The complexity of contemporary security threats has had a significant impact on the agenda of regional institutions. As the contemporary world system has turned into a ‘world risk society,’ characterized by ‘spatial, temporal and territorial de-bounding of uncontrollable risks,’ regional institutions have acquired a growing prominence in dealing with those threats that bypass states’ functional and political boundaries from above and below, that challenge the social integrity of societies and their ability to function. Inevitably, this has caused an instant focus on non traditional sources of insecurity, and multilateral action is increasingly viewed as the most effective way to deal with concerns arising from a primarily non military sphere, such as terrorism, piracy, natural disasters and climate change, infectious diseases, organized crime and illegal immigration.

Taking this into account, this chapter investigates ASEAN’s growing role in the arena of what Kirchner and Sperling have defined as protection, with an ambition to explore the extent to which the ASEAN RSP achieves this goal and in what direction it may develop. This chapter presents the following argument: that structural processes have posed important constraints on ASEAN’s agenda, which is reacting to change in the international system by reshaping its political priorities, defining new goals and principles for comprehensive security, and redesigning its institutional architecture in terms of new norms and modes of cooperation. Although the ASEAN security system has been focused mostly on the prevention of conflict, ASEAN can be viewed as a dynamic entity, whose policies do not derive uniquely from its agents’ values, culture, traditional principles and ideas, but flow from the interplay of diverse components, many originating in the external environment. Thereby, in line with a structuralist approach, according to which ‘agency and
structures are two sides of the same coin, it is argued that, under the pressure of systemic factors, there has been, and continues to be, a tendency for ASEAN to expand its political security agenda and introduce policy and institutional change.

In line with these premises, after having briefly defined what is meant by the task of protection, the first part of the chapter explores the rationale of ASEAN’s engagement in this security function. A diachronic analysis of the AMM Joint Communiqués (AMMJC) from 1990 to 2010 shows how external threats have impacted the ASEAN security agenda, producing expansion and an adoption of new goals and principles of cooperation that go beyond traditional military security.

The second part of the chapter concentrates on ASEAN institutional innovations and related performance in the face of NTS crises. It maintains that the need to cope with new uncertainties initiated regional efforts in the arena of internal security. This process is explored through two case studies that exhibit two extremes on the spectrum of security threats, namely terrorism and disaster management, in particular by focusing on how these issues affect ASEAN’s processes of adaptation and recalibration of institutional norms, structures and activities.

**Defining protection**

In Southeast Asia, just before the economic crisis of 1997, national governments defended the integrity of their domestic affairs and refused any dilution of their national sovereignty, even though rising levels of interconnection and interdependence were calling for new forms of cooperation. The notion of security was essentially circumscribed by regional reconciliation. In this sense, ASEAN was intended chiefly to provide the umbrella under which its member states could contain their intramural conflicts, and approaches to regional reconciliation were focused on conflict prevention mechanisms and processes.

After the 1990s, the variety of new security challenges that confronted the region caused Southeast Asian states to feel more vulnerable. The growing realization that ‘a range of new referent objects and threats is being set up above, below and alongside the state, compounded by the inability of national actors to regulate the entry and exit of new threats (economic crises, terrorism, pandemics, natural and man-made disasters), or to isolate their effects, was a sudden wake-up call for the region, in favor of greater interstate coordination. Thus, even if the principles of the ASEAN way continued to be recognized as a viable path to regional security cooperation, the new nature of NTS threats led to a