



ESSAYS: LEADERS









ASEAN @ 50



Goh Chok Tong

I want to offer a ringside view of key developments in ASEAN between 1990 and 2004, when I was Prime Minister of Singapore, as well as share some thoughts on the future of ASEAN at 50.

Birth of ASEAN

ASEAN's original members – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand – were distinctly different from each other. They had different histories, political systems, aspirations, and external alignments. They all grappled with newfound independence against a backdrop of intra-regional disputes and Cold War competition for influence.

As then Foreign Minister of Singapore S. Rajaratnam put it, the ASEAN Leaders were concerned over the potential ‘Balkanization’ of Southeast Asia by external powers. Thus, they shared a vision of a Southeast Asia that could stand on its own and face common threats together to secure stability and improve the livelihoods of their peoples.

ASEAN largely succeeded in preventing intra-regional conflicts and member countries from being pawns of big powers.

Evolution of ASEAN

The next phase of ASEAN emphasised economic cooperation.

In 1984, ASEAN’s membership expanded to six with the inclusion of Brunei Darussalam. By 1990, ASEAN had a total population of 321 million with a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$319.5 billion.

The income gap between the six ASEAN Member States was wide, with Brunei’s and Singapore’s GDP per capita at the upper end and Indonesia’s at the lower end by virtue of size disparities.

With different natural endowments, comparative advantages, and competitive strengths, the ASEAN Member States did not need economists to tell them that economic cooperation would raise the standard of living of their peoples, albeit at different rates. It only required political will.

ASEAN Free Trade Agreement

I witnessed that will in 1992 at the ASEAN Summit in Singapore. It was my first as Singapore’s leader. At that meeting, Thai Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun proposed that ASEAN negotiate a free trade agreement (FTA). It was accepted. By then, Indonesian President Soeharto was the only remaining founding leader of ASEAN. Given Indonesia’s protectionist policy then and the underdevelopment of its resource-based economy, I was impressed by his liberal attitude, his focus on developing the Indonesian economy, and understanding of the importance of a stable and co-operative ASEAN.

Frequency of ASEAN Summits

Prior to 1990, ASEAN Summits were held infrequently. In fact, there were only three Leaders' meetings between its founding in 1967 and 1990, a span of 30 years.

With the proposed FTA, however, Ministers and officials started to meet frequently to design the framework and negotiate the details of tariff reductions.

As impetus, the Leaders also agreed to meet more often, alternating between formal and informal summits. Formal summits were stuffy, with set speeches and cultural performances. They were media occasions.

Informal summits were more like Leaders' retreats. Leaders had plenty of conversations with one another. Ideas could be floated and tested, accepted, amended, or rejected without loss of face. Views were candidly exchanged. On several occasions, Leaders would override the advice of their officials. They trusted one another, knowing that no one was trying to best each other. They were working for the common good of ASEAN and its peoples.

When formal summits were later dispensed with, all summits became productive sessions, generating ideas and programmes. The ASEAN Leaders certainly kept their Ministers and officials busy until the next summit!

ASEAN Member States have developed the habit of consultation and cooperation. Two examples testify to this: the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome in 2003 and the Asian financial crisis in 1997.

Expansion of ASEAN

After the Viet Nam War ended in 1975, ASEAN welcomed Viet Nam, Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Burma (now Myanmar) into its fold in the 1990s. This was very much in keeping with the founding goals, vision, and values of ASEAN.

The older six members set up the Initiative for ASEAN Integration to provide technical skills to help the four new members integrate into and benefit from ASEAN. Singapore was among the more active members of this programme.

Today, ASEAN has a combined population of 629 million and a total GDP of US\$2.4 trillion, a sizeable force and market indeed.

ASEAN Plus 3 and Other Summits

ASEAN is outward-looking, unlike most other regional groupings. It needs foreign investments and trade with the rest of the world. Above all, it needs a stable and peaceful East Asia. Northeast Asia suffers from the historical legacy of World War II. Relations between China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (henceforth Korea) remain testy.

ASEAN has sought to play a role in bringing about a peaceful and prosperous East Asia, including ASEAN, by creating frameworks such as the ASEAN Plus 3 (China, Japan, and Korea), the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Regional Forum, to give ASEAN's external partners a stake in the region and a platform to engage each other.

This is a key ASEAN contribution – enhancing regional integration and cooperation within and beyond ASEAN.

ASEAN Economic Community

With its sole focus on tariff reductions, I felt the ASEAN FTA, was too narrow. I felt that ASEAN should evolve into an economic community, a closely linked, flexible community, but not a supranational organisation like the European Union. No country would cede any aspect of its sovereign rights to an unelected Brussels-like bureaucracy.

At the 2002 ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and against the advice that the idea would not fly, I floated the vision of an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) for study by Ministers and officials.

They would report back to the Leaders at the following summit. As it was merely a proposal for study which would not bind the Leaders to the concept, they agreed.

The AEC was an attempt to change the tenor of conversation on economic issues in ASEAN and put it on a more positive footing. My hope was that the ASEAN Member States would coalesce around this concept and recognise the opportunities presented by a shared community. As I expected, the High-Level Task Force on ASEAN Economic Integration in 2003 found merit in evolving ASEAN into an economic community by 2020, which was a long period of time. The other member countries saw the merit of this economic pillar and later proposed two more pillars to support the AEC – namely the ASEAN Political–Security Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. It is my hope that we will evolve an ASEAN Community where our peoples see themselves as ASEAN citizens, in addition to their own national identity.

The AEC was formally established in 2015, 5 years ahead of schedule.

The Future of ASEAN post 50

From 2004 to 2016, ASEAN continued to progress and strengthen with new initiatives. But it is for others to cover this period.

Here, I would like to share some thoughts on the future of ASEAN.

First, ASEAN's ability to remain relevant should not be taken for granted. It must remain outward-looking to be able to play a central role in the peaceful development of East Asia. As former Singapore Deputy Prime Minister S. Rajaratnam said presciently at the birth of ASEAN, 'it is necessary for us, if we are really to be successful in giving life to ASEAN, to marry national thinking with regional thinking ... we must think not only of our national interests but posit them against regional interests'.

Second, given the slowing economic growth and onslaught of disruptive technology, ASEAN needs to hold out hope for its peoples. When morale is high, people can achieve much. When it is low, they will despair even more.

The size of the middle class has grown to 24%, but this is still low. ASEAN needs to more than double this percentage by 2025. This is the hope to hold out to the peoples of ASEAN.

Third, given the geopolitical uncertainty, ASEAN must remain cohesive and not allow bilateral disagreements and regional disputes – which will surface from time to time – to divide them. ASEAN Leaders must focus on the big picture and forge a meaningful consensus that is in line with their national and regional interests. ASEAN must continue to speak with one voice on issues of common interest, including countering violent extremism, cybersecurity, and the need to keep sea lanes and trade open.

Lastly, ASEAN can learn from the Leaders' experiences in the period I have covered. We had differences of views but shared more common perspectives than disagreements. We built up trust and goodwill; we had a give-and-take attitude. We took bold initiatives, always for the common good and not only for our national interests. The last 50 years have shown that regional stability and prosperity are better served with cooperation to prosper one another, rather than pursuing selfish interests that will only beggar each other. Given the rise of populism and inward-looking nationalism across the world, present and future ASEAN Leaders need to pull together to face a more uncertain future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Goh Chok Tong was Singapore's Prime Minister from November 1990 to August 2004.

He was first elected into Parliament in 1976 and re-elected in the nine subsequent general elections. He remains a Member of Parliament. Between 1979 and 1990, he served consecutively as Minister of Trade and Industry, Health and Defence. He was appointed Deputy Prime Minister in 1985, and succeeded Lee Kuan Yew in 1990 as Singapore's second Prime Minister. He relinquished the premiership in 2004 to pave the way for leadership renewal.

He remained in the Cabinet as Senior Minister and was Chairman of the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) from August 2004 to May 2011. Upon leaving the Cabinet, he was given the title of Emeritus Senior Minister. He was appointed Senior Advisor to MAS, and effective April 2017, the Governing Board Chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.