

Forging a path through consensus

Future of the unique 50-year-old ASEAN grouping is a contest between mighty economic fortress or creative crossroads

Aug 8 marked the golden jubilee of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which was founded in 1967. This regional grouping came into being with a membership of five countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Between 1984 and 1999, five other nations joined — Brunei, Vietnam, Laos,



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Myanmar and Cambodia — to make it an association of 10 states.

ASEAN is unique in its essential character. Unlike the European Union, it is not a supranational organization.

It may be recalled that following the turn of the century, ASEAN set for itself the goal of graduating to an ASEAN Community by 2015, a program that was launched with three specific pillars — political security, economic and social-cultural — and promised a comprehensive umbrella of functions. The member governments are all agreed on the road map that will take them to a common destination.

In the past, the Southeast Asia region was divided, a sprawling culture — but for most of the past 50 years it has been held together by a unifying story. This is the story of accelerated economic growth, social progress and cultural development to provide regional peace and stability.

ASEAN's success was the story of leaving behind mutual suspicion and creating a new, promising future for its citizens. That story rested upon an amazing level of consultation, compromise and consensus — “the ASEAN way”. There are four narratives in the ASEAN way.

First, there is the story of multicultural ASEAN. It sees ASEAN citizens as members of groups whose status is largely determined by their nationalities and sociocultural background. This multicultural narrative dominates ASEAN's community-building process and education systems.

It creates social capital, producing students, the future citizens of ASEAN, more able to think in terms larger than their own identity group — which means they can find common ground or effective arguments that can reach people of different backgrounds.

Second is the narrative of the globalized ASEAN. This story is



A man cycles in front of the ASEAN logo near the venue for the Association of Southeast Asia Nations Regional Forum meeting in Manila on Aug 4. ASEAN's success is the story of leaving behind mutual suspicion and creating a new, promising future for its citizens. AFP

dominant in urban centers and industrial parks. It comes with an exhilarating ideology of economic integration supported by regional production networks that flattened economic hierarchies, strengthened the local supply chains, discarded old elites and empowered low-middle income families and individual workers.

But in real life, when you disrupt old structures, you end up concentrating power in fewer hands. This narrative worked out well for people and industries well prepared for competition, but not so well for most others.

Third, there is the liberation but people-centered narrative that dominates ASEAN as a land of free nations and individuals responsible for their own fate, both economically and socially. This story celebrates the dynamism of the economic integration that fulfills people's hopes and social aspirations.

Its prime value is in economic freedom and environmental sustainability, which by default brings human-centered progress by regarding ASEAN as a community of entrepreneurs, taxpayers, consumers and workers — indeed everything except citizens.

Fourth is the narrative of ASEAN centrality, which has ASEAN at the center of an array of regional institutions involving partners

in East Asia and beyond, such as ASEAN+3, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Asia-Europe Meeting and the East Asia Summit.

ASEAN centrality is the conviction of new identity brought by unity and strength — the unity in elite decision-making, without allegiance to a central authority but which evolves through consensus and self-confidence.

Maritime and territorial disputes in the past and present threatened ASEAN unity and centrality. But this story is always forward-looking, pragmatic and optimistic. This narrative may have contempt for democratic norms and liberal values, but stabilizes the very idea of objective ASEAN.

To take an objective view, ASEAN in the past 50 years has made significant contributions to peace, security and prosperity in the region. ASEAN has many socioeconomic and political achievements to its credit, but the challenges are plentiful too. With a population of 628 million and a combined GDP of \$2.4 trillion, it is the world's seventh-largest market and third-largest labor force, and it has been projected to become the fourth-largest economic bloc by 2030.

Mari Pangestu, a former Indonesian trade minister, said at an Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia forum that ASEAN is now threatened by the

slow recovery in the global economy, increased anti-globalization, anti-immigration and anti-elite sentiments, disruptive technologies that threaten job growth, and expanding demographic shifts. She recommends that it “speed up and widen the scope of regional economic integration”. But does ASEAN have the requisite will to execute this?

All of the four narratives provide a viable basis for successfully tackling this challenge. But the future of ASEAN will be a competition between two other stories, which are sort of descended from the existing four.

The first is the mercantilist model, which sees ASEAN not as the culmination of history and socio-culture but as one more economic power in competition with neighboring economies like China and India.

In this story, to be part of ASEAN implies membership of an economic clan, and the ideal ASEAN member states and its partners are purely protectors of this clan. ASEAN governments and corporations work together with their citizens and partners by closely controlling trade, investment and immigration. ASEAN's wealthy would have an incentive to share their resources with workers, because they need them to fight off competitive economies.

The second is the empowered community of ASEAN. This narrative sees ASEAN as a melting pot of all socioeconomic and political cultures and as human history's greatest laboratory for cultivation of new talent, skills and abilities. It welcomes diversity in education, pluralistic views on innovation, open trade, meritocracy and immigration — for all of the dynamism that these things unleash.

This model is heavily invested in social capital, especially the young and those who suffer from the downsides of creative destruction and the ASEAN community-building process. It sees every young boy and girl of ASEAN as enmeshed in the state's care to arouse his or her inherent energy and propel social mobility.

The mercantilist model sees ASEAN as a mighty economic fortress in a treacherous world. The empowered community model sees ASEAN as a creative crossroads leading an open and fundamentally harmonious world. The empowered model will be an exodus story for ASEAN member states as well as other countries that are struggling to nurture and strengthen the roots of deepened regional cooperation.

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