



CHAPTER 01

ASEAN Community: A Vietnamese Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on 8 August 1967, when Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand signed the Bangkok Declaration as the founding document of ASEAN. Subsequently, Brunei acceded to the association on 7 January 1984. On 28 July 1995, Viet Nam became the 7th member of ASEAN while Laos and Myanmar joined it on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia joined on 30 April 1999. For Viet Nam, the accession to ASEAN was one of the most critical milestones in the country's regional and international integration. This historic event was also the demonstration of the tireless efforts of Viet Nam and ASEAN in transforming Southeast Asia, once a region fraught with conflicts, into one of dialogues, cooperation, mutual trust, and solidarity. This chapter explores the journey of ASEAN Community building in the last 54 years, the road ahead, and Viet Nam's active contributions as a member of this regional endeavour.

ASEAN COMMUNITY BUILDING: THE 54-YEAR JOURNEY

The word “community” conveys a sense of shared identity, solidarity, and togetherness. The sense of belonging to a community is positive regarding being secure, caring, and proud. Within ASEAN, the term “community” has been reflected as “a big family”, “under one roof”, just to name a few. The rationale of building the ASEAN Community reflected the prevailing trend of the era when ASEAN was established. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the second wave of globalisation and the rise of regionalism. Against this backdrop, countries worldwide worked together for joint development, peace and stability and established regional organisations. On 8 August 1967, five Southeast Asian countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, declared the establishment of ASEAN. The journey of the ASEAN Community has begun since then with the motive “in the spirit of equality and partnership to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian Nations”, as stated in the Bangkok Declaration (ASEAN 1967). The ASEAN Founding Members made clear that the association would be open to all states in Southeast Asia. The community of all ten Southeast Asian countries would ensure peace and stability, leverage the size of the market and production base, and cultivate a harmonious society of diverse cultures.

Community building efforts in ASEAN gained momentum in 2003 as stated in the Bali Concord II, “ASEAN Community shall be established comprising three pillars: political and security cooperation, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural cooperation” (ASEAN 2012).

From that moment on, the ASEAN Leaders have envisioned the three pillars of the ASEAN Community as follows: the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC) to ensure that countries in the region live peacefully with each other and with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment; the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) to create a stable, prosperous and highly competitive ASEAN economic region; and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) to create a cohesive Southeast Asia in partnership as a community of caring societies.

The ASEAN Community building process was further strengthened with the adoption of the ASEAN Charter. In 2015, the 25th ASEAN Summit adopted the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on “ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together, ASEAN Community Vision 2025” and the three Community Blueprints. The ASEAN Community, which came into being on 31 December 2015, has made ASEAN a politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible community. The ASEAN Community Vision 2025 puts forward “a peaceful, stable and resilient Community with enhanced capacity to respond effectively to challenges, and ASEAN as an outward-looking region within a global community of nations, while maintaining ASEAN centrality...vibrant, sustainable and highly integrated economies and ASEAN empowered with capabilities, to seize opportunities and address challenges in the coming decade” (ASEAN 2015).

To realise such a community vision, the APSC Blueprint 2025, AEC Blueprint 2025 and ASCC Blueprint 2016–2025 have been implemented. The APSC Blueprint envisages ASEAN to be a rules-based Community of shared values and norms, a cohesive, peaceful, stable, and resilient region with shared responsibility for comprehensive security, and a dynamic and outward-looking region in an increasingly integrated and interdependent world (ASEAN 2021). The AEC Blueprint 2025 aims to achieve the vision of having an AEC by 2025 that is highly integrated and cohesive, competitive, innovative, and dynamic, with enhanced connectivity and sectoral cooperation, and a more resilient, inclusive, and people-oriented, people-centred community, integrated with the global economy (Ibid). The ASCC Blueprint 2025 strives for a community that engages and benefits the people and is inclusive, sustainable, resilient, and dynamic (Ibid).

REVIEW OF ASEAN COMMUNITY BUILDING PROCESS

Major achievements

As time passed, the 54-year journey of ASEAN Community building has yielded fruits of rapid economic growth, sustainable peace, and longstanding stability in the region. As stated by Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen, "All these have been achieved through the strong political commitment of the Leaders of ASEAN countries to come together for the good of the community, drawing on the synergies released by the framework for cooperation" (Hun 2017). Former Secretary-General of ASEAN Le Luong Minh also stressed, "The forward-looking strategic vision outlined in the Bangkok Declaration constituted a solid premise for the ASEAN Member States, different in political systems, economic structures and religious beliefs but bonded together by close historical and cultural ties, to thrive beyond themselves, respect and leverage on their differences and successfully built the ASEAN Community of unity in diversity" (Le 2020). In 2020, under the Viet Nam's Chairmanship, ASEAN released the "Mid-term Review of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 Blueprints", which assessed progress in the first five years of implementation of the Blueprints, identified gaps, and offered recommendations on the way forward.

In the political and security pillar, within the framework of the current ASEAN Community, peaceful relations among the ASEAN Member States are sustainable. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia has been established as a foundation of inter-state relations with the participation of nearly forty countries. ASEAN and China announced a draft Framework Code of Conduct in 2017 and a Single Draft Negotiating Text in 2018. The ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and the ADMM-plus for external partners have laid the foundation for ASEAN's defence and military cooperation between ASEAN and partner countries (Beginda 2019).

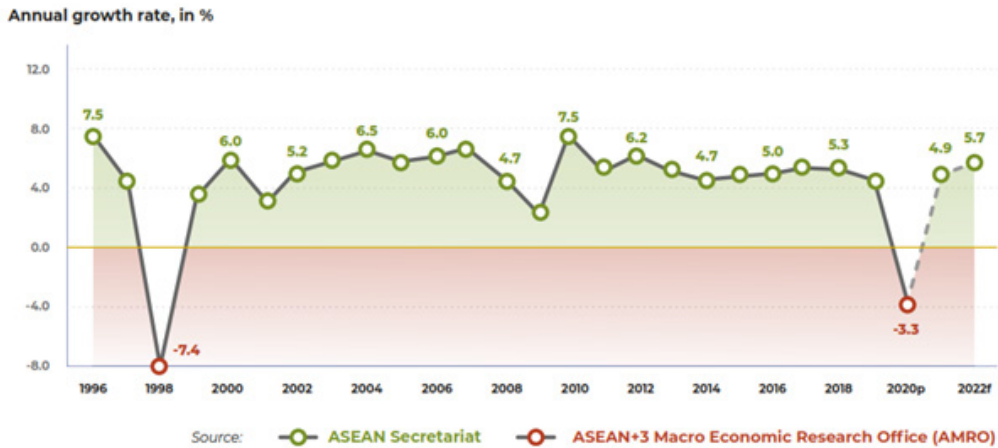
policies are drawn upon to assist Cambodian policymakers in successfully hosting the ASEAN Summits and related meetings in 2022. This book also serves as a solid piece of policy-oriented research, which provides diverse perspectives from policy advisers, scholars, researchers, investors, and practitioners.

A strong ASEAN Community is also a community in which the ASEAN's voice is heard, and regional powers respect the ASEAN's centrality in regional architecture. The concept of ASEAN centrality was coined in the ASEAN Charter. Article 1.15 of the Charter stipulates, "To maintain the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent and inclusive" (ASEAN 2021). The ASEAN centrality has been proven by its inventiveness and leading roles in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus).

In the evolving regional architecture, ASEAN has been adaptive. In 2019, ASEAN issued the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. The Outlook is “intended to enhance ASEAN Community building process and to strengthen and give new momentum for existing ASEAN-led mechanisms to face challenges better and seize opportunities arising from the current and future regional and global environments” (ASEAN 2019). At the 36th ASEAN Summit hosted by Viet Nam, The Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, stressed the need to “continue to strengthen ASEAN Centrality and unity as the way to be safe and prosperous region and a beacon of hope for multilateralism in these trying times” (Lee 2020). Up until now, ASEAN has ten Dialogue Partners, including all major powers, five Development Partners and Sectoral Dialogue Partners, and official relationship with more than 90 countries. ASEAN-led institutions and arrangements are still the most relevant for channelling efforts to succeed against current and future challenges in the Indo-Pacific region.

In the economic pillar, ASEAN has essentially become a single production base, the world's third-largest market with about 650 million people and an essential link in global production and supply chains. In all the three aspects - physical, institutional, and people-to-people - the ASEAN Community has bonded even closer as ASEAN citizens can move freely within the bloc. Cooperation is reinforced in almost all walks of life. With a combined GDP in 2020 of about 3,11 trillion USD, (Statista). ASEAN has become the fifth largest economy globally and the third largest in Asia. The region is poised to become the fourth-largest economy in the world by 2050 (US-ASEAN Business Council 2021). Until April 2021, 54.1 per cent of sectoral work plans in the AEC had been completed, while 34.2 per cent were being implemented (ASEAN 2021). Within the bloc, the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement has been established. In addition, the network of ASEAN's FTA with partners has strengthened the AEC's continued growth trajectory. These include ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand FTA, ASEAN-China FTA, ASEAN-India FTA, ASEAN-Republic of Korea FTA, and ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership. On 15 November 2020, ASEAN signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement along with Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. The covering of about 30 per cent of global GDP and 3 per cent of the world's population makes RCEP the largest FTA in history. Such efforts have helped lower production costs for businesses and facilitate trade and investment within ASEAN and between ASEAN and partners.

FIGURE 1. REAL GDP GROWTH OF ASEAN, 1996–2021



Source: *Mid-Term Review of ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025*

In the socio-cultural pillar, the progress of implementing the ASCC is encouraging. As of May 2020, 71,8% of the actions and activities in the work plan of ASCC Blueprint had been implemented, including 24,8% was completed.

Types of activities comprise capacity building (29.5%), research and publication (23.9%), public outreach (21.0%), policy formulation (19.2%) and groundwork (6.5%) (ASEAN 2020). On improving the youths' competitiveness and productivity, a series of activities have been organised to equip the youth with 21st-century skills needed in the era of rapid digital transformation, urbanisation, and climate change. The ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth (OOSCY) has been implemented to provide life-long learning, accreditation, and skill development. In addition, the ASEAN Labour Ministers' Statement on the Future of Work: Embracing Technology for Inclusive and Sustainable Work has provided an inclusive framework to help the ASEAN workforce catch up with future skills and work. On healthy lifestyle, the physical wellbeing of the ASEAN Community has been promoted through activities to reduce the non-communicable diseases, combat anti-microbial resistance, and prevent malnutrition. On the environment, the ASCC has also introduced initiatives to reduce marine debris pollution, mitigate the transboundary haze in the region, and build climate-resilient cities. The ASEAN Coordination Center for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Response and Management (AHA Center) is responsible for developing disaster risk management and climate change adaptation capabilities. In 2019, ASEAN celebrated the ASEAN Cultural year through several initiatives to promote the roles of culture in the region's sustainable development. Finally, raising greater awareness of ASEAN is a vital part to heighten the sense of the ASEAN Community.

The ASEAN Communication Master Plan 2018–2025 (ACMP II) has exerted the bloc’s efforts towards the “ASEAN: A Community of Opportunities for All”.

Key challenges

Despite significant achievements, the progress of ASEAN Community building has not always been smooth. As reminded by N. Hassan Wirajuda, the former Foreign Minister of Indonesia, it took five years to “translate this into charter-based provision” despite an agreement in principle on the ASEAN Community concept. Moreover, the recent development of the regional and international situation has complicated the ongoing progress of ASEAN Community building. Some key challenges to the ASEAN Community building are as follows.

First, the ASEAN boat is sailing across high seas of increasing uncertainty and disruption. The increasing geopolitical tensions among major powers, especially between the U.S. and China in the region, and the enduring fallout of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic are, among others, big waves affecting the ASEAN Community building. The competition between the U.S. and China continues to worsen down the road. “If ASEAN is to live up to its aspirations of unity and centrality, ASEAN Member States must demonstrate leadership through [a] decisive action on difficult issues even if this may even mean having to [utilise] the consensus-based mechanism differently from the past” (Noor 2020). How to achieve such leadership will be challenging for ASEAN in the time to come. In addition, the outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020 has created additional constraints that are unfavourable for regional multilateralism in general and for ASEAN Community building. This unfolding situation has posed the looming risk of not realising all the priorities and goals of the ASEAN Community by 2025.

Second, although ASEAN Member States have made progress in raising the awareness of the ASEAN Community, recent polls have shown mixed results. In the Poll on ASEAN Awareness 2018, across the 10 ASEAN Member States, 96% of the respondents were aware of ASEAN. However, fewer than one-third claimed to know the ASEAN Community and its three pillars (ASEAN 2018). From the historical perspective, one obstacle to the sense of the ASEAN Community is the cultivation of different national narratives in each of ASEAN Member States (Dira 2016). In addition, the diversity in government systems, economic systems and cultures in the bloc has added more complexity preventing the spirit of togetherness and shared values within ASEAN from converging.

Third, each of the ASEAN Community pillars has its challenges. For the APSC, key challenges include the shifting balance of power in the region, the issue of the East Sea, the domestic political situation of ASEAN Member States, and increasing danger posed by non-traditional security threats. For the AEC, the development gap within ASEAN is still prominent with a broad spectrum of income levels. In 2019, the GDP per capita of Singapore was about 65,233 USD (World Bank Data), while that of Myanmar was about 1,410 USD (World Bank Data). In 2017, the World Bank’s Global Findex showed that 98% of people had a bank account in Singapore, while in Cambodia, the number was 22% (World Bank).

These statistics illustrate the urgent need for ASEAN to ensure that the regional economic integration progress is conducive to narrowing development gap among the ASEAN Member States. In addition, as the digitalisation of the ASEAN economy is under way, there is a risk of fragmentation and incompatibility among different systems of technology used by the ASEAN Member States. Given the different pace of digitalisation within ASEAN, this challenge may further widen the digital gap among the ASEAN members. For the ASCC, the changing demographics may pose a challenge. Such challenges are intertwined and require cross-pillar solutions and a stronger communication strategy. For example, given the growing sophistication and transboundary nature of cyber-threats, more collective measures are needed to ensure open, secure, stable, accessible, and resilient cyberspace to support the digital economy and social stability.

VIET NAM'S ACTIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO ASEAN COMMUNITY BUILDING

The accession of the Viet Nam to ASEAN in the mid-1990s was a historic moment for both Viet Nam and ASEAN. From the national interest point of view, it is quite evident that the ASEAN membership of Viet Nam was driven by pragmatic reasons of creating a stable and peaceful regional environment for the country's security and economic growth. From the constructivist approach, Tung (2007) argued, "Viet Nam joining ASEAN was also part of a broader process in which the country forged a new state identity in the post-Cold War era" (Nguyen 2007). There was a recognition in Viet Nam that "by working with ASEAN it can have a greater impact on regional and global events, rather than by just acting alone" (Le and Hoang 2013). The ASEAN membership has helped Viet Nam acquire a new image and new international status.

It is clear that the Southeast Asian region is vital for Viet Nam. Therefore, it is in Viet Nam's interest to contribute to ASEAN Community building. As stated by former Vietnamese Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Manh Cam, "The Asia Pacific region, at first Southeast Asia and East Asia, places an important position in the foreign policy of Viet Nam" (Nguyen 2009). In 2000, former Vietnamese Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Dy Nien said, "ASEAN membership increasingly provides us with the feeling of being on board with other ASEAN countries, which promotes better mutual understanding and sympathy" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam). The former Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung also referred to ASEAN as "a great family" (People's Daily 2007). ASEAN countries endeavoured to construct an ASEAN Community, Viet Nam "finds it quite comfortable in its support for and commitment to this grand project" (Nguyen 2007). Furthermore, the recent 13th National Party Congress of the Communist Party of Viet Nam decided to elevate Viet Nam's multilateral diplomacy, emphasising ASEAN among other partners (Le and Lai 2021).

For ASEAN, Viet Nam's accession contributed constructively to the expansion of the association with ten member countries. General Secretary of the National ASEAN 2020 Committee Nguyen Quoc Dung mentioned that Viet Nam had acted "as the bridge between the mainland Southeast Asia and maritime Southeast Asia" (Nguyen 2020). Such a progress has consolidated peace and stability in the region and helped create a united, inclusive, and open ASEAN Community. Since joining ASEAN, Viet Nam has been an active participant and contributor to the ASEAN Community building process (Lim 2020). The contributions of Viet Nam to the ASEAN Community building are reflected in five key areas.

First, Viet Nam has been very active in contributing to the formulation of strategic directions and major decisions of ASEAN in various fields. For example, in 1998, Viet Nam hosted the sixth ASEAN Summit, which adopted the Hanoi Plan of Action (HPA).

The HPA is the first in a series of plans of action to realise the ASEAN Vision 2020 that is of "ASEAN as a concert of Southeast Asian Nations, outward-looking, living in peace, stability and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in dynamic development and a community of caring societies" (ASEAN 1997). In addition, with the foreign policy of being active, proactive and responsible, Viet Nam has participated in formulating key documents such as The Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (1995), ASEAN Vision 2020 (1997), Bali Concord II Declaration (2003), Vientiane Action Program (2004), ASEAN Charter (2007), Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009–2015 and ASEAN Vision 2025, AEC Master Plan, AEC 2025 Consolidated Strategic Action Plan, and Master Plans on ASEAN Connectivity and ASEAN Integration Initiative Work Plans.

Second, Viet Nam has successfully assumed its rotating Chair of ASEAN in 2010 and 2020. In 2010, as shared by the former Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Gia Khiem, the theme "Toward the ASEAN Community: From Vision to Action" was chosen as "it portrayed the goal that ASEAN wished to reach through specific actions, rather than general calls" (Pham 2020). In 2010, Viet Nam chaired the 16th Summit to issue the ASEAN Leaders' Statement on Recovery and Sustainable Development. Since then, ASEAN economic integration has focused more on sustainability, the balance of opportunities, and benefits for its member countries. This was the first time that ASEAN launched a model for developing the ASEAN Economic Community based on the harmonisation of many policies from economic to social, and from environmental to macroeconomic management policies. Furthermore, as the Chairman of the ASEAN Connectivity Task Force in 2010, Viet Nam and ASEAN members developed the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC), adopted at the 17th ASEAN Summit in October 2010. MPAC aims to create closer linkages in transport infrastructure and information technology, especially in the Greater Mekong Sub-region, laying the foundation for expanding connectivity.

In 2020, as ASEAN Chair, Viet Nam showed the spirit under the theme “Cohesive and Responsive” when working closely with the ASEAN member countries to overcome challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and recover the regional economy. Facing an unprecedented situation, ASEAN has shown its solidarity and unity in mobilising the overall strength of the ASEAN Community to respond to the pandemic, while maintaining the momentum of ASEAN’s cooperation and regional connectivity.

ASEAN is among the first regional mechanisms to take early and practical steps, such as convening a Special Meeting of the ASEAN Coordinating Council in February 2020 to step up collective responses to the pandemic. In addition, ASEAN has strengthened cooperation with other countries and international organisations to improve epidemic prevention and control effectiveness.

At the 37th ASEAN Summit held in November 2020, the Leaders approved several initiatives on cooperation in responding to Covid-19 and epidemic risks, putting into operation the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund, the Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies, the ASEAN Standard Operating Procedures in response to Public Health Emergencies, and the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases. ASEAN also approved the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, the ASEAN Travel Corridor Agreement, and the synchronous implementation plan on all three the pillars to support people and businesses. In particular, the Ha Noi Declaration on the ASEAN Community’s post-2025 vision emphasised, “A caring and sharing, cohesive and responsive ASEAN Community, in which ASEAN Member States are bonded by regional solidarity and cooperation, where ASEAN identity and the sense of belonging are promoted” (ASEAN 2020).

Third, Viet Nam is among the most active players in regional economic integration. The country is among the top two countries with the highest implementation rate of priority measures in the AEC Master Plan 2015. Viet Nam is currently among the top four countries with the highest implementation rate of the AEC Blueprint 2025 (People’s Daily 2020). It has participated in comprehensive cooperation with other ASEAN countries in trade in goods, services, investment, agriculture, transportation, telecommunications, intellectual property protection, competition policy, and consumer protection. By 2010, Viet Nam had reduced import tax for nearly ten thousand tariff lines to 0 per cent-5 per cent, according to the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT). Such record accounts for 97.8 per cent of the tariff lines, of which there are 5,488 tariff lines at the tax rate of zero per cent. On 1 January 2018, Viet Nam eliminated tariffs on 98% of tariff lines imported from ASEAN countries. This is the highest reduction in import tax among all Free Trade Agreements (FTA) that Viet Nam has signed. It is also one of the leading countries in implementing and piloting trade facilitation measures such as the ASEAN Single Window and self-certification of origin and trade database. Compared to when Viet Nam joined the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1996, the total import-export turnover between Viet Nam and ASEAN increased by more than 16 times, from 3.26 billion USD in 1995 to nearly 53.598 billion USD in 2020 (Viet Nam Financial Times 2021).

As of the end of July 2020, the registered foreign direct investment (FDI) capital of investors from ASEAN reached about 82.2 billion USD, accounting for 21.6% of total registered FDI in Viet Nam. As of the end of June 2020, Viet Nam's direct investment in Laos reached more than 4.9 billion USD in registered capital, followed by the Cambodia market with a total investment of nearly 2.8 billion USD (Figure and Event 2021).

Fourth, Viet Nam has been eagerly pushing initiatives to ensure that the ASEAN Community building process has a trickle-down effect, benefiting all people, groups, and businesses in ASEAN. Viet Nam has given priorities and driven initiatives promoting welfare, social services for disadvantaged groups, and social work professions in the regional work plans.

Such efforts included developing the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection and the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the ASEAN Region. Furthermore, together with ASEAN countries, Viet Nam has put great efforts in expanding the labour market in ASEAN countries and strengthening the recognition of skills among ASEAN countries.

Fifth, Viet Nam has contributed constructively to the expansion of ASEAN's relations with external partners. In 2010, it had two important initiatives to expand the East Asia Summit with Russia and the U.S. and participated in the establishment of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), with the first ADMM+ hosted by Viet Nam. The country has also successfully assumed the role of country coordinator of ASEAN-China relations (2009-2012), ASEAN-EU relations (2012-2015), and ASEAN-India relations (2015-2018). It is now the country coordinator of ASEAN-Japan relations (2018-2021).

By participating in the ASEAN Community building process, Viet Nam has enjoyed great benefits from a stable and peaceful region for the country's socio-economic development. An ASEAN comprising 10 Southeast Asian nations is the foundation of each member's peaceful and stable regional environment, including Viet Nam. The accession to ASEAN is a milestone for Viet Nam to further open its door to the world and accelerate its international integration process. The political commitments and principles of sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, non-interference, and consensus have laid the foundation for Viet Nam and the other ASEAN Member States to strengthen the open, transparent, inclusive and rules-based regional architecture, as well as the ASEAN Charter and the United Nations Charter.

After 25 years as an ASEAN member, Viet Nam considers the region one of its leading economic and trade partners. The membership of AEC provides it more opportunities to access regional and external markets, thereby expanding markets and diversifying export products. In addition to the benefits for economic growth, the economic integration into ASEAN has helped Viet Nam attract foreign direct investment, creating opportunities for Vietnamese enterprises to improve their competitiveness. In addition, the positive impacts from the AEC will contribute to making changes in the development and improvement of domestic policies, laws, and procedures, more in line with international standards. Being an active member of the AEC has accelerated the extensive and comprehensive economic cooperation between Viet Nam and other countries in the region and the world.

By participating in ASEAN socio-cultural cooperation, it can learn from other ASEAN Member States and partners. Some key cooperation areas include poverty reduction, human resource development, information technology, management experience, and capacity building, aiming to effectively handle transnational challenges such as environment, natural disasters, climate change, and epidemics.

MOVING TOWARDS ASEAN COMMUNITY VISION 2025

Looking ahead, ASEAN is entering a critical period in the realisation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the preparation for the post-2025 Vision. Given the challenges mentioned above in the community building process, ASEAN needs to uphold solidarity, unity, and mutual assistance, particularly in maintaining its centrality and strategic interests.

First, on the political and security pillar, ASEAN needs to strengthen its centrality as a driving force in promoting dialogue processes; building trust for peace, security, and stability in the region; and responding more proactively and effectively to the challenges. ASEAN needs to make more active contributions to efforts to promote regional and global peace and development. In the context of growing tensions among major powers, ASEAN commands the central role, both geographically and politically, in leveraging the ASEAN Centrality to encourage an inclusive, peaceful, and integrated evolution of the Indo-Pacific region (Le 2020). It is critical to uphold ASEAN Centrality so that each member and ASEAN can act as active partners rather than as pawns in the strategic chessboard of any external force. ASEAN may not be designed for solving conflicts. However, the association is well-positioned in preventative diplomacy on contentious issues in the political and security realm. A “track 2” or “track 1.5” approach may be conducive to exploring innovative solutions where internal and external factors constrain the government’s actions. An ASEAN Community was first advanced by scholars in the academia and think tanks and has subsequently embraced by ASEAN’s Leaders (Muthiah 2015).

Second, on the economic pillar, a strong ASEAN Community must rely on closer regional economic linkages. In particular, ASEAN needs to put more effort into actively promoting ASEAN’s role in linking sub-regional cooperation with ASEAN’s development process so that all people and regions have the opportunity to contribute to the ASEAN Community. In addition, equitable, inclusive, and sustainable development is critical to building the ASEAN Community, especially when Covid-19 and natural disasters are threatening to slow down the growth of the whole region. Therefore, ASEAN needs to step up measures to support businesses to restore production, business, jobs, and livelihoods for people, while focusing its resources and efforts at the highest level on reducing the risk of the COVID-19 pandemic gradually.

Third, on the socio-cultural pillar, an ASEAN Community must truly be a people-oriented and people-centred ASEAN. It is foremost essential to place the people at the centre of the ASEAN agenda, cutting across all the three pillars of the ASEAN Community. Facing with the rise of non-traditional threats to regional peace and stability, it is high time that ASEAN focused more on human security. In addition, a people-centred ASEAN is more than just creating an ASEAN identity. It should also be the process of building cohesiveness among people in the Member States and encouraging people's participation in the process of community building in all walks of life. The building of the ASEAN Community must be driven by all citizens, not only by government officials, politicians, or researchers.

Fourth, a strong ASEAN Community must be built upon higher awareness of the ASEAN Community and its pillars. It is important for citizens of the Member States to feel that they belong to the bigger ASEAN family. It is also equally important to facilitate the frequent exchanges of ideas among stakeholders on the ASEAN Community building. In a community with diverse identities, each member state must know how to balance national interests with the community's shared interests.

Fifth, to realise the goals of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, it is imperative to further cultivate a culture of compliance through capacity building and harmonisation of national legal systems and enhance human and financial resources required for the implementation and coordination by relevant agencies, especially the ASEAN Secretariat. It is also time that appropriate actions be taken to update the ASEAN Charter to allow more flexible application of the principle of consensus, which will not prevent the community from moving forward, while leaving no member behind. Given the Covid-19 impacts and complicated geopolitical landscape, ASEAN needs to improve the institutional capacity and effective operation of the ASEAN apparatus and ASEAN Way to adapt to the new contexts.

CONCLUSION

It is now a challenging time and a critical period for ASEAN in realising the goal of ASEAN Community 2025 and moving forward in line with the Post-2025 Vision. The Vietnamese people have a saying: "Fire is the test of gold; adversity, of strong men". ASEAN will continue to consolidate its centrality in the regional architecture and its stance as a reliable and sustainable partner to regional and external countries. As ASEAN will turn 55 in 2022 under the upcoming Cambodia's Chairmanship, the endurance and relevance of the association will prove that ASEAN can be more united, more cohesive, more responsive, and more capable of delivering the benefits to people of the ASEAN Member States.

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