

# Preface

Creating and maintaining peace is probably the most noble and most difficult task that politicians everywhere around the world face. One of the many complexities in this task is the fact that it can never be achieved by a state alone – all states need to manage and nurture complex multi-dimensional relationships with neighbouring countries. Many countries have a history of war and conflict with their neighbours, and in the 1960s, many states in Southeast Asia were no exceptions to this rule. Given the circumstances, the foresight and achievements of the founders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) cannot be over-emphasised. For, in the last fifty years, ASEAN has emerged as a beacon of hope for unity in the region. It has maintained peace and geopolitical stability among its members and deepened mutually beneficial relations with more than ten Dialogue Partners and other external parties so as to support integration efforts in the region.

ASEAN has come a long way in the last five decades – having been created at the height of the Cold War with five members, it has now transformed itself into a regional organisation encompassing all countries in Southeast Asia. Despite significant geopolitical shifts in the intervening years, ASEAN has occupied a central role in regional geopolitics and been the main driver for regional cooperation. With its guiding principles of non-interference in domestic affairs, consultation, and consensus, and its decision-making model, ASEAN has been successful in building trust and confidence among its member states. This has also allowed the group to gradually expand its agenda while increasing cooperation in the region and beyond.

While ASEAN's impressive track record of five decades is rightly the focus of attention, we should not forget that this year also marks the 40th anniversary of relations between the European Union (EU) and ASEAN. Today, the bilateral ties between these two highly successful regional integration processes cover a wide range of areas, ranging from politics and economics to development, trade and investment, and cultural affairs. With growing political will and institutional capacities in both blocs, there is further potential for strengthening cooperation and dialogue. This is especially pertinent given that the world is experiencing challenges to the US's global leadership on many levels. For the EU and ASEAN, this provides a great opportunity to define common goals and revitalise practical cooperation, with the ultimate aim of creating common EU-ASEAN-driven initiatives.

However, as the world faces new global security uncertainties and a shifting global balance of power, ASEAN needs to re-examine its structures and relations to current realities if it is to play an effective role in the future. Its achievements are currently being challenged. ASEAN has been able to make great progress on the economic integration aspect, but this cannot cover up certain shortcomings in the other pillars and especially the external pressures on its unity. Is the 50th anniversary of ASEAN therefore an

opportune time to start a reform of its core principles? While they have served ASEAN well in enhancing intraregional integration, they may actually hinder its external relations and weaken the organisation's ability to respond decisively to events that may cause destabilisations or divisions in the grouping. This is particularly apparent in the current volatile environment, in which actions of interference by outsiders are obvious. The return of great-power competition to the region will create a critical juncture for smaller states if they are not part of a regional integration process.

In this issue of *Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs*, we reflect on ASEAN's achievements in the last five decades, challenges it has overcome, and the prospects ahead. Special emphasis has been placed on ASEAN's relations with several of its dialogue partners in the ever-changing global landscape. We have the honour and privilege of having His Excellency Le Luong Minh, the current ASEAN Secretary-General, contribute the first chapter to this issue of our journal.

Despite the changing global landscape and complexities ahead, ASEAN is building deeper synergies in the region and it will continue to do well and thrive in the coming decades.



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