result, failed to issue their joint communiqué for the first time in the organization’s history (No Author –BBC News– 2012). More recently, in 2017, Malaysia “disassociated” from an ASEAN statement regarding the violent treatment of the Rohingya community in Myanmar (No Author –Channel News Asia– 2017). Many ASEAN elites and some commentators have been quick to spin such incidents as indication of a “new level of maturity” in how diplomacy is practiced in ASEAN (Dancel 2017; Tan 2015). Others suggest these “dangerous precedent[s]” (Davies 2017) indicate a “spectacular collapse” (No Author –Bangkok Post– 2012) of ASEAN’s unity and normative order.

In this article we investigate the “ASEAN way” and come to a rather different conclusion regarding what this set of norms means for ASEAN practitioners and how recent developments within the organization impact their continued practice. We contend that rather than a set of
normative standards that have staying power despite having undergone limited, consensual adaptation in practice in the face of new conditions, the “ASEAN way” is a discursive-practical space characterized by continuous debate as to what counts as competent regional diplomacy. We argue this phrase is more usefully understood as “rhetorical commonplace” – a well-established topological resource that social agents draw from to articulate claims of authority, legitimacy, or competence – in a social field, but that can be expressed in different ways depending on specific circumstances (Jackson 2006, 28). Far from a stable normative core of relations, the “ASEAN way” is a resource around which claims of competent diplomatic practice are advanced and defended by practitioners of Southeast Asian multilateralism.

This is a novel and productive account for two reasons. First, as we show, it better aligns with how ASEAN practitioners themselves understand and make use of this phrase - not as a set of fixed norms, but a phrase that signals and is used to contest claims of competent behavior. Second, our understanding addresses empirical and theoretical limitations in existing treatments of ASEAN norms. Beyond this substantive investigation we also develop an analytically productive account of how claims of competence are advanced and negotiated in practice within diplomatic communities that extends beyond ASEAN. Competence is an intersubjective recognition of appropriate and effective conduct which stems from claims of authority - that “this is how things are done” within particular social contexts (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 893; see also: Neumann 2002, 637). The competent way to enact norms varies across different communities, but also, as we show, within communities as well. Competence is continually negotiated in and through discourse and practice.
To advance our account, we draw on and extend three growing strands of IR literature. First, we build on norm contestation literature to emphasize a need to move away from an understanding of norms as having fixity in “shared understandings” (Jurkovitch 2019) to pay more attention to their open-ended and unstable character in practice. Second, we engage with the “practice turn” to narrow attention to how diplomacy is enacted in particular ways within a community of practice – a group of actors united in pursuit of regionalism, making use of shared diplomatic resources and tools, and engaged in dense and repeated interactions (Davies 2016; Author Citation). We deviate from existing practice-based treatments in the study of ASEAN (e.g. Author Citation; Davies 2018; Nair 2018) and other international institutions (e.g. Adler and Pouliot 2011; Bueger 2013; Adler-Nissen 2014; Cornut 2018), however, because our analysis does not focus primarily on how iterated practice “makes the world hang together” for this community or produces continuity in multilateralism. Rather, we examine contestation over what counts as competent diplomacy as a central driver in the (re)production of the community of practice, instead of an exceptional event. Third, we draw from discourse theory to gain a better understanding of how contestation over “meaning-in-use” (Wiener 2009) is carried out by community actors engaging in the discursive terrain wherein a common collective identity is (re)produced through the struggle over competence.

To develop our account of the ASEAN way as a rhetorical commonplace and to demonstrate its significance beyond this case, we advance a practitioner-near account of regional diplomatic norms and practice. We draw on semi-structured interviews with 61 ASEAN officials through which we map out existing and competing understandings of competent practice of diplomacy
among practitioners, which we complement and contrast with relevant documentation from a variety of sources (e.g. official documents, media commentaries, public statements).  

This article is structured over four sections. In the first section, we examine how the “ASEAN way” has been generally understood in constructivist IR literature, including by those inspired by the “practice turn.” Here, we underscore a tendency to seek out what remains established, fixed, and unchanged in ASEAN’s norms despite contestation. In the second section we advance a novel account of the “ASEAN way” as a rhetorical commonplace. We draw from norm contestation, practice, and discourse-based literatures to develop an approach that focuses not on “shared understandings” but on “meaning-in-use” (Wiener 2009; Holzscheiter 2014) to better account for contestation, while also circumventing the inherent tension that stems from treating norms as simultaneously fixed and in flux. In the third and fourth sections, we demonstrate the utility of our approach. Here, we examine key instances of contestation over what counts as competent diplomatic practice of the central ASEAN norms of non-interference and consensus-building by looking at the development of the organization’s positions regarding Myanmar - the Rohingya crisis in particular - and the South China Sea disputes.

I. The ASEAN Way

Conventional Wisdom

Scholars of Southeast Asian multilateralism typically understand the “ASEAN way” as a discrete diplomatic culture or set of norms and tend to adopt a similar strategy: identifying the general

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1 All interviews were conducted with ASEAN officials and diplomats in Jakarta, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Manila from 2014 to 2019. Most interviews were conducted anonymously, and are referenced using female pronouns. Affiliation is rendered in a way that interviewees explicitly consented to, and they did not receive any compensation.
normative principles enshrined in key official documents, and then adding specific patterns of social action that appear to guide the behavior of individual practitioners. Central here is Acharya’s (2014) account of the “ASEAN way” as a set of global “legal-political” principles (e.g. non-interference) that have been localized in particular ways within the ASEAN context and “socio-cultural” norms (e.g. quiet diplomacy, non-confrontation, face-saving, consultation and consensus), practitioners themselves deem unique to Southeast Asia or Asia more broadly (see also: Author Citation; Nair 2019).² This understanding aligns with how ASEAN leaders describe the “ASEAN way”. Malaysia’s former Foreign Minister Ghazali Shafie, for example, famously characterized it as “a common cultural heritage” among ASEAN countries (quoted in Acharya 2014, 64). Many interviewees echo this claim, suggesting that the “ASEAN way” is the “psyche of Southeast Asian people,” “we Asians being Asians,”³ or simply part of the “culture.”⁴

Many constructivist accounts laud the pacific effects of these norms (Acharya 1998; Kivimäki 2001; Haacke 2003), or broader regional “ideas” (Ba 2009), to explain ASEAN’s longevity. ASEAN practitioners make similar assertions (Almonte 1997). In a comment sentiment, for example, one ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC) official suggests that the “ASEAN way” “is a necessity that works most effectively” in fostering regional cooperation and peace (quoted in Author Citation). However, while attesting to the existence of ASEAN norms some scholars

² As Nair (2019) points out, concerns for face-saving are not specific to ASEAN, but a trademark of diplomacy writ large. However, the particular mechanisms or practices that sustain how this is accomplished varies from one community of practice to another.
³ Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2015.
question their impact or effectiveness (Rüland 2000; Narine 2002; Emmerson 2017). ASEAN practitioners are not deaf to these critiques. After the Asian Financial Crisis, calls for “reinventing ASEAN” (Tay et al. 2001) quickly multiplied in policy circles. Several proposals were considered by officials to relax the principle of non-interference and supplement it with more flexible concepts (Haacke 2005; Katsumata 2004).

These internal debates about the “ASEAN way” have been extensively covered (Stubbs 2019; Ba 2019), and afforded some attention to norm contestation (Haacke 2003). Acharya (2014, 63), for example, recognizes the “ASEAN way” as “vague and contested.” Similarly, Ba (2009, 5) details the “dialoguing, arguing, framing, affirming, [and] negotiating” that has, since ASEAN’s inception, driven the creation of a common regional identity. However, most accounts treat contestation as a temporary disruption from normal ASEAN relations, something that, for conventional constructivist literature, is reconciled either through a triumph of underlying shared identities or regional unity. This is clear in existing assessments that proposals for “reinventing ASEAN” were “met with hostility” by a majority of member states and ultimately rejected (Haacke 2003, 169). Despite some recognition that additional flexibility in practice is warranted and therefore tolerated in some instances, and that ASEAN itself is not impervious to change, the common view is that principles of the “ASEAN way,” for better or for worse, remain more or less the same (Haacke 2003; Caballero-Anthony 2005; Nesadurai 2008; Davies 2016; Yuzawa 2018).

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5 A minority of scholars are skeptical of the very existence of the “ASEAN way,” questioning the utility of analyzing a normative core of regional relations that appears to be constantly violated by regional states (e.g. Jones 2010). Yet even such detractors from the organization tend to center analysis on a fixed core of ASEAN norms.
This search for what holds ASEAN together rather than what drives it apart is a common inclination in constructivist literature, and one that is entirely understandable. As Ba (2009, 2) explains, whereas rationalist accounts are well equipped to show why ASEAN has not worked better, they have much less to say about “why [it] should work at all.” While we share this assessment, we also believe that there is no need to belabor the point that social dimensions of Asia-Pacific IR matter. Rather, we seek new insight into how they matter and operate in practice, thus shedding light on the dynamic character of an organization that is too often portrayed as sclerotic.

*Myth-busting the ASEAN Way*

Beyond an overemphasis on what is shared in ASEAN, conventional constructivist accounts of ASEAN norms suffer three interrelated deficiencies. First, these accounts are largely state-centric, drawing attention to how states adopt, institutionalize, and enact norms. When they do examine individual practitioners, the norms they embody are assumed to be “a product of state interaction” (Collins 2019, 5). As a result, many accounts of the “ASEAN way” suffer from the “fallacy of composition” – the assumption that what applies to individuals also applies to states (or vice-versa), and therefore, that they are both authors of practices (Epstein 2011).

Second, and relatedly, many such accounts rely on official rhetoric and declarations to elucidate the ‘way’ regional diplomacy works. While these documents can tell us many things about how the organization constructs a self-narrative, engages in legitimizing strategies, and expresses consensus, formal references to the existence, and importance, of codified norms tells us little about how those norms – indeed those phrases – are understood (and contested) and with what
effect on behavior (Author Citation). As Acharya has rightly acknowledged, through his recognition of the existence of internal contestation over norms, there remain questions as to whether “the “ASEAN way” [...] has been upheld in practice” (Acharya 2014, 63, emphasis added). Indeed, there is widespread recognition in existing accounts that reform proposals, while formally rejected, may have led to changes in practice, but this possibility is typically stated as an afterthought and not seriously probed (Yuzawa 2018). What ultimately matters in determining whether change has actually happened, from this conventional perspective, is whether an existing norm was explicitly dismissed and a new one codified. Here, practice is treated not as consequential in and of itself, but as epiphenomenal to norms, while signs of what is “normal” are derived from what is enshrined in official text. Stopping analysis at official rhetoric or codified documents, however, forestalls a full examination of the process that made such outcomes possible, of what alternatives were marginalized, and what unresolved issues these documents hide when it comes to defining what counts as the competent practice of broad principles. Furthermore, attempts to assess this are necessarily complicated by the fact that the “old” ways were never codified beyond authoritative claims made by prominent, self-defined followers of the “ASEAN way.” To put it bluntly, this is not how practice works.

Third, and central to the growing literature surveyed above, is the distinction between general principles guiding inter-state interaction and patterns of behaviour that individual practitioners engage in. However, this distinction is not so clear-cut and often conflated in practice. This limitation stems in part from the fact that the concept of “norms” itself serves as a ready-made term to bring all elements of diplomatic relations under the same ideational umbrella, and to erroneously reduce practice to an expression of shared understandings (Pratt 2020). In ASEAN,
there is a disconnect between how regional diplomats talk about their trade and external observers’ accounts. Rather than established and fixed norms, diplomats in Southeast Asia have difficulty explaining what the “ASEAN way” actually is or consists of. Many interviewees alternatively describe it as “a kind of atmosphere,” something that is “very difficult to explain,” or “the way we do things [...] unconsciously.” Following practice theory, this may be taken as a glimpse of the “inarticulate know-how,” “background knowledge,” or “commonsense” that informs daily practice (Pouliot 2010). However, in a departure from the “practice turn,” we understand these articulations as somewhat messy, unrehearsed, yet still reflective ways of reproducing the “ASEAN way” not as a conduit for intersubjective knowledge, but as a rhetorical commonplace espoused to signal and contest competence. These interventions by ASEAN practitioners illustrate the importance of moving away from examining what remains fixed and shared in a norm, and towards how norms are understood and enacted in practice.

According to former Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa (2018) for example, “changes are afoot” in the practice of regional diplomacy that can no longer be accommodated by “blanket statement[s]” about the central ASEAN norms of consensus and non-interference. However, there is little consensus as to what, precisely, the “ASEAN way” is, in practice, or how it may be changing. It still remains a favorite explanation for both ASEAN’s successes and failures in ways that appear self-fulfilling: by repeatedly using the phrase to describe whatever it is that distinguishes the way(s) “things are done around here” (Neumann 2002) from other ways of doing that prevail elsewhere, and then looking for signs of it in behaviour, the “ASEAN way”

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6 Interview conducted in 2014.
7 Interview conducted in 2015.
is assumed to be a social fact despite being a moving target. Without denying the fundamental importance that the “ASEAN way” continues to bear on ASEAN practitioners, we seek to highlight its elusive and contested qualities. While most scholars remain focused on uncovering the existence and effects of the “ASEAN way” at its essence, we abandon the search for fixity altogether. Instead, we treat what is commonly referred to as ASEAN “norms” as a dynamic, ever-evolving set of meaning-making practices – verbal and non-verbal – that are contested “all the way down.”

II. From Norms to “Meaning-In-Use”

While conventional constructivist literature on the “ASEAN way” is centered on unearthing its supposed stable core, we understand the “ASEAN way” as contested practice. To do so we build on three growing literatures: norm contestation, practice theory, and discourse scholarship in IR, which are currently informing a new wave of ASEAN scholarship (Freistein 2013; Davies 2016; Nair 2019; Mustapha 2019; Author Citation; Author Citation). These have tended to evolve on separate planes. We thus begin our discussion by surveying them separately. However, we aim to fruitfully reconcile them in an analytically eclectic, pragmatic assessment of the “ASEAN way” through a focus on “meaning-in-use.”

Norm Contestation

Wiener’s work on “norm contestation” is a useful starting point to examine how or why diplomatic norms are practiced in various and competing ways (Wiener 2009). Against conventional constructivist accounts of the stable structuring quality of norms, Wiener
emphasizes dynamism and contestation, showing that the meaning of a norm may differ for individuals, particularly ill-defined “fundamental” norms like non-intervention (Wiener 2009; see also: True and Wiener 2019). This account of “meaning-in-use” has inspired an examination of contestation across contexts (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2019; Bode and John Karlsrud 2019). Following this approach, we see that the supposed core of the “ASEAN way” may mean something different for particular ASEAN officials and be contested over time.

Yet, Niemann and Schillinger (2017) explain, there is a tension in combining an analytical focus on norms with an attention to meaning-making. A focus on norms often means allocating them a degree of fixity prior to contestation or, as Pratt (2020) shows, making a priori judgments regarding their existence. While Wiener (2009, 180) recognizes that, in the abstract, norms have an inherently “flexible” quality, her account centers on “disrupting” otherwise stable understandings of a norm that have crystallized over time. Collins (2019) offers a similar account in his attempt to seize a middle ground between conventional and critical constructivism to produce a novel understanding of the practice of ASEAN norms. This conceptual move, however, “ultimately reintroduces an understanding of norms as facts,” and as only partially contested, within the bounds of a pre-established agreed-upon normative terrain, something hard to reconcile with an interest in either the productivity of discourse or the play of practice (Niemann and Schillinger 2017).

Our approach draws on Wiener's account of contestation, but embraces the instability of meaning “all the way down.” Norms are not, as Kratochwil (2013, 543-544) puts it, “some mysterious liquid […] taking hold of our minds.” Rather, as with all in the realm of “shared understandings”
– beliefs, ideas, rules, values, ideology, symbols, etc. – norms cannot be analytically separated from how they are enacted in practice. Thus, we turn to practice theory in IR.

**Practice Theory**

At a foundational level, practice theory suggests that the ways people typically think and act are essential to understanding how stability and change in social relations. Practices are “socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify…the material world” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 6). They are the properties of groups, often defined as “fields” (Adler-Nissen 2011; Loh 2019) or “communities of practice” (Bueger 2013; Davies 2016). In most accounts, the “background knowledge” of such a group is understood as particularly consequential to its interactions, making possible certain practices while precluding others (Pouliot 2010). To examine practices, scholars draw attention less to codified statements and official rhetoric and more to the often mundane behaviors of officials (Pouliot 2015). This practitioner-near approach is useful in overcoming the “fallacy of composition.” Through this approach, practice theorists examine both contestation and stability (Cornut 2018). As they demonstrate, to be part of a community of practice and to claim the resources that come with it, social agents must be recognized as competent by community members. As Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014, 895) explain, however: “In practice, competence is never recognized for good but is the object of endless contestation.” They distinguish between thinner and thicker forms of contestation – the former within the bounds of agreed criteria for competence, and the latter “questioning the definition of competence altogether.” Thick contestation, they assert, occurs only “rarely” in the “rather conservative world of multilateral diplomacy.” While we see the value in drawing
attention to the role of practice to explicate how and why diplomats do what they do, our account of ASEAN practice calls into question the exceptional character of thick contestation in diplomatic communities.

Moreover, while there is focus on contestation in this literature, by their own admission proponents of the practice turn are caught in a “continuous tension between recognizing the dynamic, continuously changing character of practice on the one side, and the identification of stable, regulated patterns, routines, and reproduction on the other” (Bueger 2014, 391). Davies (2016, 211) for example, adopts a practice-oriented perspective to argue that ASEAN is “locked in a traditionalist mode” of regionalism defined by a normative core codified through the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. In his view, attempts to revise regional governance have been entertained but rejected by the community of practice. Thus, while the practice turn can be utilized to shed light on “the simultaneous processes of stability and change,” often practice oriented-accounts explicate that “most political dynamics come to rest on the fixation of meanings” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 3; see also Bueger and Gadinger 2015). To overcome this oversight we draw on poststructuralist discourse theory, which forcefully centers attention on the structural but ultimately unstable qualities of meaning.

**Discourse Theory**

Discourse-based scholarship in IR treats discourse as a “grid of intelligibility” from which actors make sense of the world by ascribing meaning to it through language (Milliken 1999). Discourse analysts seek to map how agents position themselves in a social (and therefore discursive) field as “speaking subjects” of a particular discourse. While proponents of practice theory often rely
on a firm distinction between discourse (often equated with written texts or “rhetoric”) and practice (as meaningful behaviour), discourse analysts treat discourse as both structure and practice (Hansen 2006). In other words, discourse structures the realm of possibilities for social action (Epstein 2008), but also depends on its constant rearticulation in practice by social agents, as meaning is never fully fixed but in constant mutation and contestation (Doty 1997). A discourse-based approach has been used in the context of ASEAN to highlight how social agents, by positioning themselves as “speaking subjects” of specific discourses about the region (Tan 2013), regional security (Author Citation; Mustapha 2019), or human rights and democracy (Freistein 2013) are able to claim and assert knowledge/power, and as a result, shape the realm of possible action for the further development of regionalism.

Taking discourse seriously requires foregoing the desire in much of IR, including the two literatures surveyed above, to treat language as a conduit for factors situated in an unobservable non-discursive and stable “background,” be that “shared understandings” in conventional constructivist accounts or inarticulate “know-how” in practice-based accounts. Instead, discourse theorists, and poststructuralist IR scholars in particular, treat discourse as the way agents position themselves in a social field and (re)produce their identity by advancing a certain interpretation of the world through language (e.g. Wæver 2002). When ASEAN practitioners rely on the “ASEAN way” as a rhetorical commonplace, they engage in claims on what makes the ASEAN diplomatic community distinct, what competent diplomacy looks like and, by extension, what it does not. As such, discursive power is enacted in setting up these boundaries, which remain contested. By drawing from a distinct interpretative methodology, discourse analysts look for – and not behind – “meaning-in-use.”
However, like many conventional constructivist scholars, those interested in the productive power of discourse tend to be preoccupied with an examination of written and public “texts” rather than the “practitioner-near” work privileged by practice theorists. This has led some to claim that discourse scholars partake in “armchair analysis,” removed from the sites in which the (re)production of discourse as practice occurs (Neumann 2002). We draw insight from discourse theory to center attention on the unstable epistemological terrain of social relations, but overcome this limitation by adopting an agent-centric focus, thus bringing discourse theory in close communication with norm contestation and practice literatures.

*Contestation over meaning-in-use: an eclectic framework for analysis*

The three literatures surveyed are more compatible than what scholars of each camp typically assume: all are interested in reconstructing the meaning social agents give to their reality, recognize the existence of struggles over meaning in communities of practice, rely on a similar set of methods, and acknowledge the intricate relationship of discourse and practice (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 14; see also Author Citation; Hansen 2006). We take up these similarities to ground our account of the “ASEAN way” as a rhetorical commonplace and contested practice “all the way down.”

Our account is founded on a recognition that how diplomats behave and how others ascribe meaning to that behaviour are both intimately related to language – written, verbal, or non-verbal. We intend this in two ways. First, discourse about diplomatic practice – already a discursive practice in and of itself – is an unavoidable entry point into its study which, as practice theorists recognize, can rarely involve direct observation given that diplomatic meetings are
often held behind closed doors. Rather, studying diplomatic practices often requires drawing from how practitioners recollect a flow of operation that unfolded at a previous point in time (Pouliot 2010). This is typically done through semi-directed or non-directed interviews, i.e. a discursive (and artificial) encounter between the researcher and the practitioner. Second, discursive practices form an integral part of the daily conduct of diplomacy itself, whether through formal statements given by diplomats to represent the position of a state or organization they represent, or through the negotiation of language in written agreements (Neumann 2007; Faizullaev and Cornut 2017). However, whether or not they study diplomats, the main difference between poststructuralist IR scholars and those in the practice turn is whether they situate the explanation of social phenomenon inside or “outside-the-text” (Author Citation).

From this foundational commitment rather than seeking a non-discursive “background” that practitioners “think from” (Pouliot 2008, 260), our approach remains agnostic of what goes on inside actors’ heads. Instead, we center attention on the enactment of meaning in practice, and its effects within and on a community. This allows us to better account for how diplomacy is produced and transformed in and through practices that are “discursive,” if not always verbal. Moving our emphasis away from “ideas” as cognitive-social phenomena to “meaning-in-use” may also yield a more satisfactory account of how norm contestation unfolds in practice by circumventing methodological limitations of other work that share our interest in the social constructedness of world politics. Therefore, instead of treating discourse/practice as the way in which ontologically prior “shared understandings” are brought to life by social agents, we understand the enactment of meaning in practice as having explanatory power in and of itself.
In addition, we center attention on norm contestation without reproducing norms as social artefacts. Rather than treating norms as given prescriptions for action or as the “stuff” of practices, our approach understands norms as powerful words that social agents rely on to lay claims as to what counts as “normal,” competent, and effective, to position themselves as such within a community, and to render alternative ways of talking and acting as “abnormal,” inappropriate, and incompetent. We understand this process as being imbued with power dynamics that are, to a significant extent, endogenous to the community in which they are enacted, but remain largely outside the scope of most constructivist accounts of ASEAN.

Using this approach, we contend that ASEAN is usefully conceived of as a community of practice (see also: Davies 2016; Author Citation; Author Citation). Diplomats from member states posted in ASEAN Missions in Jakarta, ASEC staff, and officials working in ASEAN national secretariats or representing their country in ASEAN meetings align with the three definitional qualities of a community of practice. They are united in a common enterprise, in this case regionalism, engaged in dense interactions, and they make use of shared repertoires of action and resources to secure social recognition or pursue their interests. Central among these resources is the rhetorical commonplace that is the “ASEAN way” and the notion that ASEAN operates according to and is united by a distinct set of norms. Officials make use of this resource to signal, reify, and contest competence within their community – what is effectively and appropriately “done around here.” As we detail below, this resource is utilized within interactions in various ASEAN meetings held behind closed doors and through public

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8 ASEAN is famously known for holding more than 1,000 meetings a year, and this is a common element emphasized by ASEAN officials when referring to the “ASEAN way”.
interventions on the margins of these meetings. In relying on this rhetorical commonplace to claim and contest competence within the community, these interventions also serve to reproduce the “ASEAN way” itself, and the identity of the community of practice (see also: Adler-Nissen 2014).

The remainder of this article applies this approach to examine the “ASEAN way.” We focus our analysis around two “norms:” non-interference and consensus-building. We do so because these norms are central to both scholarly (e.g. Acharya 2014; Yukawa 2018) and practitioner accounts of Southeast Asian regionalism and diplomacy. In the succinct words of one ASEAN official, “That is the ‘ASEAN way:’ consensus, non-interference.” We therefore, center our attention on how practitioners themselves present a competent understanding and enactment of these “norms.” Substantively, we focus attention on two recent and salient security issues in the region. We first examine ASEAN’s norm of non-interference in practice in relation to Myanmar, and the Rohingya crisis in particular, before turning to consensus-building in ASEAN’s approach to the South China Sea disputes.

III. (Non-)Interference in ASEAN: A Matter of When and How

Scholars and practitioners alike assert that non-interference is centrally important to ASEAN regionalism. In the words of one ASEC official, “We do not force people to do stuff. I think that

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9 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2019.
is the ASEAN, or Asian ‘way.’” Understandings of what interference entails in the context of ASEAN are not limited to intervention in another country’s domestic affairs, such as sending troops, imposing sanctions, or providing support to insurgent movements. Rather, it is entirely possible to interfere in words alone, by commenting on how another member state handles internal problems. Therefore, delineating the competent practice of non-interference is a subtle exercise for ASEAN practitioners, and one that underscores the importance of examining how officials understand and enact the norm itself.

The distinction between interference and non-interference in ASEAN, and the competent practice of non-interference, is established through meaning-making practices. These practices work to establish when interference is appropriate – whether it implicates ASEAN as an organization or not – and how it is effectively enacted – in what space, and with what tone and words. As regards the latter point, Haacke (2003) suggests that (incompetent) interference occurs when there is “condescendence” in an overture. As he explains, making “critical comments, ill-considered remarks or pejorative references to other leaders” is generally recognized as inappropriate and ineffective within ASEAN. Upholding the norm of non-interference thus means knowing when and how to interfere in a way that prevents claims that someone has violated the norm. Knowing where those boundaries lie is a manifestation of diplomatic competence in ASEAN. While non-interference in ASEAN is often treated as a form of avoidance, and therefore as passivity or inaction, practitioners indicate that what counts as respect for the norm is the result of a much more active process that allows one to competently interfere while preserving the veneer of non-interference.

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10 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2014.
The evolving character of ASEAN’s practice of non-interference is apparent in the organization’s response to developments in Myanmar since its controversial accession in 1997. Following this moment, domestic crises that affected ASEAN’s credibility were referred to in formal statements by ASEAN urging Myanmar to “resume its efforts of national reconciliation,” (ASEAN 2003) avoid allowing its domestic affairs “to affect ASEAN’s solidarity and cohesiveness” (ASEAN 2005), or ensure “a peaceful transition to democracy” (ASEAN 2007). These statements hint at the evolving character of non-interference as rendered in official language. They have also been accompanied with public expressions of disapproval by member state officials (Jones 2008). The compatibility of these public comments with the grouping’s “flexible engagement” approach towards Myanmar is ambiguous and has been debated, pointing to the contested character of non-interference in practice (Haacke 2005). Contrary to the more ad hoc approach to these earlier crises, however, ASEAN’s response to Myanmar’s disinterest in opening to international aid in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008 has been widely recognized as a watershed moment for the organization, and to have introduced changes to how non-interference is practiced (Author Citation). Under the leadership of officials from Singapore and Indonesia as well as Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan, Myanmar was made to accept international aid it had originally refused, leading to much debate as to whether or not non-interference was indeed upheld (Author Citation). For Dewi Fortuna Anwar, this episode illustrates that “[t]he ASEAN way itself has been transformed...”11 As she summarizes, “ASEAN did not refrain from interfering in Myanmar when it became a necessity,” as the regime’s behaviour was “not simply bad for Myanmar itself, but for ASEAN as a whole... So, it became

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11 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2014.
imperative for ASEAN to intervene in a way that was acceptable for Myanmar – not in a preaching or finger-pointing way or [by adopting the] ‘holier than thou’ attitude of a lot of Western countries, which was not really productive... but in a way that was softer.” In this view, non-interference is upheld provided intervention acts in support of wider ASEAN interests and does not manifest with overt critique or a critical tone. ASEAN’s response to Nargis has significantly informed its handling of the Rohingya crisis and the future practice of (non-)interference.

Individual representatives of ASEAN member states did not shy away from publicly condemning Myanmar’s conduct, and in unprecedentedly harsh terms. For example, on 4 December 2016, Malaysia’s then Prime Minister Najib Razak labeled the violence in Rakhine state as “genocide” and urged both a regional and UN-led response (No Author–The Guardian–2016). He noted Myanmar had protested his plan, warning that it would be “interfering in their internal affairs” in contravention of the ASEAN Charter. As he continued: “They are using only one article. ... Are they blind? Don't simply interpret [the Charter] as you wish. ... I refuse to shut my eyes and my mouth. We will continue to fight until the Rohingya are safe” (quoted in Yunus 2016). The same approach, upholding the importance of non-interference and the Charter while rhetorically contravening it, was apparent in the approach taken by the Malaysian delegation in a meeting of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers to discuss the issue:

As a founding member of ASEAN, Malaysia is fully cognizant of the principles upon which ASEAN was built, in particular, the non-interference principle that binds us in ASEAN. However, we also believe that the ASEAN Member States are bound by international principles on the promotion and protection of human rights, which are also enshrined in the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (No Author–ASEAN-Malaysia Secretariat–2016).
Starkly apparent here is the existence of competing interpretations of how the principle of non-interference is competently enacted in the community. There is a divide between the perspective of Myanmar, where non-interference means just that, and Malaysia’s case that it is contingent on the upholding of other normative commitments, even those ASEAN has traditionally abhorred in practice but had recently adopted through its Charter. Reflecting on this distinction, a Thai official suggested it indicated that ASEAN was in the process of “redefining non-interference” in ways that some members supported and others, centrally the CLMV states, were resistant to. As another official explained, “ASEAN has the right to voice their concern or try to facilitate some kind of resolution or solution to issues that also affect ASEAN community as a whole. [...] When we talk to Myanmar, we’ve been urging them, we’ve been pressing them to reform. I think that’s already [...] a step further on non-interference. [...] It’s getting sort of more and more loosely defined within ASEAN.”

Contestation over the competent practice of this norm continues to be clear with Mahathir bin Mohamad’s return to the Malaysian premiership in May 2018. In his statement to the 73rd UN General Assembly in September 2018, he addressed the on-going Rohingya crisis: “I believe in non-interference in the internal affairs of nations. [...] Nations are independent. But does that mean they have a right to massacre their own people [...]?” (No Author–Channel News Asia–2018). By targeting the Myanmar government and Aung Saan Suu Kyi directly in an international forum, Mahathir’s remarks, despite being framed as a rhetorical question – perhaps

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12 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2014.
13 Interview conducted in 2014. This comment echoes Haacke’s (2003; 2005) work on debates over the ambiguous practice of non-interference in ASEAN and its relation to Myanmar’s democratization process.
to soften the blow – stand in contrast to the usual level of tact and tone demonstrated by ASEAN officials when relying on a similar tactic behind closed doors.

According to one ASEAN official, this sort of qualified interference is common in ASEAN meetings wherein officials can be “very open, but [their interference] is very creatively and innovatively done in such a way that you do not feel offended, or it is very subtle. [Officials] find creative ways of ‘voicing their concern’ or ‘offering their assistance’ […]. You talk […] as if everybody already knows what you are talking about, it is very general. But we meet each other so often [that] we [usually] know what is behind that message.”14 Adopting this “creative approach” is a matter of diplomatic skill, and also “has to do a lot with the personality of those who are involved.”15 For members of the community of practice, it is also distinctly opposed to the “blunt” character of interventions from Western and Chinese diplomats that, according to this diplomat, often involves a “facial reaction” or some kind of “very emotional response.”16

The way that the ASEAN Chair described the Rohingya crisis as a “matter of concern” in an initial draft statement would thus fall within the line of what these accounts depict as competent interference (Tani 2018). However, the more divisive public comments by Mahathir do not. As he stated, for example, “Aung San Suu Kyi is trying to defend what is indefensible” (Aravindan and Geddie 2018) and “ASEAN must support international moves to stop this abuse of authority and injustice in Myanmar” (No Author–Dhaka Tribune–2018). Singapore’s Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan described the situation with a similar intent but more tact as a “man-made

14 Interview conducted in 2014.
15 Interview conducted in 2014.
16 Interview conducted in 2014.
humanitarian disaster [that] should not be happening in this day and age” (Boyle 2018). By highlighting the wider repercussions of the crisis as posing a potential “threat throughout Southeast Asia and beyond,” Balakrishnan gets closer than Mahathir to the spirit of “constructive intervention” in cases where a domestic crisis has clear regional implications.

These comments stand in sharp contrast to how other ASEAN officials describe the competent way to “interfere” within ASEAN meetings. One diplomat, for example, refers to Marty Natalegawa as being particularly skilled in this delicate exercise: “When Marty interferes, it just flows, it does not cause any reaction or agitation from people. [He is] very humble and modest in voicing concern, opinions.” This sentiment is echoed by others who speak of a distinction between the “strong, even brutal” rhetoric employed at the leaders level, outside of the confines of ASEAN, and what goes on among the levels of the ASEC, Committee of Permanent Representatives, or Senior Officials Meetings. In the words of one official, at these levels it is “all very friendly, [...] very cordial, so people would say things that they have to say because [of] their national position and they’ll come back and apologize to each other [...] after the meeting [...]. At the end of the day, I think we all know that [...] on the personal level, we are friends.” This does not necessarily mean “sweeping issues under the carpet,” as a common characterization of the “ASEAN way” suggests (Acharya 2014, 5-6). Rather, as this official continued, “we can be honest, we can be straightforward. That is very good.” Yet because levels of comfort vary even among friends, the way to make things “work” is to intervene “in a

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17 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2015.
18 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2019.
19 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2019.
20 Interview conducted in 2014.
very gentlemanly manner”\textsuperscript{21} and by allowing one’s counterparts to “save face.”\textsuperscript{22} However, in this case, Myanmar officials, at least from the perspective of their Malaysian counterparts, are now past the point where face saving is manageable without negative repercussions on ASEAN’s credibility, which again underscores the unfixity of practice in context.

Furthermore, much of the discussion about ASEAN’s statements being overly complacent or “watered-down” has drawn attention to a common practice of refraining from naming and shaming specific member states (Sukma 2009, 6; Ravenhill 2009, 228; Roberts 2010, 183). This should in no way be interpreted as if specific states were not raised in meetings conducted behind closed doors, even if these explicit references do not make it in outcome statements (see also Author Citation). A similar level of contestation and variation in practice is apparent when attention is directed to the ASEAN practice of consensus-building.

**IV. Consensus-building in ASEAN: A Calibrated and Contested Practice**

Along with non-interference, scholars and practitioners alike widely consider consensus foundational to ASEAN regionalism and the “ASEAN way.” As one official suggests, “I suppose the ASEAN way can be summed up in a few elements. One of them is consensus.”\textsuperscript{23} What consensus is and how it unfolds in ASEAN, however, is less than clear in these accounts.

\textsuperscript{21} Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2015.
\textsuperscript{22} Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2015.
\textsuperscript{23} Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2014.
When asked to describe ASEAN’s practice of consensus, practitioners often discuss situations where the membership is split over an issue and detail how such divisions are expressed and understood within meetings. For example, Singapore’s former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew described consensus, at a time when ASEAN consisted of only its five founding members, as the absence of vocal disagreement: “When four agree and one does not object, this can still be considered a consensus, and the four should proceed […]” (quoted in Acharya 2014, 69). This is similar to abstention in multilateral institutions where decisions are reached through voting. Yet there is an additional subtlety to consensus as a flexible practice that requires practitioners to gauge support in less overt terms, and know where to stop advocating for a proposal even in the absence of vocal opposition in order to maintain a non-confrontational atmosphere. In a common sentiment, one diplomat notes that “If it is something one or two or three countries propose and the seven others don’t feel ready [to do], the three will not push it.”24 For practitioners, there is no fixed rule on which proportion of members should support, abstain or reject an initiative, and how it should be deemed consensual or not.

Consensus-building, then, is more than just the passive identification of the lowest common denominator. As one official summarizes, “Consensus is hard.”25 It is a moving, negotiated target that is expected to evolve gradually through an active process of consultation from the working levels up and well in advance of a meeting where a decision is expected. As one member state’s permanent representative explains: “It is not the case that if all ten [members] don’t agree that we are not in consensus. […]. We all work. We all talk, like a family. […] if we

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24 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2014.
25 Interview conducted in 2014.
have [states] that agree and one that does not, that is okay. We will work on it. They will come.” Another official concurs: “Wait ‘til they get onboard and they’ll move along.” This dynamic has been recognized by scholars as well. As Acharya (2014, 69) notes, ASEAN consensus-building “is not to be confused with unanimity.” However, there remains less clarity as to where or how officials draw the line between the two.

In practice, consensus-building requires diplomats carefully craft the grouping’s position in a way that accounts for and eases resistance within the group in order to “keep everyone on board.” It entails a delicate balancing act between a number of elements, often contingent upon diplomatic skill of the Chair and a struggle over their authority. The first of these elements involves the confidence that no one will be coerced into agreeing to something that runs against its basic interests. Second, it means the recognition of a necessity, sometimes, to make concessions for the sake of the group, to maintain a conducive atmosphere. As one official puts it, “sometimes we don't take too strong of view even though we disagree strongly. So we tend to [say] ‘okay, no problem’.” Third, it requires ASEAN to “speak with one voice” publicly or in its interactions with external actors. As one diplomat suggests, when ASEAN “speak[s] up to [an] external partner, we do [so] as a group. That’s the ASEAN way…” While central to the “ASEAN way” in such an account, how to uphold these three components appears to have changed over time, largely as a result of confidence-building and the grouping’s expanding mandate and institutional structure. This is clear from a common sentiment among ASEAN

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26 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2019.
27 Interview conducted in 2014.
28 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2014.
29 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2015.
30 Interview conducted in 2014.
diplomats that the practice of consensus is much different today than in “the old days.”  

As one mission official describes, “the consensus that we have now and the consensus that we had 40 years ago has been, in a sense, calibrated.” This is echoed by another official: “there's [been] a shift. Countries are more and more open, willing to compromise on their position to build a consensus.” What counts as a competent striking of this balance between interests of the group and individual states, and how to appropriately enact consensus-building, however, is less clear, and it remains subject to interpretation among members. This is evidenced in the regional response to the South China Sea disputes.

In July 2012, ASEAN experienced one of its most public and infamous setbacks. The Foreign Ministers failed to issue their annual joint communiqué for the first time in the organization’s history after disagreement over language regarding the South China Sea. The “Phnom Penh incident,” as it is known in ASEAN circles, is often characterized as a failure of consensus-building or of the “ASEAN way” itself (Emmerson 2012). However, this view fails to account for the play of practice. As we explore below, this incident is better understood as contestation over what counts as the competent practice of consensus-building itself.

Contrary to other ASEAN documents, the joint communiqué of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) is a negotiated statement that ought to directly reflect the extent of the consensus reached by the Foreign Ministers. Intra-ASEAN discussions are first summarized in a draft statement by a subset of Foreign Ministers, which is then discussed by the whole group. Leaked

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31 Interviews conducted in a Southeast Asian capital in 2014.
32 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2014.
33 Interview conducted in 2015.
minutes of the plenary session of the Retreat of Foreign Ministers on 9 July in Phnom Penh showcase intense debate on how to refer to China’s recent activities in the South China Sea (Thayer 2012). The Foreign Ministers of the Philippines and Vietnam were pushing for stronger language referring to specific incidents in Scarborough Shoal and within their exclusive economic zones, which were opposed by the Cambodian Chair, Hor Namhong, on the basis that such language would contradict ASEAN’s position of neutrality on claims. The rest of the ASEAN membership took various stances on a spectrum between these two extremes. While all emphasized the importance of ASEAN “speaking with one voice,” some remained non-committal (Thailand) or avoided taking part in substantive discussions on the issue, deferring to the Chair to determine consensus (Brunei, Laos, Myanmar). Others (Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia) expressed clearer support for the inclusion of specific references to incidents. These proposals were systematically rejected by Hor Namhong. Rather, he summarized discussions on the draft as an absence of consensus and called for the controversial excerpts to be deleted from the communiqué for lack of agreement. He also warned: “If we cannot agree on the text, there should be no text at all” (quoted in Thayer 2012, 11). This suggestion initiated additional debate as to what consensus-building in ASEAN entails and the role of the Chair in bringing it about. Over the following days this debate led to a number of attempts to strike a compromise on language. However, this was not enough to overcome the impasse and no joint communiqué was released (Thayer 2012).

Scarborough Shoal was administered by the Philippines before China forcefully took control of the area in April 2012.
Amongst ASEAN attendees there are two competing interpretations as to whether or not ASEAN’s norm of consensus was upheld in Phnom Penh in 2012. The coexistence of interpretations is possible only because what counts as the competent practice of consensus-building is itself unstable and contentious. This struggle is apparent during the AMM, but is particularly salient in the public expressions of grievances in its aftermath which attempted to articulate supposed violators of the appropriate, effective, and normal practice of consensus-building in ASEAN. The dominant narrative articulates incompetence on the part of the Cambodian Chair. However, a counter-narrative reprimands officials from both the Philippines and Vietnam.

The clearest public expression of the dominant view, unsurprisingly, comes from the Philippines officialdom. Albert del Rosario himself argued that he “simply wanted the fact that we discussed the issue [of Scarborough Shoal] reflected in the joint communiqué, no more, no less. It [could] have just been a simple sentence (No Author –Philippine Daily Inquirer– 2012). Following del Rosario’s comments, the Undersecretary of the Philippines’ Department of Foreign Affairs, Erlinda Basilio, wrote a systematic response to “lay down the facts” against her country’s critics and correct “grave misimpressions” (Basilio 2012). In her words, “[t]he strain being felt by ASEAN is not attributable to the Philippines but [was] due to the failure of the Chair to gain a consensus.” Contrary to reports that the Philippines “escalated the rhetoric,” in her assessment, del Rosario approached the issue “with patience and tolerance,” was “[p]recisely mindful of ASEAN’s consensus-based decision-making,” and was willing to compromise. Like del Rosario, she also claims that the Philippines’ position was “strongly supported by many countries.” In this
view, it is the incompetence of the Chair, not del Rosario and the Philippines, that explains the outcome.

This interpretation is supported by a number of regional analysts, who characterize the Cambodian Chair’s behaviour as a “faux pas,” a failure to exhibit “the virtue displayed by all previous ASEAN chairs” (Chongkittavorn 2012a;b) and a breach in a long-standing “normal practice” of consensus-building (Storey 2015), which requires the minority to “meet the others half way” (Chogkittavorn 2012a). Many see the cause as a lack of diplomatic skill or experience on the part of the Chair, and contrast this with that of the founding ASEAN member states. In one such account, “[n]o core ASEAN member in the role of chair would have allowed the annual meeting to close without a joint communique […]. [Instead, they] would have resorted to some finessing of diplomatic language in the text to reflect common concerns” (Kassim 2012). Another similarly depicts Cambodia as “a junior member of [ASEAN] kick[ing] the rest of the group in the teeth and then walk[ing] off waving a middle finger in the air” (Mitton 2010). Many ASEAN officials echo this claim of incompetence on the part of the Chair, suggesting he “should have played a bigger role, but he didn’t,” that Hor Namhong was “the worst Chair” (quoted in Mogato and Grudgings 2012) or that “if someone else was sitting there maybe, in the end, we would have gotten a joint communiqué.” According to Singapore’s Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam: “There is no point in papering over it. There was a consensus among the majority of countries. The role of the chair in that context is to forge a complete consensus amongst all. But that did not happen” (quoted in Basilio 2012). In addition, given that

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Note that such allusions to historical ASEAN practice emphasize fixity, but stand in sharp contrast with practitioners’ accounts that point to how the practice has evolved significantly since the organization’s founding.

Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2014.
Hor Namhong is a veteran diplomat, having been Cambodia’s Foreign Minister since 1990, and is thus quite familiar with ASEAN practice, others have implied various motives for his supposedly incompetent behaviour, with most centering on undue pressure from China (Bower 2012). These accusations have been vehemently denied by Cambodian officials.

There is a second interpretation advanced largely by the Cambodian host. This view singles out the Philippines and Vietnam as disrupters of the competent practice of consensus-building, and lauds Hor Namhong’s for upholding it. Hor Namhong himself justified his decision quite plainly:

“We have not issued a joint communiqué because there was no consensus” (Prak and Rondonuwu 2020). In a press conference following the AMM, he explained: “I requested that we issue the joint communiqué without mention of the South China Sea dispute [...] but some member countries repeatedly insisted on [including] the issue of Scarborough Shoal. [The AMM] is not a court, a place to give a verdict about the dispute” (Tansubhapol 2012). This view has been reiterated by Cambodian officials who emphasize the Chair’s competent practice of consensus-building, arguing that “It is quite normal […] and has always been the ASEAN way to drop the disagreed points for further deliberation and moved on […]. [What] was unprecedented and very disappointing [is] that some ASEAN member states appeared bent on taking ship-scuttling position[s] by imposing an ultimatum that their demand must be fulfilled” (Koy 2012a). In this view, officials from the Philippines and Vietnam “hijacked” the meeting by “making inclusion of a direct reference to [certain] disputes a sine qua non for their endorsement” (You 2012) and, through their “unyielding position,” took the joint communiqué “hostage” (Koy 2012b). This behaviour was “completely contrary to the ASEAN way,” (Koy 2012b) especially since “[a]ll ASEAN Member States, [except] the Philippines and Vietnam, fully supported” a
version of the draft that made no mention of specific incidents (Kao 2012). The host had been
ture to ASEAN’s practice by being “mindful of the need to secure full consensus […], especially
on the sensitive issue of the South China Sea.” Since it was “clear that ASEAN had no consensus
on this matter” Cambodia would have “violated [ASEAN’s] consensus-based decision-making”
by issuing a statement (Hos 2012).

This position is also supported by officials outside Cambodia. One Thai official, for example,
argued that Western critiques of ASEAN that cited the absence of a communiqué as a failure of
consensus were in error. In her words, there was “no breakdown” of consensus, and “consensus
still works.” Others suggest that del Rosario acted in contravention of competent practice,
noting that he “[spoke for] fifteen minutes, everyone was frozen. No one knew what to say.
When he was done there wasn’t any response. It wasn’t in the script so we just moved on. […] But I could see everyone’s face just in disbelief.” In this view, this is not how competent
consensus-building is practiced per some “traditional ASEAN way,” as a retired Indonesian
ambassador described it. Del Rosario’s “blunt” language and behaviour during the meeting was,
then, quite simply “very un-ASEAN” (Siagan 2017).

That these divisive understandings of the episode exist among practitioners suggest both the
contested nature of consensus-building in ASEAN and the lack of agreed upon rules to guide the
Chair in pursuing it. As one observer underscores, this contestation unfolded within and using
“the rhetoric and tactics that ASEAN leaders are familiar with” (Chongkittavorn 2012b). In

37 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2014.
38 Interview conducted in Jakarta in 2019.
short, contestation over what counts as its competent practice is centered around the “ASEAN way” as a rhetorical commonplace. There is no clear evidence or neutral standpoint available to assess, in precise terms, how strong the alleged “majority” was, which side it took, what exactly it supported and to what extent. The list of states in favour or against specific wording changing from one report to the next is not surprising in these conditions. Such ambiguity constitutes the space in which practitioners engage in the struggle over practice. This struggle is not bound to the confines of a diplomatic meeting, but bleeds into the broader public sphere long after, allowing a variety of actors to pile on. The productive power of discourse plays a key role at every step.

Conclusion

In this article, we advanced a novel understanding of the “ASEAN way” by bridging literatures on norm contestation, practice, and discourse. Rather than seeking to uncover the normative core of regional relations in Southeast Asia, a central interest of conventional constructivist scholarship on Southeast Asia, we argued that the “ASEAN way” is best conceptualized as a rhetorical commonplace around and through which practitioners of ASEAN diplomacy struggle to define what counts as competent practice. To demonstrate this claim and underscore the value of our approach, we investigated the practice of two central ASEAN norms: non-interference and consensus-building. Through an exploration of the ASEAN community’s response to the ongoing Rohingya crisis and the South China Sea disputes, we have shown that there exists varied discursive representations within a wider rhetorical commonplace regarding what these norms
mean to ASEAN member states and their representatives and how to competently enact them in practice.

The significance of our analysis extends beyond ASEAN. As we have shown, the repeated assertions as to the existence of norms and their codification offers little insight into how norms, like non-interference and consensus, are interpreted and enacted by officials within a diplomatic community of practice. Thus, the same norm may be practiced in varied ways over time, across issues, and by different actors and communities of actors. Further, ASEAN, like other multilateral institutions, often relies on ambiguity as a way to foster flexible agreement over how supposedly “shared understandings” should be mobilized in practice, thus opening up space for thick contestation over how competence ought to be defined. Moreover, this analysis demonstrates that shared agreement as to the existence of certain norms by social agents – even more so when they are defined as part and parcel of how a certain community “does things” – does not mean that norms are not continually contested and negotiated in and through practice. Instead of assuming that norms have fixity beyond how they are reified in text and then “discovered” in patterns of (verbal and non-verbal) social action that are deemed to be following the script, our analysis has demonstrated the need for an “all the way down” approach to contestation that underscores the instability of meaning within diplomatic communities.


