


ASEAN@50: Building on Past Achievements



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During my early political career (in the 1990s), ASEAN did not feature much in our work. Young leaders in the region would occasionally gather to discuss ASEAN. Much of the debate then mainly reflected the frustration and a sense of underachievement as far as our regional integration was concerned. We tended to look to Europe as a model and felt that ASEAN could achieve so much more. For those of us who grew up without a vivid memory of war and conflicts within the region, we overlooked the fact that ASEAN was founded in response to security threats, focusing instead on the economic goals of the region.

By the time I became Prime Minister (December 2008), ASEAN has made considerable progress. The new Charter had been approved.

The ASEAN Free Trade Area was on track and the region was moving towards establishing the ASEAN Community. Engagement with dialogue partners grew. The regular East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum showed how ASEAN was also becoming a global player.

Thailand had the honour of being the Chair for longer than the usual 1-year term to start implementing the new Charter. Unfortunately, due to the political instability in Thailand, ASEAN meetings had to be called off during my predecessor's tenure. While we successfully hosted an ASEAN summit in Huahin, political violence disrupted the second summit in Pattaya in dramatic fashion. Leaders had to be evacuated. To this day, I remain grateful to all leaders and governments for their understanding of what happened and appreciate the commitments from all to try to make sure our work could continue.

And continue we did. Economically, when the whole world faced one of the biggest global financial crises, ASEAN's response was undoubtedly a model of success. With discussions on policy coordination and commitment to resist protectionism, the region's economy proved its resilience and recovered relatively quickly. Moreover, ASEAN completed free trade agreements with all our Dialogue Partners, moved to establish the ASEAN Macroeconomic Research Office and embarked upon the connectivity agenda to strengthen the upcoming ASEAN Economic Community. After my participation in the World Economic Forum where I met Gordon Brown, the former British Prime Minister and G20 Chair at the time, ASEAN was invited to attend the G20 meetings.

On other fronts, ASEAN was also making good progress. The United States and Russia joined the East Asia Summit. Myanmar's democratisation became more and more concrete due in no small part to ASEAN's encouragement in our closed-door meetings, thus removing obstacles to engagement with Europe. The South China Sea issue was dealt with in a sensible and moderate way where ASEAN would not get involved in the dispute but would help ensure that solutions would be sought through peaceful means according to international law and that there was safe passage.

We could all be proud of these achievements. To cap it all, towards the end of my tenure as Prime Minister at the Asia-Europe Meeting in Brussels in 2011, I could hardly hide my pleasure when several European leaders wanted their countries to engage with ASEAN, even to be part of the East Asia Summit, reflecting on how far we have come since those days when ASEAN was criticised as being unambitious and even irrelevant, especially by Europe.

Yet the sense that ASEAN can be so much more remains. As we celebrate ASEAN's 50th anniversary, it is clear that we face many important and fundamental challenges. For the ASEAN Economic Community's goals to be achieved and for the region to remain competitive, much remains to be done. We must increase intra-ASEAN trade and investment by removing non-tariff barriers and the need for greater harmonisation of regulations. Connectivity is proceeding too slowly. ASEAN must make use of China's One Belt, One Road initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Most importantly, as I have spelled out in a companion volume of this ASEAN@50 publication – Volume 4, entitled *Building ASEAN Community: Political-Security and Socio-cultural Reflections* – ASEAN integration and the ASEAN Community needs far greater participation from the peoples of ASEAN. Otherwise, ASEAN will only be meaningful to the elites made up of politicians, bureaucrats, and some from the business sector. We need to learn the lessons from past success of the European Union and the recent episode of Brexit. A sense of belonging on the part of citizens and accountability on the part of ASEAN are crucial as ASEAN moves ahead. While there is clearly greater awareness of ASEAN among the people, it is also clear that the level of engagement needs to be raised.

The reality is that doing so means we need to face up to one big challenge – overcoming the democracy deficit in the region. At the national level, ASEAN cannot sidestep issues concerning people's rights. The ASEAN intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (established during Thailand's chairmanship) must have a bigger mandate and a greater role, including issues which are regional in nature, such as immigrants. Unless this happens, ASEAN's credibility will suffer in the eyes of both its citizens and the international community.

Engaging stakeholders must also be pursued vigorously. I witnessed first-hand how Thailand's attempt to allow civil society (along with parliamentarians and youth) to meet with leaders was resisted by one ASEAN Leader; so, a compromise had to be reached. This practice of engaging stakeholders was subsequently discontinued. It needs to be revived and expanded. Institutions such as the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, business councils, the Economic Research Institute of ASEAN, among others, must be integrated into the process of ASEAN's decision-making. Ultimately, a body of elected representatives from member states might be needed to drive the direction of ASEAN.

Other changes will also be required. Moving away from the rule of consensus, conducting meetings with Dialogue Partners with a single voice (not 10 individual statements which make such meetings so time consuming), admitting Timor-Leste, completing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and creating a mechanism to bridge the development gaps among members should all be ASEAN's priorities.

There is much to be proud of as ASEAN turns 50. Let's build on past achievements and effect required changes so that the next 50 years will deliver peace, prosperity, and a global voice to ASEAN's people.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abhisit Vejjajiva was Thailand's Prime Minister from 2008 to 2011. He is the current Leader of the Democrat Party in Thailand, a position he assumed after serving as Deputy Leader of the same party from 1999 to 2005. He was Leader of the Opposition in 2005–2006, 2008, and 2011–2013, Minister to the Prime Minister's Office in 1997–2001, Chair of the House Education Affairs Committee in 1995–1996, Deputy Secretary to the Prime Minister for Political Affairs in 1995, Democrat Party Spokesman in 1995–1999, Government Spokesman in 1992–1994, and Member of the Parliament in 1992–2006 and 2007–2014.

He holds a Master's Degree in Economics from Oxford University in the United Kingdom. He obtained a Bachelor's degree (first-class honours) in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Oxford University, and a Bachelor's degree in Law at Ramkhamhaeng University in Thailand.