



# ESSAYS: ASEAN SECRETARIES-GENERAL





## ASEAN Revitalised: The Golden Years



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For the first time in the 25 years of its history, ASEAN Leaders at the landmark Singapore Summit in January 1992 decided to set up a professional Secretariat headed by the Secretary-General of ASEAN with an enhanced status as a Minister, a term of 5 years, and an enlarged mandate to ‘initiate, advise, coordinate and implement ASEAN activities.’ The staff were appointed through open, direct recruitment. I was the first in the line of the Secretaries-General to work under the new system.

It so happened that 3 years prior to assuming the Secretary-General’s post, I was the Director-General of the ASEAN-Malaysia National Secretariat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The assignment served as a kind of apprenticeship for the bigger role I was to play later and proved to be of invaluable experience in enabling me to familiarise myself with the issues

and the inner workings of ASEAN. It also gave me the opportunity to come to know the Leaders, the Ministers, senior officials, and others involved in the ASEAN process.

Member countries had taken a bold step in bringing about the changes in the Secretariat and I was aware that they would be watching me closely to see if I was worthy of their trust. My only advantage was that I was an ‘insider’, coming in from within the system, and that helped me tremendously to become operational almost immediately upon taking office.

This was not case with my new staff. The 20 of them were selected from over 4,700 applicants. They were of varied backgrounds, coming from the media, academia, civil society organisations, and United Nations agencies. Save a couple, none had any exposure to ASEAN. What comforted me most was that they were young eager beavers, quick learners, and raring to get their feet wet. Even though they had difficulties in being able to write minutes and reports the way we did in ASEAN, at least they could write and express themselves well. The ASEAN work culture would seep into them gradually as they became more familiar through practice. The mantra I kept drumming into them was that they should consider themselves as being ASEAN and to think and act as ASEAN. To their credit, we began working as a team and got a lot of work done.

The period of my stewardship of the Secretariat could not have come at a better time. ASEAN was into its third decade, a much more mature and self-assured organisation. It had given its peoples a peaceful and a stable region that enabled member countries time to build national resilience. Through export-led growth, ASEAN had become the fourth-largest trading region in the world, after the European Union, the United States, and Japan. Foreign direct investment flows were such that between 1980 and 2005, ASEAN was getting about 15% of the world’s total, with only 2% of the world’s gross domestic product (GDP). The World Bank used the term ‘East Asian Miracle’ to describe the phenomenal success of these ‘tiger’ and ‘tiger cub’ economies in ASEAN and East Asia. Politically, the peace dividend was at hand with the end of the Cold War and the final resolution of the long-vexing conflict in Cambodia. The region could now look forward to a period of reconciliation and reconstruction.

Peace, stability, and strong economic growth were the essential mix for what I call the 'Golden Years', during which I was privileged to serve ASEAN. Things seemed to be going well for ASEAN at that time. ASEAN was a beehive of activity. ASEAN's success had acted like a magnet, attracting regional and subregional groupings in the South Pacific, South and Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America to its shores. They came eager to establish institutional links by which we could explore trade and investment opportunities, exchange experiences, and encourage the respective private sectors to play supportive roles in all these efforts. I visited Argentina and Brazil at their invitation to discuss establishing such links with the Mercosur countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, and Venezuela). ASEAN Member States also played an active part in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and the Asia-Europe Meeting. I represented the ASEAN Secretariat, which was granted observer status, in both bodies.

The ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) was launched to give ASEAN the competitive edge to turn it into becoming the production hub for the global market. It was to be completed within 15 years (by 2003), using the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) scheme.

While AFTA was well on its way, ASEAN was also moving towards becoming a family of 10 by 1999, with the addition of the four CLMV countries, (ASEAN's term for Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic [Lao PDR], Myanmar, and Viet Nam), thus bringing to a reality the dream of our Founding Fathers. The ASEAN Secretariat was very much involved in preparing these countries to undertake the responsibilities and obligations their membership entailed.

There were, in fact, a number of other urgent issues before me, in addition to AFTA and the increase in ASEAN's membership, that also needed urgent attention and on which the Secretariat played a very active part. One of them was the elevation of functional cooperation to a higher plane. This involved social development, culture and information, science and technology, drugs and narcotics control, and the environment.

However, owing to space constraints, I cannot do justice to all of them here but shall concentrate on the first two so that I can elaborate a little bit more on the role played by the Secretariat.

Starting with AFTA, there was no doubt for us at the Secretariat that AFTA was our baptism of fire. The staff, inexperienced as they were, came into their own through the challenges posed by AFTA to the extent that they were able to coordinate and monitor its implementation. They were also able to analyse the impact of the data on the CEPT scheme and to project trends and directions for use by the Ministers and officials. The load they carried may be hard to believe but, literally, the data they handled would weigh as much as 10 kilos! They were enterprising enough to put out publications – giving regular progress reports on AFTA, statistical data on ASEAN and on the ASEAN Investment Area. The member countries even supported the establishment of an AFTA Unit in the Secretariat and national AFTA units to better handle the increasing amount of workload that was beginning to pile up.

When we started with AFTA, many cynics and naysayers doubted the seriousness of the governments in launching it.

The quips going around were that AFTA was ‘Another Fairy Tale Agreement’. The CEPT was termed as ‘Can’t Explain in Plain Terms.’ Such negative comments arose because ASEAN’s past record in promoting economic cooperation had been poor.

The seriousness of the intentions of the governments were clearly demonstrated when the first batch of the list of products offered for tariff reduction arrived and were analysed. It was a pleasant surprise to find that member countries, which had been given 3 years within which to start implementation, all opted to start on 1 January 1994, with the exception of Brunei Darussalam, which started 6 months later.

By all accounts, AFTA was making very good progress. Within a short span of 3 years – that is, by the time of the ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in December 1995 – the Economic Ministers were able to report that all the necessary mechanisms for implementing AFTA were in place, that the countries had completed their schedules of tariff reductions, and that legal enactments to implement those tariffs had been put in place.

Owing to the positive response and support, AFTA's time frame was cut from the original 15 years to 10 to accelerate the process. Even unprocessed agricultural products, which had been originally excluded, were brought into the scheme. So much for the fairy tale story!

To make ASEAN an even more attractive proposition for manufacturers and potential investors, the Summit Leaders signed the ASEAN Framework Agreement on Cooperation on Services, in recognition of the fact that the services sector had now overtaken the manufacturing sector in GDP growth terms for all ASEAN countries. They also called for the ongoing discussions on investments to move towards the establishment of an ASEAN Investment Area. Other agreements on intellectual property, a new industrial cooperation scheme, and an umbrella dispute settlement mechanism for all ASEAN economic agreements were also signed.

To speed up the work on trade facilitation measures, the Secretariat convened meetings of the Directors-General (DGs) on custom matters and on immigration separately to enlist their cooperation. They all played an important role in the efficient and speedy movement of people, goods, and services within ASEAN.

At the meeting of the DGs of Customs, my suggestion for introducing a Green Lane for the speedy clearance of CEPT products at customs checkpoints, especially at the ports where delays could be costly for the importers, was endorsed at the Bangkok Summit in 1995. The other suggestion to turn the Customs Code of Conduct into a more legally binding document also came to pass with the signing of the ASEAN Agreement on Customs in March 1997. It placed customs cooperation on a more legalistic basis and facilitated trade by addressing issues such as transparency, harmonisation of tariff nomenclature, customs valuation and procedures, simplicity, consistency of treatment, a system of appeals, and a dispute settlement mechanism, among others.

To the DGs of Immigration, I suggested ASEAN Lanes at immigration counters to give people a sense of identity and awareness of being ASEAN, visa abolition for nationals of ASEAN countries travelling within the region, and the introduction of smart cards, which could be used as a substitute for passports. I also suggested the standardisation of the arrival and departure forms. The suggestion for ASEAN Lanes at immigration counters

was taken up but on a rather ad hoc basis, with Thailand being the first country to introduce them when the Fifth ASEAN Summit convened in Bangkok in 1995.

By the time I was about to leave ASEAN, towards the end of 1997, AFTA had already reached the 42,250 tariff line mark (about 90.6% of all tariff lines in ASEAN). That meant that from the original set of tariff lines that ASEAN started off with in 1993, only less than 10% of all tariff lines would be left to be completed by 2003, the deadline set for the realisation of AFTA for the six member countries. The average tariff rates for products in the Inclusion List had fallen by half to 6.38% from 12.76% in 1993. All customs surcharges on the products in this list were abolished by the end of 1996, and the ASEAN Harmonized Tariff Nomenclature was completed and ready for implementation.

Going on to the expansion of ASEAN, it reached a significant milestone with the admission of Viet Nam as a member in 1995. The Lao PDR and Myanmar joined in 1997 on ASEAN's 30th anniversary, and Cambodia in 1999. Prior to that, all of them, as a requirement for membership, had to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia before being granted observer status. This they did and subsequently the Lao PDR and Viet Nam became observers in 1992, Cambodia in 1995, and Myanmar in 1996. As observers, they were able to participate in the meetings of the ASEAN Regional Forum. They were also encouraged to attend meetings of the areas of functional cooperation to familiarise themselves with the ASEAN mechanisms, decision-making processes, and current issues in these areas; and to establish personal working relations with their ASEAN colleagues to get a sense of what the 'ASEAN Way' was meant to be. Observer status was thus a crucial transition stage towards membership in ASEAN.

The objective criteria for membership included the following:

1. Sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia.
2. Accept all the legal and other documents such as the communiqués, joint statements, declarations, etc. issued by ASEAN Leaders and Ministers.
3. Accept the obligations and responsibilities arising from the implementation of the CEPT for AFTA.



4. Accept all the financial obligations of ASEAN, including the equal sharing of the annual operating budget of the ASEAN Secretariat, which in 1996 was around US\$5 million, contribution to the ASEAN Fund (US\$1 million), and the Science Fund (US\$50,000).
5. Open up embassies in all ASEAN countries.
6. Facilitate travel of ASEAN officials and nationals to their respective countries.
7. Accept English as the working language of ASEAN.
8. Efforts to assist the CLMV countries started from the time they gained observer status. All parties in ASEAN, the member countries, Senior Officials, Senior Economic Officials, the ASEAN Standing Committee, and the Secretariat were very closely involved in meeting the requests for assistance from these countries.

The assistance revolved around the following issues:

1. Translating all ASEAN documents from English into their national languages so that they could understand what ASEAN was all about and the nature of the responsibilities they were about to undertake. The ASEAN Secretariat had to seek funding from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and foundations from Germany and other sources for the translation and other printing costs. Myanmar did not need any help as English was widely used.
2. English language training for their government personnel to enable them to cover ASEAN meetings adequately. Member countries were very helpful and forthcoming in this respect. Their aid and assistance were both on an ASEAN basis and bilateral. I also spoke to some of our Dialogue Partners and India did respond by sending some English language training teachers.
3. Need to build a pool of English-speaking government officers and train them in international cooperation, diplomacy, and various areas of specialisation. Again, this aspect was also handled by member countries mostly on a bilateral basis.
4. CLMV officers on attachment courses at the ASEAN Secretariat. UNDP funding made it possible for us to train four Cambodian and five Lao PDR officials at the ASEAN Secretariat for 4–5 weeks each. Later, Myanmar officials were also brought in for similar training and attachment.

5. Attachment at ASEAN national secretariats of member countries to learn and understand how national secretariats were set up, functioned, and how coordination was carried out with relevant ministries and agencies.
6. Briefings on matters relating to economic and functional cooperation in ASEAN with particular reference to AFTA by Senior Economic Officials, the ASEAN Standing Committee, and the ASEAN Secretariat staff in the capitals of CLMV countries.

We in the Secretariat also had to help in improving the connectivity and communications among the different parties, the ASEAN Secretariat, the national secretariats, and the capitals of observer countries. I delivered a keynote address to the executive partners of Digital Equipment Corporation at their conference in Bali in April 1996. Out of this contact, I was able to get Digital to donate a client/server system comprising 30 personal computers valued at US\$2,000 each for Cambodia and the Lao PDR. The ASEAN Secretariat was also presented with such a system, enabling it to work with the latest in technology.

I also visited all these countries and met their Leaders and Ministers. Their interest in being part of ASEAN was evident and they welcomed all the assistance they were getting from ASEAN, the Dialogue Partners, United Nations agencies, and private foundations.

I would like to dwell a little on Myanmar as it was a special case. The country was already sanctioned by the United States and the European Union. As a result, great pressure was being brought to bear upon some ASEAN capitals for them not to proceed with Myanmar. I did not feel the pressure directly but faced intense criticisms from ASEAN non-governmental organisations and from the press, especially the foreign media, for my role in this. Their criticisms centred on what they claimed were human rights violations, political repression, and suppression of democracy. In the face of it all, ASEAN stood by its 'constructive engagement' policy with Myanmar, advocating dialogue rather than isolation.

Regarding Myanmar's membership in ASEAN, I spoke to Ambassador Nyunt Tin of Myanmar at a reception in Jakarta about Viet Nam and the Lao PDR being granted observer status in 1992 with a view to becoming members of ASEAN. I asked whether there was any thinking in Myanmar to follow

suit as it would fulfil the Bangkok Declaration's desire to see all countries in the region being part of ASEAN. He said that Yangon was appreciative of ASEAN's role in supporting Myanmar's re-entry into the Non-Aligned Movement in 1992 but did not go beyond that remark. This conversation could have taken place in 1993/1994. I also told him that if there was interest, I would be happy to help out in any way I could. After some time, when we met again, he told me that he had reported our conversation to Yangon; but Yangon's main fear was of getting its application rebuffed, which would result in loss of face for Myanmar. I repeated what I had said in our earlier discussion and added how Myanmar was invited at the time of ASEAN's formation in 1967 to join ASEAN as a founder-member but declined because of non-aligned status. At our next meeting, he said Yangon had enquired about the procedures entailed in applying for membership. I then briefed him on how Viet Nam and the Lao PDR had gone about it, suggesting that Myanmar, too, could follow the same steps. The rest, as they say, is history. I am sure ASEAN capitals and Yangon must have also shared some signals on this matter and that probably had a bearing on the outcome of my discussions with the Ambassador in Jakarta. The upshot of it all was that Myanmar had decided to become a part of ASEAN.

Myanmar invited me for an official visit to Yangon in November 1996, and during this visit, I saw how seriously the country was taking the task. Preparations were far more advanced than the CLV countries. An ASEAN department had already been set up in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Officials to run it were being trained, focal points for ASEAN in other relevant ministries were being identified, and a top-level coordinating council under the chairmanship of the Secretary of the State Law and Order Restoration Council was being set up. Myanmar had already begun attending meetings on functional cooperation relating to drugs and narcotics, agriculture and forestry, and the other sectors as well.

For the CLV countries, the immediate problem was English and I used to hear how the Ministers and Senior Officials were hard at work attending evening classes. Officials were told that their promotion in the service would depend on their English proficiency. Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia told me, during a courtesy call on him, how students were agitating to learn English because it would open job opportunities for them.

On a lighter vein, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers, in their more casual moments during meals, used to ponder what ASEAN meetings would be like with the new members and whether they would play golf, karaoke, eat durian, and engage in lighted-hearted golf locker-room banter. But the newcomers to ASEAN surprised us. During the historic ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 1997, at which both the Lao PDR and Myanmar were admitted as the eighth and ninth members, respectively, the usual golf game was arranged. Viet Nam's Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam also showed up. I was paired with the Minister and we were the last to tee off. He laboured on valiantly over two holes and at the third hole gave up and excused himself saying he did not want to hold us up. How ironic it was, I thought. Here we were wondering whether they would fit into our ASEAN way of doing things and, on the other side, the newcomers were trying desperately hard to be one of us. From this incident alone, I saw that there was hope for ASEAN.

As I look back, I am struck by the coincidence of events during my term as Secretary-General beginning with the Golden Years and how both AFTA and the expansion of ASEAN kept pace. Here, implementation of AFTA started in 1993; there, expansion of ASEAN began when Viet Nam and the Lao PDR were granted observer status in 1992. In 1995, AFTA mechanisms and necessary enactments were in place and implementation was brought forward by 5 years, to 2003. There, Viet Nam became a member, Cambodia became an observer, and Myanmar became one the following year. In 1997, over 90% of total tariff lines were already in AFTA and average tariff rates were down by half to 6.38% from 12.73% in 1993. The Lao PDR and Myanmar became members of ASEAN in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. The financial crisis then was gathering speed and the storm clouds were about to burst signalling the end of the Golden Years. How uncanny and yet wondrous the ways of nature.

Now, ASEAN is 50. What a remarkable achievement and what a great tribute to the Founding Fathers whose vision, faith, and courage were a constant inspiration to those who have built ASEAN to what it is today.

I feel privileged and very humbled that I was able to play a very small role in the evolution and development of ASEAN.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ajit Singh** was born and educated in Malaysia. He joined the Malaysian Foreign Service in 1963.

In a career spanning just over 30 years, he served in various positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and at Malaysian Missions abroad in Canberra, Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), and New York. He was Malaysia's Ambassador in Viet Nam, Austria, Brazil (with concurrent accreditation to Bolivia, Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela), and Germany.

He was elected the first Secretary-General of ASEAN, which carries the rank of a Minister, and served a 5-year term from 1 January 1993 to 31 December 1997.

In recognition of his services, both the Lao PDR and Viet Nam awarded him their prestigious Friendship Medals in December 1997. He was also awarded the Panglima Setia Mahkota award, which carries the title of 'Tan Sri' by His Majesty the King of Malaysia at His Majesty's Official Birthday on 6 June 1998. The Government of Indonesia awarded him the 'Bintang Jasa Utama' in February 1999 in recognition of his work in ASEAN and in helping improve Malaysia-Indonesia relations.

After leaving the Secretariat, he joined the National Petroleum Oil Company, PETRONAS, where he worked as Director, International Business Ventures from August 1997 to October 1999. He left to help establish the Boao Forum for Asia in Hainan, China and was elected its first Secretary-General in February 2001.

Upon his return, he became the Advisor for India Business for IJM Corporation and is now a member of the Malaysia-India CEO Forum set up by the Prime Ministers of the two countries, the Advisor to the Malaysia-India Business Council, and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Mercy Malaysia.

In early 2009, he was appointed to the then Indian Prime Minister's Global Advisory Council of Overseas Indians. In January 2011, the Government of India awarded him the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award, India's highest award recognition for an overseas Indian.