



# ESSAYS: ASEAN PARTNERS





MYANMAR, 2014

# ASEAN - AUSTRALIA 40<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY COMMEMORATIVE SUMMIT

Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, 12 November 2014



Our People, Our Community, Our Vision  
MALAYSIA 2015

# 18th ASEAN-Japan Summit

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 22 November 2015



Partnership for Growth and Prosperity  
ASEAN-CHINA COMMUNITY  
LAOS 2016

# 19<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-China Summit to Commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations

7 September 2016, Vientiane, Laos





## ASEAN at 50: Reflections from Australia



**Gareth Evans**

As Australia's foreign minister from 1988 to 1996, I had no counterparts anywhere in the world with whom I felt closer and more comfortable than my ASEAN colleagues, despite the multitude of cultural and historical factors notionally dividing us. As close partners on such initiatives as the creation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and the ASEAN Regional Forum and negotiating peace in Cambodia, there grew among us an enormous sense of camaraderie and a sense that, working together, we really could look forward to a future of sustainable peace, prosperity, and social justice.

There were things about some of those ministerial meetings that I would prefer to forget, above all the acute embarrassment of being called upon to perform some musical number – me, whose voice is so tuneless I was even

banished from my kindergarten choir! And no doubt there are a number of things that my colleagues would prefer to forget about me, such as my occasional infection with what was dubbed (I suspect by my Singaporean friends) as ‘initiative-itis’. But there were many experiences also that I would never want to forget, one occasion in particular. Early in 1990, during a break in one of the big Jakarta meetings on Cambodia, looking for a quiet place in which to make a phone call, I inadvertently stumbled into a room where half a dozen ASEAN ministers were chatting over coffee. My profuse apologies were overborne by calls to stay and join them, with one colleague saying ‘Come on in. You’re one of us.’

If I – an outsider from a non-ASEAN country – could feel that sense of camaraderie, how much greater must it have been for my ASEAN colleagues with each other? That, of course, is at the heart of what makes ASEAN the great success story it has been for the last 50 years, not only in achieving the kind of political cooperation that has enabled deadly cross-border conflict to be effectively banished from the region – thus fully realising the primary dream of its founders – but also in creating a cooperative open trading environment that has generated a level of prosperity unimaginable 5 decades ago.

Milestone anniversaries are properly an occasion for celebration, and there is much to celebrate looking back, but they should also be an occasion for reflection about what lies ahead. And it does seem, at least to this outsider, that there are some challenges with which ASEAN does now need to seriously grapple.

One is maintaining cohesion in the face of the challenge from a newly confident and assertive China. Beijing seems only too happy to create, or re-create – if it can do so without violent conflict – some kind of hegemonic, tributary relationship with its southern neighbours. For China to be able to succeed in dividing and neutralising ASEAN’s reaction on the South China Sea issue, to the extent it has in recent ministerial meetings and summits, does not bode well for the future. Consensual diplomacy – traditional ASEAN style – is all very well, but sometimes, when the vital national interests of so many of its members are manifestly involved, some collective pushback is needed.

A second challenge is to keep ASEAN's balance in the face of the almost complete uncertainty about how the United States (US) under President Trump will behave in the region, with at least the possibility now of everything from a US trade war with China to a serious dilution of traditional US alliances and partnerships long seen by ASEAN as a force for regional stability. The best way for ASEAN to maintain its own balance in this uncertain environment may be for it to make a major new effort to give real content and substance to the regional economic and security policy-making architecture which it has, for so long, played a central part building – including APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and now, most importantly, the East Asian Summit. The potential for creating a really cooperative, common security environment in the region that can withstand political shocks – even on the scale of a Trump-driven Amexit – has always been there, but never fully realised.

A third challenge for ASEAN is maintaining its economic momentum, including job creation, in an environment where there are not only the geopolitical stresses and uncertainties already mentioned, but a backlash everywhere against globalisation and a fear, thoroughly justified, of the unskilled and less-skilled being left completely behind by digitalisation. These economic problems – and the social justice problems inexorably associated with them – are of course not ASEAN's alone, but they are going to require a huge amount of intelligent, united policy commitment, including through the new ASEAN Economic Community mechanism, to begin to resolve. This is not a time for erratic, beggar-thy-neighbour, populist nationalism.

A fourth challenge is how to balance ASEAN's traditional, and understandable, desire to continue to give primacy to state sovereignty and non-interference against the need to address unacceptable violations of universally recognised civil and political rights. Those violations, of which we have seen too many graphic examples in recent times from too many ASEAN Member States, are very destructive of ASEAN's international reputation. They seriously limit any soft power it may otherwise be able to exercise and diminish ASEAN's claim to continued 'centrality' in the operation of those regional organisations which are so crucial to the whole region's future.

There are plenty of other challenges which ASEAN will need no prompting from any outsider to recognise, not least how to begin to take forward a regional organisation of 625 million people with a Secretariat with few teeth and a budget of only US\$20 million. But let me conclude with one more from an Australian perspective: is it thinkable that ASEAN would ever be willing and able to admit its non-Asian southern neighbour to its membership?

In the new uncertain geopolitical environment created by both G2 members (the US and China), it has never been more important that all the other countries of the region work together to build more collective strength, both economically and politically. A new mantra – ‘More self-reliance. More Asia. Less America.’ – is as applicable for Australia as it is for ASEAN members and for the countries of North East Asia and South Asia as well. Australia is the 13th largest economy in the world and, despite our much smaller population, ranks alongside Indonesia, Viet Nam, and Thailand in military firepower. Bonds between Australia and ASEAN are quite strong already – you are collectively our second-largest trading partner, after China; we are a major supplier of education, with some 120,000 of your students enrolled in our universities; and we have close security ties with a number of you. But it would be in both our interests for those bonds to be very much stronger still. It is probably premature for both sides to be talking about actual Australian membership in the organisation. But if ASEAN is to be as effective and influential in the next 50 years as it has been in the last, it is something we should both be thinking seriously about.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Gareth Evans** is Chancellor and Honorary Professorial Fellow at The Australian National University, and President Emeritus of the International Crisis Group which he led from 2000 to 2009. He was a member of the Australian Parliament for 21 years, and a Cabinet Minister in the Hawke and Keating governments for 13, including as Foreign Minister from 1988 to 1996. He played prominent roles in initiating APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the United Nations peace plan for Cambodia.