

ASEAN at 50: Looking Back to Move Forward

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EVOLUTION THROUGH MAJOR MILESTONES

Established through the signing of the Bangkok Declaration on 8 August 1967 when the Cold War was raging wild and tensions among its would-be members were still running deep, the birth of ASEAN manifested the aspiration of the peoples of Southeast Asia for regional peace and prosperity, which has been the determining factor of success of its constant evolution over the past five decades.

From a tender beginning

Set out with a loose and minimal institutional structure that evolved around the annual ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting (AMM), ASEAN's first decade was mainly dedicated to norms-building through instruments such as the 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration (ZOPFAN), and especially the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). The fundamental principles of peaceful co-existence and pacific settlement of disputes as prescribed in these instruments include respect for national independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, non-interference, and non-threat or use of force.

Together with the TAC, the 1976 Declaration of ASEAN Concord (Bali Concord I) adopted at the first ever ASEAN Summit on 24 February 1976, reflects a growing confidence in the ASEAN project among the Member States. The Bali Concord I agreed to expand ASEAN cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, and political fields and recognized the need to build ASEAN institutions, including the meetings of the ASEAN Leaders and the establishment of the ASEAN Secretariat.

Building on the impetus from the Bali Concord I, ASEAN cooperation in the next two decades expanded to economic and other functional areas with the establishment of various ASEAN sectoral bodies, e.g., science and technology, environment, health, energy, law, and information. Of notable importance were concrete steps towards deepening intra-ASEAN economic integration as a paradigm shift to reinvent ASEAN after the end of the Cold War. A key milestone in this regard was the creation of the 1992

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ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) which aimed to reduce and eventually abolish all tariffs in intra-ASEAN trade.

The end of the Cold War also enabled ASEAN enlargement to encompass all Southeast Asian countries of different political systems, economic structures, and religious beliefs. Bringing together under one roof all the countries (Timor-Leste was then still part of a Member State) in one of the most diverse regions in the world constituted a historic achievement for the organization.

To a rules-based Community

With ASEAN having its footprint across Southeast Asia and enhanced aggregate strength, intra-regional cooperation continued to be expanded and deepened in all areas. The idea of an emerging ASEAN Community started to gain traction, culminating in the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II) adopted at the 9th ASEAN Summit on 7 October 2003 which charted the path towards realizing an ASEAN Community based on three pillars – the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).

The APSC is arguably the most important foundation for ASEAN to survive and thrive. The political-security motivations that led to the creation of ASEAN, i.e., to build an environment of peace and stability, both domestically and regionally, allowing it to focus on development, remain fundamental to ASEAN today.

Aiming to deliver free flow of goods, services, and investment, and freer flow of capital and people to achieve a competitive ASEAN economic region, the AEC has attracted most of the attention of the public and media given its potential benefits in raising the living standard of the ASEAN peoples.

The ASCC is where ASEAN can reach out to its peoples in the most concrete and direct manner, including to the grassroots and various sectors of society, across a wide spectrum of areas, from education to environment, health care to disaster management, culture and information to social welfare. Inclusiveness and resilience are key to the ASCC in bringing ASEAN closer to its peoples.

The growing scope and complexity of regional cooperation and Community building made it urgent to transform ASEAN from a loosely structured association into a more rules-based organization. The ASEAN Charter concluded in 2007 provides the legal and institutional framework for ASEAN by giving it a legal personality, codifying its objectives and principles, and consolidating its organizational structure.

With the launch of the ASEAN Community on 31 December 2015, ASEAN embraces a Community status with a comprehensive agenda of cooperation. This historic milestone testifies to the region's resilience and dynamism as well as the political will and solid commitment of all members to the ASEAN path. ASEAN Member States have made a strategic decision in building the ASEAN Community – to bind their

economies and societies together in a shared destiny, to become a more cohesive and credible entity in addressing common challenges, to boost up their economic competitiveness, and to carve out for themselves a strategic and economic space in dealing with other regional powers.

Community building, however, is an on-going process and its achievement cannot be just sanctified by a declaration. Moving forward, the ASEAN Community will be pursued through the implementation of its Vision 2025 with three new Community Blueprints. Deeper and broader integration will be realized through various agreements and plans of action across all sectors, accompanied by increasingly robust institutional building, and with the support and cooperation of partners and other external parties around the world.

Connected to the world

Having full dialogue relations with ten major partners and long-standing and comprehensive partnerships with the United Nations and other regional organizations, ASEAN centrality in the evolving regional architecture is widely recognized, and it has gained greater attention and priority in the foreign policy of not only the major powers but also countries across the globe. Its external relations continue to grow robustly. As of June 2017, 87 non-ASEAN countries/organizations have established relations with and appointed Ambassadors to ASEAN.

With increasing interest from external partners to engage with ASEAN through formal partnerships, ASEAN is taking steps to streamline its meetings and processes so as to release more capacity and resources to expand its external relations with potential partners, at the same time strengthening existing partnerships to become more substantive and strategic. ASEAN will continue to be outward-looking and proactive in its external relations.

As reflected in the Bali Declaration on ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations (or the Bali Concord III) adopted in 2011, another emerging dimension of ASEAN's outward-looking posture is "ASEAN go global". The goal is to enable ASEAN to become a more proactive and constructive partner in addressing global issues, thereby promoting ASEAN's profile in the global arena. Towards this end, ASEAN countries have committed to co-ordinating ASEAN positions and enhancing ASEAN capacity in response to global issues of common interest and concern.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS AND EVOLVING ROLE IN REGIONAL AFFAIRS

From a fledgling association in a region embroiled in intra-mural tensions and great-power contestations, ASEAN has persevered and prospered over the past five decades to become an indispensable player and major contributor to peace and prosperity in

Southeast Asia and beyond. ASEAN today is widely recognized as a successful model of regionalism in all three key dimensions: regional peace and security, economic integration, and institution building.

Anchor of peace

The most important success of ASEAN thus far is the maintenance of peace and stability in Southeast Asia by promoting peaceful relations among its Member States. Since ASEAN's inception, war among its members has been "unthinkable" though there have been certain disputes, conflicts, and even some small clashes which have largely been contained, diffused, and resolved. ASEAN has served as a safety valve in preventing bilateral differences from boiling over into regional flashpoints. There were occasions where ASEAN's role was more direct and proactive. A case in point was its quick response to the Cambodia-Thailand border skirmish in 2011 and the "shuttle diplomacy" by the then ASEAN Chair to help settle their bilateral disputes through amicable regional solutions.

To maintain peace, ASEAN has actively advocated a rules-based regional architecture in which all countries, large or small, co-exist with respect for national independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity on an equal footing, within a set of rules and norms anchored in international law. Towards this end, ASEAN has developed important instruments which uphold the principles of peaceful co-existence and pacific settlement of disputes among its Member States as well as with external partners. Being the first ever ASEAN treaty, the TAC is widely recognized as a code of conduct for inter-state relations in Southeast Asia. It has been gradually universalized with 25 non-ASEAN High Contracting Parties now in its fold, including all major powers.

Apart from the TAC, the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) is another important instrument which provides a key framework for ASEAN to work with China to defuse the prevailing tension, prevent conflicts, and restore confidence eroded due to the unilateral actions going counter to its principles for the maintenance of peace, stability, and the promotion of dialogue and cooperation in the South China Sea. To add value to the DOC, ASEAN is intensifying consultations with China towards early conclusion of a Code of Conduct (COC) capable of not only preventing but also managing such incidents.

With diligent efforts of norms-building, confidence building, and regular exchanges among regional leaders and officials of its Member States, the ASEAN process has embedded the habits of mutual consultation and a sense of togetherness. Suspensions and residual animosity gradually gave way to trust and collegiality thanks to the mutual assurance that all member nations, regardless of size and might, adhere to the ASEAN code of conduct, hence achieving the transformation of Southeast Asia from the "Balkans of the East" in the late 1960s to an oasis of peace and stability today.

Such an achievement is not a historical coincidence or pure luck, but the result of brave decisions and the hard work of generations of ASEAN leaders to nurture peace and stay away from war.

Platform for comprehensive security

Upholding the principle of comprehensive security, ASEAN has stepped up regional cooperation in addressing non-traditional security challenges such as transnational crime, terrorism, disaster management, drugs, and pandemic diseases, among others. These transboundary challenges have grown in scope, impact, and intensity due to enhanced connectivity in the region. Indeed, non-traditional security is a key target of policy discussions and practical cooperation under various ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters (AMMD), the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC), the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM), the ADMM-Plus, and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

Going more rules-based, ASEAN has put in place the necessary legal instruments to deal with these challenges, including the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response, and most recently the ASEAN Convention on Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, which came into force in March 2017.

Emerging transboundary problems such as radicalism and extremism, cyber security, and irregular migration also feature more importantly on ASEAN's agenda. Cyber security has emerged as a priority area under the ARF and ADMM-Plus. The AMMTC has convened special meetings to discuss ways to address these challenges, including through the updating of the ASEAN Comprehensive Plan of Action on Counter-Terrorism to counter the emerging trends in violent extremism and radicalization, the inclusion of "people smuggling" under the AMMTC's purview, and the establishment of a trust fund to support humanitarian efforts to cope with the phenomenon of irregular migration in Southeast Asia.

Driver of economic integration

The end of the Cold War allowed ASEAN to move its economic agenda from limited industrial cooperation started only in the 1970s to economic integration with the introduction of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992. During its integration process, various concrete initiatives have been undertaken both at the national and regional levels, from the virtual elimination of intra-ASEAN import tariffs, the gradual opening of the services sector, to the simplification of cross-border trading processes including

customs procedures and rules of origin, the harmonization of technical regulations, and mutual recognition arrangements.

The business and investment environments in the ASEAN region continued to be fostered through the adoption of common frameworks, innovation-promoting initiatives, and mutual cooperation in areas such as competition policy, intellectual property rights, and consumer protection. The development of global value chains has been further supported through the work to enhance connectivity, including improvements in transportation and other infrastructure networks.

Already as the regional organization having the most free trade agreements with all of its major economic and trading partners, ASEAN is complementing its internal regional integration efforts with strategic global engagement by forging new free trade agreements and comprehensive economic partnerships, especially the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Furthermore, initiatives such as the ASEAN Trade Repository, the ASEAN Solutions for Services, Investment and Trade, the ASEAN Tariff Finder, the SME Online Academy, the ASEAN Intellectual Property Portal, and the Mutual Recognition Arrangements for professionals, have been introduced with the objective of facilitating businesses to better benefit from the AEC. Work also continues on major initiatives such as the ASEAN Single Window, the Customs Transit System, and Self-Certification.

These achievements and progress have resulted in flourishing business confidence in the region. Surveys have shown growing business expectations of increased trade and investment in ASEAN, and the importance of ASEAN in their global portfolios. Building upon the achievements and foundation laid under the previous Blueprint, the AEC Blueprint 2025 will chart the direction for ASEAN economic integration up to 2025. The new Blueprint not only is aimed at deepening existing integration areas, but also includes new focus areas and cross-cutting elements such as global value chains, e-commerce, science and technology, good regulatory practice, sustainable economic development, and global megatrends, thus ensuring ASEAN's continued relevance in the fast-changing world.

Although the AEC remains largely a work in progress, its potential benefits in delivering an ASEAN single production and market base are huge. With a current total GDP of approximately USD2.6 trillion, the region collectively is the sixth largest economy in the world or the third largest in Asia. ASEAN is also home to 640 million people in 2016, more than half of whom are under 30 years old, making it the third largest market in the world. If ASEAN could maintain its growth momentum, it is set to become the world's 4th largest economy by 2050.

Nucleus of the regional architecture

Lying at the crossroads of the strategic interests of major powers both geo-politically and geo-economically, ASEAN has been positioning itself as an “extra-regional”

organization by promoting an open and inclusive regional architecture. It has been recognized as a successful architect of various regional frameworks in Southeast Asia and beyond. Over time, these frameworks have grown substantially to embrace various cooperation areas as well as new members, yet still bear ASEAN's imprint.

In Asia-Pacific, where an overarching regional framework is absent due to history and the complex dynamics of major-power relations, the ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ADMM-Plus, each having its own strategic significance and historical context, provide much-needed platforms for major powers and other regional countries to engage in political and security dialogue and cooperation on issues of common interest and concern. These issues range from non-proliferation to maritime security, from disaster relief and humanitarian assistance to disputes in the South China Sea, among others.

With a broad membership comprising 27 countries from across the Indo-Pacific and also Europe, the ARF constitutes a very inclusive forum. After focusing its work on confidence building measures during the past two decades, the ARF is now progressing to preventive diplomacy. The ADMM-Plus established in 2010 has also gone beyond talk and dialogue to engage in practical cooperation on maritime security, counter-terrorism, peacekeeping, military medicine, disaster relief, and mine action. With the same membership as the ADMM-Plus, as a premier forum for the leaders of ASEAN countries and key Asia-Pacific powers to discuss broad issues of strategic significance to the region, the EAS is undertaking institutional enhancement, including through the work of the newly established EAS Ambassadors Meeting in Jakarta, to ensure follow-up on the Leaders' dialogue.

Through the EAS and other ASEAN-led mechanisms, ASEAN has been exercising its centrality to maintain strategic equilibrium in the region, maximize its leverage and space in dealing with the major powers whose interests and priorities do not always coincide with each other's and with those of ASEAN, and contribute to building a regional rules-based order where the "might makes right" rule should not be allowed to prevail over the rule of law.

CHALLENGES AHEAD AND THE WAY FORWARD

While much has been achieved over 50 years of its evolution, development, and regional integration, challenges remain for ASEAN along the way. Comprised of ten sovereign nations with different political systems, economic structures, foreign policies, and security outlooks, ASEAN, working on the basis of consultation and consensus, has an inherent challenge in managing and reconciling the vast diversity among its membership. Development gaps within and among Member States are holding back deeper and higher-quality integration. In various areas of cooperation, national laws and regulations differ substantially.

In addition, the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms, hence the absence of a compliance culture, is another major impediment. The admonition of the Eminent Persons Group on the ASEAN Charter a decade ago still holds true today: *“ASEAN’s problem is not one of lack of vision, ideas, and action plans. The real problem is one of ensuring compliance and effective implementation of decisions.”*

ASEAN also needs to overcome many institutional constraints. Coordination across a wide swathe of agencies and departments within each ASEAN country, among ASEAN Member States as well as among different ASEAN mechanisms would need to be improved. Besides, limited resources to implement ASEAN initiatives and plans of action also constitute a major obstacle to increasing the quality of ASEAN cooperation.

Furthermore, greater awareness and understanding of ASEAN are crucial for gaining public support for and participation in the ASEAN Community. ASEAN must address the seeming disconnect between its policy-level discussions and the impacts on the ground. Being an inter-governmental organization, ASEAN has long been acquainted with a top-down approach but its agenda across the three pillars has increasingly focused on delivering tangible benefits to its peoples. ASEAN must do more to “walk the talk” in delivering a people-oriented, people-centred community.

For ASEAN to continue being a success, it must be close to the hearts of the ASEAN peoples and high on the agenda of the ASEAN leaders. The long-standing political commitment by the member governments to the ASEAN project should never be taken for granted, and must be constantly nurtured. The realization of the ASEAN Community cannot be the sum of the three Blueprints’ regional actions only. It relies on concerted efforts at all levels and from all stakeholders, as well as the enduring national interest of all ASEAN Member States in the cause of regional integration.

And, last but not least, the biggest challenge to ASEAN’s resilience is geo-political. The Asia-Pacific landscape is presently in flux with the shifting balance of power and growing strategic contestations among major powers. The most daunting challenge for ASEAN in the years to come is how to navigate its relations with the major powers and other key external partners in an inclusive and constructive manner.

ASEAN centrality must be diligently earned through unity and credibility. Being central is more about “act central” than only “talk central”, and ASEAN can only act central when it is politically united and economically integrated. The on-going disruptive trends to the regional architecture are to be expected and well beyond ASEAN’s control. What ASEAN can and must do in this time of uncertainty is to stay united and to build a strong and integrated ASEAN Community. An ASEAN that is cohesive and capable of maintaining its centrality would contribute meaningfully to peace and stability in Southeast Asia and beyond.

H.E. Le Luong Minh is the Secretary-General of ASEAN. Before assuming his post as Secretary-General of ASEAN, Le Luong Minh was Viet Nam's Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs. The ASEAN Leaders endorsed him as Secretary-General for 2013-2017 upon nomination of the government of Viet Nam. Minh has had a long career in Viet Nam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which began in 1975. He was appointed Deputy Director-General for International Organizations in 1993, and in 1995, he was the Ambassador Permanent Representative to the United Nations Office and Other International Organizations in Geneva. In 2002, he was appointed Director-General for Multilateral Economic Cooperation. From 2004 to 2011, Minh was Viet Nam's Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Representative to the United Nations. From August 2007 to December 2008, he was concurrently Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs and from December 2008 till the end of his tenure in June 2011 concurrently Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs. He studied Diplomacy at the University of Foreign Affairs then studied Linguistics and English Literature at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.