

# ASEAN Imperfect: The Changing Nature of Southeast Asian Regionalism

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## INTRODUCTION

Regional integration in Southeast Asia is the second most successful project of institutionalised regional cooperation in the world, second only to the European Union (EU). Just like the EU did in Europe, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has created peace, stability, and substantial socio-economic growth in a region in which neither could be taken for granted previously.<sup>1</sup>

It is not the purpose of this paper to demonstrate ASEAN's value-added to Southeast Asia. Instead, it tries to show how ASEAN faces severe challenges from within the precious organisation itself, just like the EU.<sup>2</sup> The danger of erosion from within is the result of political change within the member countries. There, a "new-nationalism" is characterised by narrow definitions of the national interest and often articulated by populist anti-multilateral rhetoric, geared towards domestic audiences by insecure leaders.

The necessary symmetry between broader regional and narrower national interests has become off balance. At the same time, ASEAN processes entirely depend on sound cooperation and the goodwill of ten heads of government and their interpersonal relationships. This paper argues that ASEAN is due for a makeover if it wants to remain relevant and resilient. Southeast Asian regionalism was conceptualised at a time of domestically stable leadership across the region. Now, ASEAN needs reliable unity at a time of profound change in the region.

## THE ASEAN WAY, SOFT-INSTITUTIONALISM, AND GOLF

Permitting cooperation in perhaps the most diverse region in the world is a unique *modus operandi* called the "ASEAN way". The ASEAN way is a seemingly

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., F. Kliem, "ASEAN@50. Celebrating five decades of regional stability," 2017, <http://www.kas.de/politikdialog-asien/en/publications/49757/>.

<sup>2</sup> See article by Wientzek, O. in this journal on how domestic political change affects the EU.

contradictory method of regional governance through emphasis on the nation state. It consists of core principles and practices, such as national sovereignty, equality, and mutual non-interference in internal affairs. Its realisation in day-to-day governance results in a strictly inter-governmental regional architecture. In lieu of a strong bureaucracy and independent supranational institutions, ASEAN depends entirely on the goodwill and cooperation of its ten member states. By extension, due to an often highly personalised style of governance across the region, ASEAN depends on the goodwill of individual Southeast Asian leaders.

### A minimalist interpretation of institutions

ASEAN is an exclusively inter-governmental organisation. That is, while there is a plethora of ASEAN institutions and institutionalised processes, their independence from the ten members' governments is kept at a bare minimum. On virtually all policy decisions, ASEAN minus the consensus of all ten members is an immobilised organisation. It was intentionally kept strong enough to enable dialogue and cooperation in a surprisingly diverse region; yet, too weak to develop its own institutional dynamic. Thus, ASEAN as an actor is not an actor in its own right, neither capable of providing leadership, or even having an independent voice on regional matters, nor authoritative enough to remind national leaders not to put national interests before the common regional good. This is what most distinguishes ASEAN from the EU, where Brussels institutions, such as the Commission or the Parliament, can have a certain degree of independent agency.

The most significant functional fora governing ASEAN are the biannual ASEAN Summit, as the prime decision-making body, and the ASEAN Ministers Meetings (AMM). More often than not, decisions reached in those fora will have been discussed previously in various institutionalised “retreats”, in which stakeholders withdraw from the public eye, and other ad-hoc side meetings. ASEAN has no meaningful parliament representing its citizens and/or national parties on the regional level. In theory, the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC), based in Jakarta, Indonesia, has the potential to transcend inter-governmentalism. It is supposed to streamline ASEAN cooperation and to be the permanent “mission control” of Southeast Asian regionalism. However, given its very limited financial and human resources<sup>3</sup> and highly circumscribed mandate, the ASEC in fact perfectly epitomises the ASEAN way, the approach of national pre-eminence over supranational sovereignty, and personalism over institutionalism.

All ASEAN institutions and meetings are organised, hosted, and led by the annually rotating ASEAN Chair (Philippines in 2017, Singapore in 2018, Thailand in

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<sup>3</sup> The ASEC's 2016 budget stood at around US\$20 million in total (!), paid by equal contributions from its member states. This compares to a total EU budget of an estimated US\$185 billion (!).

2019). In practice, the Chair is ASEAN's external spokesperson; hosts, chairs, and facilitates all meetings; and is ASEAN's agenda setter. However, the most important job is arguably the Chair's informal role as ASEAN consensus builder under the primary principle of consensus and unanimous decision making.

All ASEAN cooperation relies on the practice of informal consensus building and mutual consultation within a non-confrontational, "face-saving" bargaining environment at a level of mutual comfort. Particularly, the sensitive arenas of security and domestic difficulties rely on this kind of quiet diplomacy, meaning that communication and policymaking take place opaquely, outside the public view and without meaningful external input, not to mention participation. This requires all members to unanimously agree—or at least not disagree—before ASEAN can move on a particular issue.

Such a minimalist interpretation of institutions and the absence of supranational governance are not bugs in the system but, in fact, design features. The consensus principle in particular enables cooperation in a diverse region in the first place. But it limits the organisation's effectiveness, as policymaking and agency is reduced to the lowest common denominator. The above also encourages a highly informal and personal interactional habitus among ASEAN's political elite and highly opaque processes, in which decision making is almost entirely void of inclusive participation.

## Golf diplomacy

The ASEAN way was designed to accommodate regional cooperation among resilient, likeminded, and well-acquainted leader-personalities with a certain degree of political leeway at home; somewhat less concerned with domestic audiences' interest in foreign policy and more with regional stability and economic prosperity. To be certain, the founding fathers of ASEAN were staunch nationalists, but they appreciated their mutual interdependence as well as the requirement of regional stability, in order to foster that economic prosperity and security they needed at home. In other words, national resilience needed regional resilience.

Despite significant historical baggage and mistrust, to some extent lingering until this day, Southeast Asian leaders could find a *modus vivendi* via ASEAN. Their common organisation allowed for frequent, personal contacts, which established a permanent leadership network. Over time, this led to easy personal and working relationships between heads of government and ministers. In Southeast Asia's still personality driven, bargaining governance atmosphere, such networks encourage confidence building and mutual trust. They allow stakeholders to discuss disputes personally, before they appear in public and attract third party attention. Disputes can be resolved on a personal level, or if no agreement can be found, disagreements

can be muted and it may be decided to “shelve” contentious issues until such time when dynamics are more auspicious.

A particularly important role is fulfilled by frequent retreats, held prior to ASEAN meetings, in which leaders or minister discuss upcoming summits and get a feel for the atmosphere, the possibilities, and the red lines. Often, this involves a few rounds of golf and undisturbed dining. In this easy, non-committing atmosphere leaders can pitch their ideas and assess whether or not they are likely to gain traction. The personal recreation agenda points are as important and accentuated as the political business. This also regularly includes a side-programme for ASEAN leaders’ spouses, who socialise—and debate—among each other. In his memoirs, former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew recalls that even singing contests after work-dinners were frequent parts of ASEAN meetings.<sup>4</sup> Such frequent personal interaction led to habits of cooperation, consultation, and compromise.

This may sound profane to European leaders. But in Southeast Asia, the importance of this personal interaction cannot be overestimated. In a region divided by a history of different colonial zones of influence, ethnic tensions, and great religious diversity, the inter-personal is the glue that binds the region.

## ASEAN IMPERFECT

When ASEAN’s founding document was signed 51 years ago, Mr. S. Rajaratnam, Singapore’s first Foreign Minister, said, “We must now think at two levels. We must think not only of our national interests but posit them against regional interests: that is a new way of thinking about our problems.”<sup>5</sup> All five founding members agreed. If all member states were to put a premium on regional interests and were to keep up sound working relationships with their peers across the region, such two-level thinking would work in sync. However, at times, both can conflict and regional cooperation may require compromises on the national level. In ASEAN, this should be overcome in mutually comfortable and personal negotiations among leaders.

Lately, ASEAN has gotten its fair share of negative press. Its failure to produce joint communiqués criticising China’s creeping assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS), failure to meaningfully respond to Beijing’s blatant violation of international norms and rules in the region, or to the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, and its lack of progress in economic integration and inclusive institutional development are just some selected examples of ASEAN’s inability to live up to its own Charter and numerous Community Blueprints stipulations. If national interests are defined in

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<sup>4</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> “About ASEAN: History,” <http://asean.org/asean/about-asean/history/>.

narrow terms, and leaderships do not cordially engage, Southeast Asian regionalism becomes impracticable.

### Domestic disruptions—Erosion from within

In lieu of independent and empowered institutions, ASEAN requires both a natural leader and sound inter-elite ties, putting a premium on successful regional cooperation.

Europe's largest countries, Germany and France, in general strongly support their common integration project, particularly at times of crises, in the tradition of Konrad Adenauer, Charles de Gaulle, Helmut Kohl, and many other great Europeans. ASEAN has also had political figures in the past under whose leadership ASEAN was conceived and maintained. Leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew, Mahathir Mohamad, Suharto, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and many others did not support ASEAN because they were committed internationalists, but because they believed that their national prosperity and socio-economic development, upon which their political fortunes often depended, were tied to regional stability and prosperity; regional resilience precipitates national resilience.

Despite the ASEAN Community, ASEAN's greatest institutional reform, inaugurated in 2015, recent years have been characterised by a halt, perhaps even regress, of ASEAN integration. An absence of leadership as well as an apparent increase in populist nationalism is to blame, creating a situation in which ASEAN now faces the threat of being neglected by those it utterly depends on. Unfortunately, there is no Berlin or Paris in sight in ASEAN.

Given its size and geostrategic position, it is not surprising that Indonesia has often been regarded as ASEAN's "natural leader".<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Jakarta itself has in the past felt entitled to be ASEAN's *primus inter pares*, in particular during President Suharto's reign (1967-1998). Despite having always been an incomplete, sectorial leader, Jakarta has oftentimes been instrumental in managing regional crises as well as in institution building.<sup>7</sup> However, with Yudhoyono, Indonesian President from 2004-2014, ASEAN lost an important supporter. His successor, Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, seemed to be less regionalist. Of course, the alleged erosion of ASEAN is not Jokowi's fault alone. Yet, it is no surprise that much of it coincides with a rise in Indonesian nationalism. In this light, it is promising that Jokowi seems to have taken more to ASEAN over time. As 2019's presidential election gets closer, Indonesia is likely to continue neglecting ASEAN for some time. Should election results, how-

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<sup>6</sup> For example, A. Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> See R. Emmers, "Indonesia's role in ASEAN: A case of incomplete and sectorial leadership," *The Pacific Review*, 6 June 2014.

ever, re-confirm Jokowi, his positive trajectory may continue thereafter. The future success of ASEAN will depend a great deal on the domestic discourse in Indonesia; among isolationists and the more international camp.

In theory, there are alternatives to Indonesian leadership, but recent political change in almost all of them is inauspicious. Thailand for instance has traditionally been blessed with great political and diplomatic talent. Yet, since the ascent of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in 2006, Thailand has been in a prolonged state of political turmoil. A predominantly domestic preoccupation has gone hand in hand with populist power struggles between various factions within the country. The latest in a long list of military coups took place in 2014 and brought current Prime Minister General Prayuth to power. A certain degree of domestic stability has returned since, but the death of the beloved monarch King Bhumibol Adulyadej in 2016 significantly reinforced domestic instability and a preoccupation with domestic affairs. Royal succession and return to civilian power will keep all stakeholders on their toes for years to come. In 2019, Thailand will assume the ASEAN Chairmanship and many questions mark remain in this regard. Will elections take place before the first ASEAN Summit 2019, or will the junta, fearful of renewed domestic turmoil, postpone elections until after Bangkok passes the ASEAN baton on to Hanoi? Or how will election results, likely to reconfirm a divided Thailand, impact Bangkok's ability to perform its chairmanship duties?

Malaysia, also one of the founding members, has long been a stable polity, where policymaking takes place more or less shielded from public scrutiny and is, thus, less prone to erratic foreign policy change. Former Prime Minister Najib Razak was supportive of ASEAN, but neither an inspiring leader, nor an obstructive force within ASEAN.<sup>8</sup> Yet, Malaysia was a champion for ASEAN matters during their 2015 Chairmanship, producing some of the strongest language on controversial issues, such as China's militarisation of the SCS. 2015 was also the year the organisation inaugurated the ASEAN Community. However, since then, the Malaysian government has not experienced the kind of stability it did throughout much of its independent history, especially during the time of long-term Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. Najib had come under threat from opposition parties and even within his own party, UMNO. He became embroiled in serious corruption allegations and employed ethno-religious populism to safeguard his power base. 2018 made history, with UMNO losing power for the first time since the country's independence and returning former Prime Minister Mahathir to power. Delivering on mostly domestic policy promises, his Pakatan Harapan coalition will also be too preoccupied with domestic matters and power consolidation to be able to meaningfully engage ASEAN.

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<sup>8</sup> See J. Doch, "Malaysia's Foreign Policy: Is Mahathirism still alive?," in *Malaysia Post-Mahathir: A Decade of Change?*, eds. J. Doch and J. Chin (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2015).

The Philippines has never been seen as an ASEAN leader but has both a great interest and stake in ASEAN. Especially on the ever contentious issue of Chinese encroachment in the SCS, the Philippines, especially under former President Aquino III, tried hard to get a common ASEAN voice and face Beijing as a united bloc of ten countries. His successor, current President Rodrigo Duterte, however, is a prime example of the kind of populist strongman that further tarnishes regional cooperation with noisy nationalist, undiplomatic, and populist rhetoric and unreliable foreign policy, including almost at will either cosying up to or condemning China, whatever furthers his domestic narrow, short-term interest. For example, when Vietnam and Aquino's Philippines tried to push territorial disputes with China onto the ASEAN agenda, they failed due to a lack of support from fellow member states. When an international court, however, ruled against Beijing's SCS claims and in favour of the Philippines, the court handed Manila—and other ASEAN claimants—a great judicial victory. Surprising to many, Duterte all but ignored the court ruling and delivered a massive blow to all those in ASEAN who had hoped for Southeast Asia making some headway vis-à-vis Beijing's ever increasing assertiveness, raising serious doubts as to ASEAN's unity and agency. Or when Duterte skipped the March 2018 ASEAN-Australia Summit due to international criticism of domestic policies, his non-appearance dominated international news headlines and was a further blow to the regional grouping, visibly demonstrating the narrow definition of the national interest in some member countries.

Due to its complex and very difficult history with the rest of ASEAN, Vietnam cannot exercise leadership; which is unfortunate, since Vietnam is one of the most stable states and ardent supporters of ASEAN. The same complex relationship applies to Myanmar, where the slow advent of democratisation is still work in progress and does not yet seem to have improved Myanmar's poor human rights reputation. The decision by ASEAN to admit the difficult country into the grouping was based on the presumption that ending Burmese isolation would facilitate permanent change through a process of economic and social development as well as increasing elite-contacts.<sup>9</sup> However, recent democratisation efforts have been disappointing to many and the Rohingya crisis, in particular, has put great stress on ASEAN. The organisation was seen as being almost entirely apathetic, paralysed by Myanmar's refusal to multilaterally discuss the matter. As was the case many times previously, Myanmar's human rights record caused great embarrassment to ASEAN and caused international observers to doubt the relevance of the organisation.

Cambodian leaders have been equally problematic for ASEAN. The latest discord transpired in 2012, when it became painstakingly obvious how Phnom Penh puts narrow national interests—read: economic ties to China—before the

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<sup>9</sup> Author's interview with Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, 13 December 2015, Kuala Lumpur.

greater cause of steady regional fraternisation. At the 45th AMM and the following Summit, the Cambodian ASEAN chair made ASEAN-internal disagreements public knowledge. In particular, Vietnam had pushed hard for a concerted response to China's assertiveness in the SCS. Then Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong, however, blocked all efforts to include a reference to the dispute into the AMM joint communiqué, although those issues had clearly been discussed.<sup>10</sup> At the 2012 Summit, the Cambodian Chair even attempted to insert a reference into the communiqué that all ASEAN leaders had agreed not to internationalise the disputes; an act of kowtowing to Beijing, to which in particular the Philippines and Vietnam could not possibly agree. President Aquino publicly stated: "For the record, this is not our understanding. The ASEAN route is not the only route for us. As a sovereign state it is our right to defend our national interests."<sup>11</sup> As a result, at the AMM no joint communiqué was issued at all—a first in its history—and the reference was dropped at the Summit. Very few—if any—doubts exist that this impasse was a result of successful Chinese pressure on Cambodia, at the expense of regional unity. Just as problematic, the Cambodian debacle was fought out very publicly, exposing the limits of ASEAN's cohesion and demonstrating to all that ASEAN cannot act as a united, trustworthy organisation of quiet diplomacy. Singaporean Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam observed correctly: "This has dented ASEAN's credibility."<sup>12</sup>

Due to capacity limitations, Brunei and Laos are unable to exercise leadership in ASEAN, either, while Singapore is unlikely to drive ASEAN forward due to a national narrative of small-state diplomacy, which allows for being a facilitator, supporter, and mediator of regional affairs, but not a leader.

## INSTITUTIONS AND PEOPLE ARE ASEAN'S GREATEST ASSETS

Multilateralism needs drivers—those who take bold initiatives and assume ownership. In ASEAN, thus far, regionalism must be driven by highly personalised national governments. Unlike the EU, ASEAN is not more than the sum of its member states and public interest in regionalism is low. Currently none of the ASEAN member states seems willing or able to step up to their common regional responsibility. Hence, ASEAN must adapt to recent changes, if it looks to stay relevant. Below are two suggestions how ASEAN could accommodate new political realities

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<sup>10</sup> Author's interview with a member of the Singaporean delegation to the 45th AMM, Singapore, January 2016.

<sup>11</sup> *Reuters*, "Tensions flare over South China Sea at Asian summit," 19 November 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Speech by Minister Shanmugam at the ASEAN Day Reception," 2 August 2012, available: [www.mfa.gov.sg](http://www.mfa.gov.sg).



across its membership; increasing the value of institutions and allowing ASEAN's people to assume ownership.

## Institutional-ising ASEAN

ASEAN faces no shortage of institutions; those, however, face a shortage of authority and independence. Politicians come and go, and even those of great longevity are prone to a change of heart, driven by circumstance, perhaps temporarily suspending their support for regional integration. Empowered institutions, on the other hand, stay and, over time, develop a certain independent dynamic and begin to operate more independently. As leadership changes within ASEAN become more frequent, unpredictable and erratic, inter-personal connections erode. In order to account for this, ASEAN must move from reliance on inter-personal elite networks to more rules-based, bureaucratised regionalism. In other words, enhance institutional capacity in order to decrease dependence on personal ties; from golf diplomacy to institutional diplomacy.

The reasons for ASEAN's institutional weakness are structural and thus, with a bit of political will, modifiable. Emblematic of ASEAN's institutional ills is its Secretariat. Transforming ASEC into a vibrant, independent, and efficient institution is necessary, but will require boldness on the part of ASEAN leaders as well as a significant budget increase. The ASEC is largely unable to perform even basic tasks in a timely manner due to its very limited human and material capacity.<sup>13</sup> Some experts have gone as far as to claim that member states often purposefully deny the Secretariat the required resources in order to prevent it from gaining too much independent agency.<sup>14</sup> Both must change. The financing model for example, whereby all member states provide equally based on the smallest member's "capacity to pay", ought to be reformed into an "ability to pay" system, measured in terms of domestic GDP. This would increase ASEC's capacity to assume a greater role in regional governance, so that it can become an effective mediator and consensus builder within ASEAN and a strong independent voice for the regional cause, bridging domestic perspectives. Reforms of the decision-making system are equally important. Introducing an "ASEAN Minus X" principle to all policy decisions would enable two or more ASEAN states to move ahead in regional integration on the basis that the other members will follow at a later stage. This would enable ASEAN to move forward with regional integration without seriously threatening unity, by providing safeguards for members that feel uncomfortable with certain decisions.

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<sup>13</sup> Several interviews held in December 2015 and February 2016 in Jakarta.

<sup>14</sup> J. Ravenhill, "Regionalism and State Capacity in East Asia," in *Democratisation, Governance and Regionalism in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. I. Marsh (London: Routledge, 2006), 177-203.

## People-ising ASEAN

One often hears ASEAN leaders talk about the great asset their over 630 million people are. Increasing public ownership of the common integration project is the best check against erosion from within. If people develop a sense of the indeed tangible benefits regional integration has brought for them, and how deeply and mutually beneficial Southeast Asia is interlinked, a popular premium would be put on the success of ASEAN. In turn, this would lead to popular pressure on national leaders to put ASEAN on top of their foreign policy agenda.

The best way to create a “people-centred ASEAN” is to increase ASEAN awareness. Significant improvements in Southeast Asian connectivity, especially air-transport and visa-free travel, have already led to greater regional consciousness. Singapore-Kuala Lumpur is the busiest flight route in the world. Such connectivity is great, but largely elitist, not reaching the less internationalised majority, and must be supplemented by standardised ASEAN education. ASEAN should be entrenched in all national schools and university curricula and history textbooks ought to reflect a common interpretation of regional history and political and socio-economic developments. This would enhance broader ASEAN institutional knowledge and foster a shared understanding and appreciation of the own region and its peoples.

Of course, high-politics and regional cooperation always require leadership from the top. But if ASEAN processes encouraged more bottom-up participation, regionalism would become more resilient and less prone to erratic individual leadership. In order to protect regional cooperation from the capricious changes of individual leadership, the people of Southeast Asia must be given ownership of ASEAN. Leaders would be less prone to neglect ASEAN knowing that public opinion values regional integration. ASEAN is a magnificent multi-ethnic and multi-religious project that must not be jeopardised. As soon as the people assume ownership of it, their leaders will treat it like the valuable resource it is.

## CONCLUSION

Local and national politics rightfully remain the top priority for governments and political leaders are, one way or another, in the first instance responsible for, and accountable to their domestic audiences. However, it is important to realise how regional and national success constitute and reinforce each other.

In contrast to the EU’s legalistic and bureaucratised cooperation and policymaking, the ASEAN way is highly dependent on personalities. In recent years, immense domestic transformations have taken place, some of which have been analysed in this journal.<sup>15</sup> ASEAN has worked on the basis of exercising collective leadership

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<sup>15</sup> See the various articles in this journal.

through informal consultation. Leaders would share and circulate ideas for consideration and work toward building a consensus. This informal form of collective leadership is premised on domestically strong leaders taking an interest in regional affairs and driving ASEAN forward. At a time of domestic preoccupation, populism and anti-globalisation rhetoric, regionalism is at risk.

ASEAN will doubtlessly survive. Currently, ASEAN's institutional weakness allows member states to ensure that the political costs of being a member remain lower than the real economic loss incurred by quitting ASEAN. However, the above has tried to argue that ASEAN must find the capacity to work more independently from individual heads of governments, in order to withstand short-term wraths and narrow interpretations of national interests. If ASEAN wants to remain relevant, all stakeholders must work towards making it less vulnerable to capricious political change. This is not only important for ASEAN as an organisation. It is also critical to the continuing success of its member states. Governments are well advised to revisit Mr. S. Rajaratnam and marry regional with national thinking. In a region as dense as Southeast Asia, the regional interest is also the national interest and the sooner ASEAN leaders—and people—realise what a precious organisation has been passed on to them by the founding fathers and how their fates are interdependent, the better.

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