



INTRODUCTORY CHAPTERS





ASEAN: Then and Now

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Introduction

ASEAN has come a long way since its birth on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand. ASEAN has grown into a vibrant and increasingly integrated economic region, an increasingly stronger socio-cultural community, and a significant force in East Asia's regional political-security and economic relations.

On the 50th anniversary of ASEAN, the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) and the Government of the Philippines decided to publish a five-volume book set on ASEAN@50: Retrospectives and Perspectives on the Making, Substance, Significance, and Future of ASEAN. This volume, Volume 1 of the book set, presents the reflections of ASEAN Leaders, Secretaries-General, and Senior Officials on the making and evolution of ASEAN over the past 50 years and its significance in the past, at present, and in the future. ASEAN@50 Volume 2 – *Voices on ASEAN: What Does ASEAN Mean to ASEAN Peoples?* – presents survey results on the aspirations and expectations on ASEAN for 2025 in each of the 10 ASEAN Member States (AMSs). The gap between aspirations and expectations in several areas indicates the challenges for ASEAN and the 10 AMSs moving forward. ASEAN@50 Volume 3 – *ASEAN Member States and ASEAN: Transformation and Integration* – presents the perspectives of the AMSs on the impact of, and challenges for, ASEAN on each member state. The essays in ASEAN@50

Volume 4 – *Building the ASEAN Community: Political–Security and Socio-Cultural Reflections* – and ASEAN@50 Volume 5 – *The ASEAN Economic Community Into 2025 and Beyond* – provide specialists’ perspectives on the significance, challenges, and future of ASEAN. They may help illumine the paths forward for ASEAN moving into 2025 and beyond. In moving forward, it is worth noting that the overriding theme of the Philippine chairmanship of ASEAN in 2017, ‘Partnering for Change, Engaging the World’, encapsulates much the spirit of meeting the challenges and reaping the opportunities of ASEAN in a dynamic and fast-changing East Asia.

This chapter provides a brief overview of the remarkable transformation of the ASEAN region during the past half century.

Remarkable Transformation

When ASEAN was born, ‘Southeast Asian peoples hardly knew one another, having been cut off from one another by the colonial powers’ (Severino, 2006: 8). As Thailand’s former Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman put it, the birth of ASEAN ‘... was a unique achievement, ending the separation and aloofness of the countries in this region that had resulted from colonial times when they were forced by the colonial masters to live in *cloisons etanches*, shunning contact with the neighboring countries’ (Khoman, 1992: xviii). The former Thai foreign minister was the one who worked hard for the birth of ASEAN, having first broached to then Indonesia’s Presidium Minister for Political Affairs and Foreign Affairs Minister Adam Malik. Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman also hosted the meetings of the five Southeast Asian countries’ Foreign Ministers that included Secretary of Foreign Affairs Narciso Ramos of the Philippines, Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak of Malaysia, and Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam of Singapore in the seaside resort of Bangsaen and his Bangkok residence. The Thai Foreign Office prepared a draft, which, after the discussions and agreements, ultimately became the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) that gave birth to ASEAN.

Twenty-five years after the birth of ASEAN, former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad would proudly call himself an ASEANist. The results of a recent survey by the Institute of Southeast

Asian Studies show that the majority of the respondent students in key universities consider themselves ‘ASEAN citizens’. With a wider coverage of respondents (students, employees, business sector, government), the results of the survey on what ASEAN means to ASEAN peoples in each of the 10 AMSs show 46% consider themselves ASEAN citizens of varying positivity, 80% hold positive views about the future of ASEAN and its beneficial impact on their respective countries, and a remarkable uniformity of aspirations for ASEAN for 2025. ASEAN@50 Volume 2 presents in detail the findings from the survey and focus group discussions in each of the 10 AMSs and the consolidated report for the whole region. The results indicate the remarkable progress since the 1960s when the peoples in the region barely knew their neighbours in the rest of the region. But the results of the survey and focus group discussions also indicate that much remains to be done before ASEAN is deeply felt among the peoples. This is a challenge highlighted by former Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva in his essay in this volume calling for a greater focus on building the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad’s statement about being an ‘ASEANist’ highlights what is arguably the greatest success story of ASEAN over the past half century; i.e. the transformation of a region that was once bedevilled by mutual suspicions, tensions, and conflicts in the 1960s among the maritime countries of the original five members and into the 1980s for several of the new ASEAN members. Southeast Asia was a region of instability in the 1960s, portrayed as ‘region of revolt’, the ‘Balkans of the East’, or a ‘region of dominoes’ (Acharya, 2001: 4). During that decade, Southeast Asia was highlighted by Indonesia’s *konfrontasi* with Malaysia, separation of Singapore from Malaysia, disagreement of Malaysia and the Philippines over Sabah, domestic political upheaval of Indonesia, and the war between South and North Vietnam. The conflicts among several Southeast Asian countries were a key reason for the failures of the earlier attempts at regional groupings, specifically the Association for Southeast Asia founded in 1961 and consisting of Malaya, the Philippines, and Thailand; and the Maphilindo founded in 1963 and consisting of Malaya, the Philippines, and Indonesia. In fact, it was during the successful end of Thanat Khoman’s shuttle diplomacy between Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila for reconciliation over the Sabah dispute that the idea was broached of a new organisation for regional cooperation that eventually became ASEAN (Khoman, 1992).

Indeed, the *raison d'être* for ASEAN was primarily about forging and ensuring peace and stability in the region in the light of volatile and uncertain geo-security in the region, not only involving the original five members (ASEAN 5) but also those impacting the five primarily as a result of the Cold War and independence wars in Indochina. ASEAN's unity was tested a year after its birth with two bilateral conflicts: between Indonesia and Singapore over the execution in Singapore of two Indonesian marines for sabotage, and between Malaysia and the Philippines over the revelation that the latter's Corregidor Island was being used as a staging area for invasion of Sabah and which led to the breakup of diplomatic relations between the two. Indonesia's President Soeharto played the crucial role in resisting domestic demands for military retaliation against Singapore and in encouraging Malaysia and the Philippines to have a cooling-off period in ASEAN activities (Anwar, 1995). As D.F. Anwar emphasised, in those early years, '... ASEAN was the effect of the members' commitment to maintain a forum for regional cooperation, so that harmonious relations between the members will develop and strengthen over time, rather than the actual cause for these friendly relations' (Anwar, 1995: 112).

ASEAN is now a zone of cooperative peace and prosperity. None of its original five countries have waged war against one another since the Association's founding. ASEAN has developed and followed a set of principles that engender peaceful settlement of disputes and non-use of force. This is best embedded in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with the principle of non-interference, underpinned by a Southeast Asia culture-based decision process and consensus building and sensitive handling of differences with overtones of kinship and common interests, embodied in the Javanese practices of *musyawarah* (consultation) and *mufakat* (consensus), and popularly described as the ASEAN Way. This ASEAN approach, combining both hard agreement and regional code of conduct and norms and culturally sensitised processes, has become sufficiently unique such that ASEAN has become almost an exemplar of the so-called 'security community' (as against the usual security alliance) among international relations experts.¹ Most importantly, ASEAN's success in engendering peace and its ASEAN Way have made countries in the Asia-Pacific region accept ASEAN as the nominal leader and institutional model for the first and

¹ See, for example, Acharya (2001).

pre-eminent multilateral regional security dialogue in the Asia-Pacific region (ASEAN Regional Forum) in the mid-1990s and the subsequent ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM), ADMM Plus, and East Asia Summit in the 2000s. In short, ASEAN has become the fulcrum of Asia-Pacific regional architecture, an arrangement itself unique in the world where the great powers dominate security arrangements.

The emphasis on peace and stability of ASEAN Leaders and Officials, especially in the first 25 years, is not surprising. Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore emphasised the primordial role of peace and stability during the First ASEAN Summit in Bali on 23 February 1976: ‘... 8 ½ years ago, in August 1967, the Foreign Ministers of our five countries signed the ASEAN Declaration. The first objective of this Declaration was and is to accelerate economic growth. But all objectives rested on the promise of regional peace and stability’ (ASEAN, 1978: 99).² The importance of peace and stability, as interwoven with development, was also emphasised by former President Soeharto of Indonesia in his opening statement during the First ASEAN Summit. He said: ‘In charting a prosperous future ... stability and peace along with development are equally important and intertwined ... It is ... quite unrealistic to speak about the future if we overlook the question of national and regional stability ...’ (ASEAN, 1978: 88).³

As in the political security arena, AMSs and ASEAN have made remarkable success in the economic arena during the past half century. At the time of ASEAN’s birth, Southeast Asia was characterised not only as unstable but also poor, albeit not among the poorest in the world. The famous Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal, in his monumental *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations* published in 1968, was pessimistic about the development prospects of the countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia because of ‘soft states’ and likely persistence of traditional power structures that would make an economic take-off highly unlikely (Lankester, 2004: 291). Indonesia, Myrdal’s exemplar for Southeast Asia, was just recovering from hyperinflation, economic collapse, and political upheaval when ASEAN was born and Myrdal’s *Asian Drama* was published.

² Statement by the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore at the Opening of the Meeting of ASEAN Heads of Government on 23 February 1976 at Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia (in ASEAN, 1978).

³ Statement by President Soeharto of the Republic of Indonesia at the Opening of the Meeting of ASEAN Heads of Government on 23 February 1976 at Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia (in ASEAN, 1978).

The dim outlook in the latter 1960s contrasts sharply with the current performance and buoyant outlook of the ASEAN region. ASEAN is now the seventh-largest economy in the world (in nominal US dollars), if all 10 member states are viewed as one economy. Many AMS economies are among the fastest-growing in the world today. ASEAN is the leading destination of foreign direct investment in the developing world, alongside China and much ahead than India. At present, two AMSs have per capita incomes that are among the highest in the world; two AMSs are very much upper-middle-income countries with one nearing high-income status; the three most populous AMSs are growing very robustly and nearing upper-middle-income status; and the last three poorer AMSs successfully graduated to lower-middle-income status and are the fastest-growing AMSs during the past decade.

The economic transformation of the ASEAN region, especially in the past 30 years, occurred alongside the deepening of intra-regional economic linkages and relations during the period, transitioning from economic (mainly industrial) cooperation and tariff preferences in the 1970s and 1980s into economic integration in the 1990s and 2000s and thence to the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) into the 2010s. ASEAN has emerged as the most successful regional economic integration initiative in the developing world. It is also considered a successful model of ‘open regionalism’ (Drysdale, 2017). As in the political security arena, ASEAN has become the fulcrum of regional economic architecture in East Asia, if not in the Asia-Pacific region, with its ASEAN+1 free trade agreements (FTAs), the forthcoming Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and ASEAN’s very strong presence in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.

The statements preceding this chapter of eminent former ASEAN Leaders encapsulate the evolution and remarkable transformation of Southeast Asia, now known as ASEAN region, over the past century. Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj talked about the lack of knowledge and cooperation among ASEAN’s founding members before and at the time of the founding of ASEAN. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew referred to the scepticism about the future of ASEAN during its early years of establishment. President Soeharto’s message showed the determination to make ASEAN succeed as an instrument for peace, stability, and progress in the region. And both Prime Ministers Pramoj and Lee echoed the positive expectations for the then young Association.

What has become the future of ASEAN is well expressed by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad; that is, the successful transformation of the ASEAN region from a region of instability to a region of peace and stability, from a region of mainly poor countries to a region of robustly growing and industrialising economies. President Yudhoyono provides a key cultural reason for the success of the Association; i.e. a familial and kinship feeling that was engendered by, and has been engendering, the give-and-take among the member states.

Nonetheless, big challenges remain and much remains to be done. As the statements of former President Fidel Ramos and former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva suggest, the stated goals during the past decade or so of ASEAN to be a ‘community’ remain a significant challenge for the Association and the region. Moreover, ASEAN’s success brings with it greater expectations on the role of ASEAN beyond its borders as reflected in the statement of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Finally, in an increasingly uncertain world, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong advises for current and future ASEAN Leaders to always pull together.

The succeeding chapter brings out more of the insights from the reflections of ASEAN Leaders, Ministers, and Senior Officials plus three special friends of ASEAN who have contributed essays to this volume.

In summary, ASEAN, despite its success, is a work in progress and the goals that animated the Bangkok Declaration establishing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations remain compelling.

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