ASEAN@50: New Challenges in Search of Solutions

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Introduction

Few would have expected the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to persevere long enough to celebrate its golden jubilee. There were many in 1967 who were happy to dismiss this grouping of five Southeast Asian nations as inconsequential. Indeed, why should ASEAN matter when two past attempts to forge some form of regional collaboration – the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) established in 1961, and the Greater Malayan Confederation (MAPHILINDO) formed in 1963 – were relegated to the annals of history without a trace? Why did ASEAN endure while other efforts failed? Was ASEAN a "miracle," as some keen ASEAN watchers have postulated?

For starters, ASEAN defied convention by surviving the Cold War relatively unscathed. One could even argue that the region benefited and even prospered from what the American historian John Lewis Gaddis would call the "long peace."[1] Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the world basked in a period of tenuous peace from the end of World War Two to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. But to categorically attribute ASEAN's achievements to a higher force or to luck belies the fact that ASEAN is, in the first instance, far from perfect. Second, it fails to recognise that ASEAN's DNA is built from chromosomes that are interlinked with idealism, self-interest, strategic flexibility, nationalism, and pragmatism. The fact that ASEAN is able to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its founding on 8 August 2017 has little to do with luck and more to do with sheer hard work, trial and error, and many karaoke sessions. On balance, ASEAN has done well in the last fifty years, but what has worked in the past may not serve ASEAN as well in the next fifty years. This article is a reflective analysis of ASEAN's internal and external challenges as it embarks on its onward journey toward building a community.

* This paper was submitted on 25 July 2017.

[1] Gaddis, John Lewis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries Into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

ASEAN at 50 or 18?

The first point of departure in analysing ASEAN is to establish its pedigree. The grouping in its present form is not fifty years old, but has been in existence for only eighteen years. ASEAN5 – comprising Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand – was indeed formed in 1967, but ASEAN10 only came into existence in 1999. The admission of Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999) brought a different mix of political, economic, and social dynamics to ASEAN, which until the enlargement process was begun, looked relatively "homogenous" in terms of economic development and political outlook. The learning curve for Brunei was less severe than for Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (collectively known as the "CLMV" states), and ASEAN sought to narrow the development gap between the ASEAN6 and the newer ASEAN member states with the introduction of the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) in 2000. More importantly, ASEAN's original DNA was altered by the admission of the new member states. The CLMV states, in particular, had a large impact on ASEAN. One of these changes is the innovation of the "ASEAN minus X" decision-making model which relaxes the rigid consensus model on non-political issues. This new modality was introduced to accord the CLMV states additional time to implement agreements and protocols under the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) framework.

From a broader perspective, ASEAN's consensus decision-making model provides a disincentive for the newer members to assimilate with the "old ways" and older members since they can literally stop ASEAN in its tracks by withholding their consent. The introduction of the "ASEAN minus X" modality points to the fact that it was the older ASEAN members that had to accommodate their newer collaborators, thus rendering the question of assimilating the newer members into the ASEAN fold moot. Accepting ASEAN's "age" as 50 implies a continuity of the "old ways," and ignores the profound impact the CLMV states have had in redesigning ASEAN's DNA and restructuring its interests. The other noticeable shift that comes with ASEAN's expansion is the dilution of the littoral ASEAN6 member states' grip on the regional organisation in favour of a more diffused and decentralisation of power and infusion of interests from the continental Southeast Asian states. This political and strategic dynamic has coloured intra-ASEAN relations for the past eighteen years and will set the scene for its future. While we laud and honour ASEAN's half-century's worth of efforts in fostering regional cooperation, we need to recognise that it is the events and developments of the past 18 years that have been more consequential to ASEAN's current affairs and its future.

Internal Challenges

In Search of Leadership

ASEAN is a unique regional organisation with a "horizontal" structure. Its intergovernmental roots mean that each member state retains sovereignty and powers. Regardless of its size, each member state is accorded the same treatment and standing. ASEAN's smallest state, Brunei, with a population of 417,000 (2015), has the same rights as its largest state, Indonesia, which has a population of 255 million. All member states are equal regardless of their size, population, and wealth – a form of institutional design which ensures that small states are not overwhelmed by or play second fiddle to their larger neighbours. This philosophy is encapsulated in the consensus decision model which ensures a level playing field for all. Unfortunately, this horizontal structure prevents the emergence of strong and sustained leadership within the organisation. Leadership is most clearly identified with the ASEAN chairmanship. Holding the helm for the year gives the Chair some latitude in proposing initiatives and in setting the ASEAN agenda. The chairmanship rotates annually among the members in alphabetical order, and as such there is no fixed assignment of leadership.

In the past, ASEAN has worked on the basis of exercising collective leadership through informal consultation. Leaders would share and circulate ideas for consideration and work toward building a consensus. This painstakingly informal form of collective leadership is premised on the leaders taking an interest in regional affairs and in driving ASEAN forward. In this day of populism and anti-globalisation, the enthusiasm for regional initiatives cannot be taken for granted. ASEAN member states have also found themselves more engrossed with domestic affairs just as their people question the utility of this regional project. In short, ASEAN is an organisation with ten leaders but short on leadership. Even traditional ASEAN powerhouses, such as Indonesia, are perceived to have taken a backseat on ASEAN. Meanwhile, the Malaysian leadership is preparing the groundwork for a generationally defining general election which has to be called by May 2018. The Thai polity is just about showing signs of sustained stability, and the Philippine leadership – while holding the ASEAN chairmanship – appears to favour some aspects of its bilateral relationships rather than standing up for ASEAN.

The tussle between national and regional interest is not new, nor would it end anytime soon. This raises the question of ASEAN's sustainability in the absence of strong and committed leadership. Can ASEAN continue to rely on the chairmanship system to provide leadership, a system which relies on the interest and political will of the holder? Could ASEAN explore the possibility of some form of functional leadership structure whereby one or a few member states could volunteer or be assigned responsibilities for their designated areas? This format would provide continuity and imbue a sense of stakeholdership, while relieving the ASEAN Chair of the sole burden of leadership. An

important priority for ASEAN moving forward is to establish new forms of institutionalized leadership to supplement the chairmanship system.

Managing ASEAN Expectations

ASEAN has a proven track record in the international community. Among its well-deserved accolades include upholding the Kampuchea cause in the United Nations and its role in the conclusion of the Paris Peace Accord. It has also garnered respect for its astute management of its external relations by providing the opportunity and strategic space for all the major powers and regional countries to engage the region. While ASEAN stands tall in the international community, it is not similarly appreciated by those within the region. Chief among these criticism is the sense of disconnect between ASEAN and the people. The AEC was launched with some degree of fanfare on 31 December 2015 – along with the Political-Security and Socio-Cultural communities – but its effects have not been fully recognised. The public's sense of awareness of ASEAN is limited to the basic identification of its logo, flag, and brief history. ASEAN is also viewed as aloof and elitist. The people do not feel directly connected to ASEAN as their participation is moderated through their governments.

The Cambodians have felt let down by ASEAN for failing to come to their cause in their dispute with Thailand over the Preah Vihear temple. In the same way, the Philippines turned to international arbitration when it felt its interests in the South China Sea could not be protected through ASEAN. There is an apparent expectation gap between what the ASEAN people expect from the regional organisation and what ASEAN can do. In the case of the Preah Vihear temple dispute, ASEAN's hands were bound by the sacrosanct non-interference doctrine which forbids ASEAN member states from interfering in the domestic affairs of other member states. It would thus be unreasonable for one party to expect ASEAN to discard this doctrine when doing so serves its purpose. ASEAN has to be approached from a realistic vantage point, in the full understanding that it can only go as far as permitted by the member states. It does not have the right to impose a position or action on any member state.

Even though ASEAN carries the designation of a "community," it is fundamentally a grouping of states linked together with the explicit aim to foster regional cooperation. In other words, ASEAN is a platform to resolve collective action problems. Its intergovernmental roots meant that the interface and direct involvement of the people in regional affairs would be limited. However, this line of explanation would fall on deaf ears among the ASEAN citizenry, largely due to the inflated expectations built up by ASEAN over the years.

The adoption of the "Kuala Lumpur Declaration on People-Oriented, People-Centric ASEAN" in 2015 is an example of ASEAN's misstep in creating false expectations. "People-oriented" implies a top-down approach with the emphasis on delivering benefits for the people, whereas "people-centric" endows ownership and

allows for a greater degree of participation by the people. If ASEAN is serious in pursuing a "people-centric" approach, it needs to go beyond the people's interface with the ASEAN leaders and introduce an institutionalised form of direct participation. ASEAN's vagueness in translating polemic into action has also generated unnecessary confusion. Although "progressive" member states like Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and even Myanmar appear to favour a more participatory approach, not a single ASEAN member state would agree to formats that would bypass its government.

In spite of the rhetoric, the governments fully expect to retain their exclusive hold as the only representative at the regional level. While the "people-centric" mantra is proposed at the regional level, it is most feasible and applicable at the national level. In practical terms, "people-centricity" is a process to engage, consult, and integrate the ASEAN citizenry at the national level on ASEAN matters. Efforts to "democratise" ASEAN begins at the national level. Unfortunately, ASEAN is a convenient bogeyman for the lack of people's engagement at the regional level even though the "fight" for a stake and voice in regional affairs actually begins and ends at the national level. Pronouncements such as the Kuala Lumpur Declaration create unreasonable expectations that eventually harm ASEAN's standing in the eyes of the people. At the same time, ASEAN governments and stakeholders have not done enough to communicate and disseminate information on the benefits of ASEAN to the masses. The often told narrative of the low take-up rate of ASEAN free trade arrangement provisions designed to benefit local businesses is another case in point.

On one hand, the concern with respect to ASEAN's engagement with its people is both managing unreasonable expectations as well as tackling the problem of the absence of expectations. ASEAN can only remain relevant if the agreements and actions transacted at the regional and international level are known and supported by the people. Moving forward, ASEAN member states can no longer hide behind the veil of its inter-governmental nature, and will need to comprehensively engage the people. Without the people's support, the ASEAN project will not fulfil its full potential and may even run the risk of backsliding.

Cohesion and Unity

ASEAN's cohesion and unity has come under increasing glare within the region and outside the region. The public break in the failure to issue the joint communiqué of the foreign ministers for the first time in its history at the 2012 ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting (AMM) exposed the underlying tensions within the grouping. This debacle continues to be played out, albeit in different intensities, in subsequent ASEAN Summits and foreign ministers meetings. Although the subject of the division is ultimately the South China Sea disputes, the larger and more important question lies in ASEAN's ineffectiveness in managing and resolving differences. ASEAN's consensus decision-making process naturally nudges the resolution of differences to the lowest

common denominator to produce a modicum of a unified position and camaraderie. In theory, ASEAN is beholden to the position of the member state with the highest resistance since consensus is only possible with its concurrence. This allows a single state to hold significant sway over the majority, as was the case in Phnom Penh at the 2012 AMM. From an institutional design perspective, the consensus model provides strong incentives for any one member state to stake out its position, making compromises more challenging and sometimes impossible. This state of affairs often results in stalemates and appearances of an unresponsive ASEAN. The consensus model provides the guarantee that divergent individual interests would always prevail over the collective interest, and a member state would not be forced to accept a position that it disagrees with. The status quo privileges the individual interest over the collective, and exposes flaws in ASEAN's institutional design, namely the failure to take into account common interests by allowing the "tyranny of one" to prevail over the many. Revising this decision-making model would not find many takers among the member states as every member state would prefer to have the "veto" trump card in its sleeves as an insurance to prevent collective action used against it while allowing it to control the ASEAN agenda. If alternatives such as a super-majority model are not politically feasible, ASEAN may consider other options to allow a more open airing of viewpoints to escape from the consensus-model straitjacket.

Rather than keeping to watered-down proclamations and statements for the sake of keeping up the appearance of ASEAN unity, Chairman's statements and joint communiqués could accurately reflect the member states' positions by stating the "majority" and "minority" views. This idea would be tantamount to washing ASEAN's dirty laundry in public by openly airing its disagreements, but is the alternative of papering over their differences a better option? The status quo downplays the disagreements by posing the minority position as the ASEAN unified view – effectively dismissing the stance and interests of the majority member states. Casting the ASEAN documents in two categories allows for member states to accurately communicate their position on regional affairs, rather than be silenced by the power of the veto. In addition, the juxtaposing of majority and minority positions forces all parties to be transparent with their stance and to take responsibility for their actions. More importantly, this innovation also helps member states to better communicate with the wider community. From a strategic perspective, the introduction of the "minority view" may encourage compromises by the outliers toward the majority view as the minority states may not want their dissenting views known publicly.

Funding the Community-building

Strengthening the ASEAN Secretariat has been a top priority in the past decades and discussions inevitably revolve around improving the institution's human resources. Two such measures involve adding to the number of officials to manage ASEAN's

ever growing areas of regional cooperation, as well as revamping the remuneration to retain and attract quality officials. The Secretariat's annual budget at US$20 million translates to a contribution of US$0.03 for every ASEAN citizen. In all fairness, the member states contribute directly and indirectly to support ASEAN activities beyond their annual dues. At the same time, ASEAN relies heavily on its Dialogue Partners to fund a wide range of projects, from promoting the freedom of the press to women empowerment to the promotion of entrepreneurship. These projects are generally "parked" and managed with the cooperation of the Dialogue Partners at the ASEAN Secretariat. The Dialogue Partners' development fund to support regional development is one of the hallmarks of the dialogue partner relations system. However, the larger issue arises from the state of dependency on the Dialogue Partners' funding and raises the question of the inability of ASEAN to generate internal funding to drive its community-building. Old proposals such as the introduction of a modest "ASEAN tax" of US$1 on international air travel would provide an independent source of income for the ASEAN Secretariat and other affiliated institutions such as the ASEAN Foundation to engage the ASEAN citizenry on a wider scale and more effectively. Increasing the ASEAN member states' contribution to the ASEAN central fund will have little effect on ASEAN's "grassroots" engagement, which remains largely underfunded. The establishment of a "community fund" with the mandate to connect local communities and the people at the regional level would inject new energy and resources to drive the community-building project forward.

External Challenges

Changing strategic environment

ASEAN has endured a challenging strategic environment since its formation in 1967. It has responded to the post-Cold War uncertainties by embarking on closer cooperation. Signature projects such as the ASEAN Economic Community, ASEAN Regional Forum, and the East Asia Summit were all initiated after the end of the Cold War. The new millennium brings new opportunities and challenges for ASEAN, none more so than the rise of China. China's speedy climb up the ranks of economic powers has been a boon for the region but it would be short-sighted to view China's ascendancy purely from an economic viewpoint. Beijing's economic success has given the world's most populous country a platform to expand its geostrategic footprint and political influence in the region. The "China factor" will be the single most important strategic challenge for ASEAN. How does ASEAN maintain its close economic ties with China without being drawn into the Chinese political orbit? What political price would ASEAN pay for its economic over-dependency on China? Will China continue to adhere to ASEAN

centrality if Beijing finds better payoffs using bilateral means to advance its national interests?

It is in ASEAN's interest to maintain friendly relations with China, and the reverse is also true. At the same time, it is also in ASEAN's interest to keep the region open and to have a balance of power to prevent the rise of a hegemonic power. In this respect, doubts about the US's strategic endurance in the region are becoming more pronounced as the world's largest power is distracted with conflicts and priorities in the Middle East and other parts of the world. The Trump Administration's early signals to the region are disconcerting and one can only hope that "America First" and the US's nascent signs of withdrawal to "fortress USA" are not the harbinger of a new and long-term strategic trend. In any case, the US's relative decline vis-à-vis China will force a major rethinking on the contours of the region's strategic balance. How will ASEAN adjust to this strategic shift, which may profoundly limit ASEAN's strategic options?

A survey conducted by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in April 2017[2] provides an inkling of these rumblings on the ground. More than half of the respondents (51.4%) thought that the US had lost strategic ground to China since Donald Trump took over the US presidency. This perception narrows ASEAN's strategic options as China's ascendancy appears to have knocked the US from its perch. An overwhelming 73.6% of the respondents viewed China as the most influential major power in Southeast Asia, and the expectation for China to fill the strategic vacuum vacated by the US was even larger at 80.2%. The US's withdrawal from the TPP and its muted articulation of its Asia policy are fuelling a sense of inevitability of China's hegemonic reach.

At the same time, China's influence is set to expand throughout the region and initiatives such as "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) will draw Southeast Asia closer to its orbit. Success, however, is by no means assured. China may be seen as the most influential, but it is also the major power that Southeast Asians trust the least: 72.5% of the respondents had "little" or "no confidence" in China to "do the right thing" in contributing to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance. The US fared just as poorly with 72.2% of the respondents registering their pessimism. The "dark horse" that Southeast Asians trust the most is Japan, which received 12.3% "very confident" and 49.7% "confident" responses. Interestingly, Japan was the only major power in the survey to receive more "positive" than "negative" responses.

This survey points to a challenging future for Southeast Asia, which will labour under the increasingly tighter embrace of China, which it does not trust. Southeast Asia holds Japan in the highest regard, but Tokyo has not shown any aptitude or inclination for regional leadership, and does not present a viable alternative to anchor Southeast Asia's balancing strategy. On the other hand, the US appears to be floundering in the sea of uncertainty of Trump's making. More importantly, the region perceives the US as

[2] Full results of the survey is available at https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/centres/asc/pdf/ASCSurvey40517.pdf.

a declining power whose primary interest lies anywhere but Southeast Asia. Secretary of Defence James Mattis's speech at the 2017 Shangri-la Dialogue did little to correct this perception. Unfortunately, Trump's decision to pull the US out of the Paris Climate Change Accord served to reinforce the view that the US has all but abdicated its leadership role. Unless the US changes gear in the near future, it might well end up in the same position as Japan in Southeast Asia: economic giant, political pygmy.

ASEAN is left with the strategic conundrum of living beside a very powerful neighbour – China – that it does not trust. At the same time, it holds Japan in high regard but doubts it has the political will and capacity to lead. The US is the world's leading power but its influence appears to be waning in the region, nor is it roundly trusted. How does ASEAN build strategic trust with China? It might be premature – and even foolhardy – to dismiss the US's interest in the region but the impact of the shifting geostrategic balance can hardly be ignored. If the US's interest in Southeast Asia is expected to wax and wane, what is ASEAN's "Plan B?" How does ASEAN respond to the "new" strategic balance in maintaining an equilibrium conducive to keeping the region open and welcoming to all parties? How do the European Union and other middle powers figure in the emerging regional strategic landscape? More importantly, how does ASEAN engage other regional stakeholders without antagonising China?

Maintaining ASEAN relevance

ASEAN was formed in 1967 with the explicit purpose of maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its member states, against the rising tide of the communist threat. Four years later this overriding rationale found its way into the Declaration of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) of 1971, which among others, aspires to keep Southeast Asia "free from any form or manner of interference by outside Powers." Keeping the major powers at bay was the *sine qua non* during ASEAN's formative decades, but the challenge in the immediate future lies in keeping the region open and the major powers engaged in the region. As reported by the ASEAN Secretariat, the grouping's member states rely on its Dialogue Partners for 56.9% of its trade and 62.2% of foreign direct investment (2015). It is thus understandable that the Dialogue Partners are interested to deepen their political and strategic engagements to safeguard their trade and investment interests. ASEAN's response has been to pioneer the establishment of political and security dialogues, beginning with the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, the East Asia Summit in 2005, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) in 2010. These platforms were designed to provide an avenue for ASEAN Dialogue Partners to engage ASEAN and also to foster habits of cooperation among the Dialogue Partners, with an eye towards the dampening of rivalries between the major powers. In recent years, these "ASEAN-led" processes have faced pressure from the Dialogue Partners to allow for increased ownership and leadership opportunities. The intermittent murmurings from some

Dialogue Partners for the East Asia Summit to introduce co-chairing of the meeting reflect some of the disappointments with the existing format. How will ASEAN reconcile these pressures with the overriding imperative of keeping the agenda firmly within ASEAN's grip? If ASEAN does not relax its grip on agenda-setting, would it run the risk of fuelling dissatisfaction to the point where interest among the Dialogue Partners in these ASEAN-led processes begins to wane?

Raising the sense of ownership among the Dialogue Partners in ASEAN-led processes is a double-edged proposition since it is unclear if broadening the management of these institutions would have a positive effect. Opening the door for the Dialogue Partners to co-manage ASEAN-led processes would expose these processes to the Dialogue Partners' idiosyncratic interests and turn these processes into platforms for competing rivalries. Placating one major power may mean making another unhappy. If all or most of the Dialogue Partners are unhappy with the present system, no one party can claim "victory" over another party, resulting in a state of stalemate that gives rise to peaceful and cooperative relations. Seen from this perspective, the status quo has a lot of merits.

Whither Centrality?

ASEAN's role as the facilitator of regional affairs has often been tested with sceptics questioning its capacity and proclivity to lead. After all, how could a grouping of ten small states purport to offer any form of leadership to non-Southeast Asian states that are bigger and more powerful than themselves? These criticisms are misplaced as ASEAN is cognisant of its standing vis-à-vis the middle and major powers in the wider East Asian region. This confusion is compounded by the fact that ASEAN denotes processes such as the ARF, ADMM Plus, and EAS as "ASEAN-led," which gives rise to expectations of leadership. In reality, the notion of "ASEAN-led" is better understood as playing a role of initiator, convenor, and manager instead of leadership per se. Given that all these processes are centred on ASEAN, it is difficult to envision their viability without ASEAN. At the very least, ASEAN performs the unique and indispensable role of providing a platform for non-Southeast Asian states to cooperate with ASEAN and among themselves. The responsibility of fora such as the ARF to resolve intractable common security challenges affecting all member states, such as the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, rests equally on all members of the fora and not just on ASEAN. Besides, if ASEAN did indeed harbour leadership aspirations, would the major powers have acquiesced to these overtures?

The realist school of thought in the study of International Relations would be highly sceptical of such unrealistic notions. Indeed, this valid question highlights the challenges for ASEAN leadership. In a similar vein, the notion of ASEAN "in the driver's seat" is sometimes viewed derogatively. Is ASEAN as "driver" merely taking instructions from paying passengers in the backseat? To what extent does ASEAN have

the discretion and ability to decide on where it wants to direct the vehicle? The contention that ASEAN is in the "driver's seat" is not useful in understanding its past and future roles. ASEAN's role is better and more accurately reflected as that of the owner of the vehicle. Simply put, it would be difficult to envisage a body in the region other than ASEAN having the political and strategic gravitational pull to attract and sustain the interests of the major powers who may not themselves always have the same strategic objectives. ASEAN's leadership shines through from an unconventional sense. It derives its power and leadership credentials from its position as a neutral and inclusive entity to sustain confidence- and trust-building. At its core, ASEAN provides the vehicle for regional engagement and cooperation. It will be difficult to find broad support for alternative platforms capable of replacing ASEAN as new proposals run into walls of resistance that neutralise and prevent the ascendancy of a new regional leader. The zero-sum views of rival major powers would derail nascent initiatives to construct platforms outside the ASEAN configuration. Herein lies the importance of ASEAN centrality which essentially underlines the regional organisation's indispensable role as the "strategic glue" that binds the wider East Asia region in a web of cooperation. ASEAN is not just the only acceptable entity because it is non-threatening to any party, but it also provides a greater degree of comfort to all parties that ASEAN would not allow the regional agenda to be dominated by any party. ASEAN's centrality provides the vehicle for regional cooperation and ensures everyone has a seat at the high table. But ASEAN has to prove that it can perform this role impartially in the face of intense pressure to take sides in the simmering Sino-US rivalry.

Conclusion

ASEAN's golden jubilee is a milestone that speaks of its longevity and relevance in the region. It is also a time for reflection and for taking stock on how to move forward. The world in which ASEAN finds itself today is very different from that experienced by its founding fathers. Internally, ASEAN will face increasing pressure from the "millennia bulge" of young Southeast Asians who are eager to engage their peers but find official support wanting. Reframing ASEAN in a more people-friendly mould and constructing an ecosystem to make ASEAN more accessible would be critical in bringing forward the people-oriented, people-centred agenda. At the same time, all stakeholders need to be cognisant that some forms of regional engagement may be best led and managed by non-governmental agencies. In this regard, the governments and the ASEAN Secretariat should consider providing support and assistance for regional linkages to take root and prosper.

Some housekeeping is also in order with an eye toward updating and equipping ASEAN to respond to and manage new and emerging challenges. Will the consensus model continue to serve ASEAN? What can ASEAN do to affirm its centrality within

the context of geopolitical shifts? Can ASEAN move from a norms-based system to a rules-based framework? How does ASEAN make the grouping more accessible? Should ASEAN rethink the tenure of the Secretary-General from the current five-year term to a shorter term to enable a more robust rotation among the member states? It is important for ASEAN to move forward to ask the right questions and work towards the answers.

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