



From ‘Sports-Shirt’ Diplomacy to a Model Rules-Based Organisation



Fidel Valdez Ramos

On 8 August 1967, the five ‘founding fathers’ – Adam Malik of Indonesia, Narciso R. Ramos of the Philippines, Tun Abdul Razak of Malaysia, S. Rajaratnam of Singapore, and Thanat Khoman of Thailand – got together at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building in Bangkok and signed a historic document, establishing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which would later be hailed as the most successful inter-governmental organisation in the world.

In his 1992 memoirs, former Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman recalled:

When, as Foreign Minister, I was entrusted with the responsibility of Thailand’s foreign relations, I paid visits to neighboring countries to forge co-operative relationships in Southeast Asia. The results were, however, depressingly

negative. Only an embryonic organization, ASA or the Association of Southeast Asia, grouping Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand could be set up. This took place in 1961. It was, nevertheless, the first organization for regional co-operation in Southeast Asia.

Soon after its establishment in 1961, ASA or the Association of Southeast Asia ... ran into a snag. A territorial dispute, relating to a colonial legacy, erupted between the Philippines and Indonesia on the one hand and Malaysia on the other... The dispute centred on the fact that the British Administration, upon withdrawal from North Borneo (Sabah), had attributed jurisdiction of the territory to Malaysia. The konfrontasi, as the Indonesians called it, threatened to boil over into an international conflict as Malaysia asked its ally, Great Britain, to come to its support and British warships began to cruise along the coast of Sumatra. That unexpected turn of events caused the collapse of the fledgling ASA ...

... efforts continued to be made in Bangkok for the creation of another organization. Thus in 1966 a larger grouping, with East Asian nations like Japan and South Korea as well as Malaysia, the Philippines, Australia, Taiwan, New Zealand, South Vietnam and Thailand, was established and known as ASPAC or the Asian and Pacific Council.

However, once again, calamity struck. ASPAC was afflicted by the vagaries of international politics. The admission of the People's Republic of China and eviction of the Republic of China or Taiwan made it impossible for some of the Council's members to sit at the same conference table. ASPAC consequently folded up in 1975, marking another failure in regional co-operation.

With this new misfortune, Thailand, which had remained neutral throughout, turned its attention to the conflict brewing to its south and took on a conciliatory role. At that time, Thanat shuttled between Jakarta, Manila, and Kuala Lumpur to effect their reconciliation.

The Bangkok Declaration

Thanat broached the idea of forming another organisation for regional cooperation that would include Thailand as the fourth member, first with Malik of Indonesia, and then got the consent of two former ASA ministers, Ramos of the Philippines and Razak of Malaysia. In addition, Singapore sent Rajaratnam to join the new setup. After its first formal meeting in early August 1967, the group retired to Bangsaen, a seaside resort 105 kilometres southeast of Bangkok. The signatories would later delight in describing their decidedly informal manner as ‘sports-shirt’ diplomacy. Yet, it was by no means an easy process: each man brought into the deliberations a historical and political perspective that had no resemblance to that of any of the others.

But with goodwill and good humour, the gentlemen finessed their way through their differences as they lined up shots on the golf course and traded wisecracks on one another’s game, a style of deliberation that would eventually become the ASEAN diplomatic tradition of *musyawarah* (consultation) and *mufakat* (consensus). They spent 4 days combining work with leisure until the final language of an agreement was forged.

It was a short, simply worded document containing just five articles. It declared the establishment of ASEAN and spelled out its aims and purposes. These were about cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, technical, educational, and other fields, and in the promotion of regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law and adherence to the United Nations Charter. It stipulated that ASEAN would be open for participation by all states in the Southeast Asian region subscribing to its aims, principles, and purposes. It proclaimed ASEAN as representing ‘the collective will of the nations of Southeast Asia to bind themselves together in friendship and cooperation and, through joint efforts and sacrifices, secure for their peoples and for posterity the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity’.

United Action from ASEAN

After the signing of the Bangkok Declaration, the first to speak was the Philippines’ Narciso Ramos, my father, who recalled the tediousness of the negotiations which ‘truly taxed the goodwill, imagination, the patience

and understanding of the five participating Ministers. That ASEAN was established at all in spite of these difficulties ... meant that its foundations had been solidly laid.' He impressed upon the audience of diplomats, officials, and media people that a great sense of urgency had inspired the Ministers to go through all that trouble. He added:

The fragmented economies of Southeast Asia, (with) each country pursuing its own limited objectives and dissipating its meager resources in the overlapping or even conflicting endeavors of sister states carry the seeds of weakness in their incapacity for growth and their self-perpetuating dependence on the advanced, industrial nations. ASEAN, therefore, could marshal the still untapped potentials of this rich region through more substantial united action.

When it was Thailand's turn, Thanat concluded by stressing: 'The goal of ASEAN is to create, not to destroy.' ASEAN came at a time when the Viet Nam conflict was raging and the American forces seemed to be forever entrenched in Indochina. Thanat then asserted:

... The countries of Southeast Asia had no choice but to adjust to the exigencies of the time, to move toward closer cooperation and even integration ... Particularly what millions of men and women in our part of the world want is to erase the old and obsolete concept of domination and subjection of the past and replace it with the new spirit of give and take, of equality and partnership. More than anything else, they want to be master of their own house and to enjoy the inherent right to decide their own destiny ...

Elaborating on ASEAN objectives, the Thai Foreign Minister spoke of 'building a new society that will be responsive to the needs of our time and efficiently equipped to bring about, for the enjoyment and the material as well as spiritual advancement of our peoples, conditions of stability and progress'.

Defence against External Threats

The formation of ASEAN, the first successful attempt at forging regional cooperation, was actually inspired and guided by contemporary events in many areas of the world, including Southeast Asia itself. France and Britain, two Western powers that reneged on their promise of protection to Poland and Czechoslovakia against external aggression, were instrumental in drawing the attention of many countries to the credibility of assurances (or lack thereof) advanced by larger powers to smaller partners. The lesson drawn from such events encouraged weak nations to rely more on neighbourly mutual support than on stronger states that serve their own national interests rather than those of smaller partners. For Thailand, in particular, its disappointing experience with other aggrupations taught it the lesson that it was dangerous to hitch its destiny to distant powers who may cut loose their obligations with lesser and distant allies at any moment. Thanat recounted:

Another principle to which we anchored our faith was that our co-operation should deal with non-military matters... We resisted; wisely and correctly we stuck to our resolve to exclude military entanglement and remain safely on economic ground.

The leadership challenges ASEAN will face will be numerous and complex. Nowadays, ideology counts much less than it did 30–40 years ago. As the American policy intellectual George Kennan notes, ‘forms of government are forged mainly in the fire of practice and not in the vacuum of theory. They respond to national character and to national realities.’

I myself discern three constants of the modern political order: the first is a strong and capable state; the second, a state subordinate to the rule of law; and the third, a government accountable to all its citizens. The centre of global gravity is tilting away from the Atlantic – where it has been for the last 200 years – not so much because the West is weakening, either economically or militarily, but because other power centres are rising in relative strength in Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

By 2020, Asia should be home to three of the five largest economies. By then, China, Japan, and India will be competing with the United States (US) and the European Union. The ASEAN 10 – principally Indonesia – will be up front, too. India, like China, a population billionaire, is entertaining its own global ambitions. Over these past years, its economy has been expanding by an annual 7% on average. Already, India is a global force in information technology, business process outsourcing, and heavy industry. But it is still years behind China in efficiency.

The Big Two: China and the United States

The US and China are the ‘Big Two’ – the rival poles of this new global power balance. Although the US still wields the strongest military, economic, or cultural influence on global affairs, China has been growing much faster than the world had thought possible.

The US has regarded itself an Asia-Pacific power since the late 1890s when, impelled by President William McKinley’s concept of ‘Manifest Destiny’, it acquired Hawaii, the Marianas, Guam, Midway, the Philippine Islands, and other territories as naval strong points of the ‘forward defence’ in the Western Pacific.

Since the end of World War II, the US has been the fulcrum of the Asia-Pacific power balance. Over these last 7 decades, Pax America (American Peace) has given the East Asian states the breathing spell to put their houses in order (Japan and China especially), just as it is the American market that has enabled them to expand their economies at the world’s fastest rate. Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, Pentagon strategies have been shifting the weight of their overseas deployments from Western Europe to the Pacific, and from Northeast Asia broadly southward – towards Okinawa, Guam, the Philippines, and Viet Nam. The same is true of the ‘pivoting’ of US forces away from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific area since 2011.

China itself has been redeploying its forces away from the Russian border southwards. Similarly, Japan is shifting its military attention from its Kuriles-Sakhalin Islands border with Russia towards China and North Korea.

In the last 2 years, the ‘double talks’ by China and ‘pivoting’ by the US (called brinkmanship between Beijing and Washington) have taken a serious turn towards military confrontation because of China’s extravagant claims to the South China/ East Sea/ West Philippine Sea (in which the national interests of Viet Nam, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and the Philippines are critically involved). China’s proximate aim seems to be to limit American access to the China Sea in its entirety, erode the credibility of Washington’s security guarantees to its Asian allies, and ease out US military forces from East Asia altogether.

ASEAN and Strategic Balance

So where and when will it all end? I continue to be optimistic. Not only has the self-destructive force of nuclear weapons made war among the great powers obsolete these days but the capability of many nations now to strike, counterstrike, and counter-counterstrike ad infinitum with the press of a red button will also surely result in mass suicide and global obliteration. We must expect the South China Sea tensions to continue because the protracted contest to dominate this great global waterway, which is ASEAN’s ‘Maritime Heartland’, began years ago with the ASEAN countries as the individual targets of China’s charm offensive and ‘divide and conquer’ efforts.

The truth is that China is not just reshaping the global economy. Globalisation is also reshaping China. China today is connected to global realities more tightly than its communist leaders realised. Over the foreseeable future, we in East Asia must live with a China driving for great power status, a Japan nurturing a resurgent nationalism, and a US asserting its Asia-Pacific role.

What can second-rank states do to help keep the strategic balance in the Asia-Pacific region and the world during the dangerous transition we see as occurring in the next several years? For ASEAN, the imperative is to help maintain the strategic balance and not to be drawn irrevocably into any one great power’s sphere of influence. Within the grouping, the regional institutions, agreements, declarations, covenants, and treaties are the best tools in moderating the dominant influence of the US and China. The ASEAN-led free trade framework, known as the Regional

Comprehensive Economic Partnership (with members from ASEAN, China, the Republic of Korea, Japan, India, Australia, and New Zealand), has today acquired greater leverage in regional and global relations. That is why our 10 Southeast Asian states should put so much weight on their community building in an integrated way.

ASEAN Integration and Its Stakeholders

The ASEAN Community defines itself as a concert of nations that are outward looking; resilient; living in peace, stability, and prosperity; and bonded in partnership for sustainable development among a caring society. Our ASEAN Community builds on three ‘pillars’ – an economic community, a political–security community, and a socio-cultural community.

Indeed, Indonesia has set a security landmark for ASEAN to reach on its journey towards ‘Community’ with its proposal for an ASEAN peacekeeping centre and a regional peacekeeping force. Without minimising the difficulties of multilateral security cooperation, I do believe the proposed regional peacekeeping centre is absolutely necessary and within ASEAN’s capabilities. Our 10 members have changed a great deal over these 5 decades – gradually, but also basically and positively, which is the best kind of change there is. But those of us old enough to remember how things were when ASEAN was formed 50 years ago on 8 August 1967 can testify as to how positive an influence ASEAN’s sheer presence has already been for the stability of Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

As to our aspiration for an ‘economic community’ with its key concept of integrating priority sectors of the Southeast Asian economy – thereby making ASEAN a single market and production platform characterised by the free flow of capital, goods, services, investments, and skilled labour – ASEAN must still bridge many gaps between its more developed and less developed members before it can progress towards this objective. Compared to China, India, Brazil, and other emerging economies, Southeast Asia has higher labour costs, more complex policy uncertainties, and still-fragmented national markets despite AFTA, the internal free trade area ASEAN kicked off in 1993. To make up for our higher labour costs, the ASEAN economies must raise workers’ productivity and cut costs across the production value chains.

To achieve these goals, ASEAN needs further internal reforms and deeper national integration.

What national reforms are urgently necessary? Basically, the ASEAN members must dismantle home-grown barriers that raise costs, reduce competitions, and deter new investments. Unfortunately, we know that governments still protect favoured national corporations and family dynasties from competition. And they continue to keep small unproductive firms afloat by tolerating their evasion of taxes, labour rules, product regulations, and even bribery practices. Increased economies of scale and scope, heightened competition, higher productivity at the company level – all these reforms should stimulate higher investment, generate more intra-regional trade, and encourage the emergence of robust and globally competitive Southeast Asian enterprises.

Making ASEAN Institutions Stronger

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community is at once the easiest and the most difficult for the ASEAN Leaders to organise. The lesson of the European Union teaches us that elite arrangements – made over the heads of ordinary people – have limited effectiveness. There is no way an ‘ASEAN Community’ can be built without engaging the interests of ordinary ASEAN peoples. Hence, it is fitting that ASEAN should be organising a collective effort among its members to bring its vision and mission within the range of knowledge of everyday Southeast Asians, starting with schoolchildren.

If the Southeast Asian peoples are to embrace ASEAN as their ‘Community’ in its economic, socio-cultural, and political–security dimensions, they must see it as a pervading, beneficial influence on their daily lives. As stakeholders, they must regard the ASEAN vision as their very own. Furthermore, the economic growth they will experience must reduce the poverty of their families and of their communities and bring better public health, housing, basic education services, and jobs as well as higher incomes for everyone. Thus, a great deal of ASEAN’s work in building ‘Community’ must focus on encouraging, assisting, and – if need be – pressuring the ASEAN members to promote good governance, strengthen the rule of law, build an inclusive economy, and defend human rights and representative democracy.

If ASEAN is to achieve regional integration that would endure and lead to the desired ‘ASEAN Community’, it must build durable regional institutions. Right now, it has no regional institutions strong enough to expedite decision-making and – even more important – enforce compliance to ASEAN group decisions.

The ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta has neither the power nor the resources to formulate and propose policies, coordinate their implementation, monitor compliance, impose sanctions, and settle disputes. ASEAN needs institutions that will represent not just the interests of the individual member states but also especially the interest of the group as a whole.

Without such stronger regional institutions, ‘ASEAN in effect grants a veto to any country that, for its own reasons, resists regional integration’, according to a McKinsey study. Thus, if regional ASEAN institutions remain merely administrative or coordinative as they are now, none of the ASEAN states need to comply with group decisions. This will result in the ASEAN again becoming neo-colonies of the superpowers instead of becoming the world’s model of an enduring regional partnership based on freedom and open markets.

ASEAN – A Future Superpower, If ...

ASEAN covers a land area of 4.4 million square kilometres, which is 3% of the total global land area. ASEAN territorial waters cover an area about three times larger than their land counterpart. The combined population of the region is approximately 642 million people, higher than either the European Union (510 million) or North America (565 million) to include Mexico and Central America.

In 2015, the organisation’s combined nominal gross domestic product had grown to more than US\$2.8 trillion. If ASEAN were a single entity, it would rank as the sixth-largest economy in the world behind the US, China, Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom. It is also home to more than 200 world-class companies, making it the seventh-largest host of leading global corporations. By 2030, ASEAN could rank as the world’s fourth-largest economy. As the ASEAN Community enters its second year, it will continue to integrate and bring about all the best of all ASEAN members.

At the launching of the Philippine chairmanship, President Rodrigo Duterte declared:

This 2017, the Philippines has the task of steering our Association through the challenges ahead. During this period, we will place the spotlight on ASEAN as a model of regionalism and as a global player amid rising tensions among nations. This will require the cooperation and support of all ASEAN Member-States which is essential to the realisation of our goal of peace and harmony in the region. The interest of the Filipino people will remain at the core of ASEAN.

This has not been a negligible result. After 50 years, ASEAN has greatly benefitted from its record of pursuing durable peace and sustainable development. Today, ASEAN has become a well-established and highly esteemed international bloc.

Finally, we must transform the immense diversity of our home region from a source of weakness into a source of strength. Our ultimate objective must be to achieve unity in diversity because such cohesion begets national power and regional resilience. And even as we begin our journey towards ‘the ASEAN Community’, we must realise ours in ASEAN is a pilgrimage that may never end.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fidel Valdez Ramos is the 12th President of the Philippines (1992–1998). He is known as the leader who ended the country’s economic crisis. Under his presidency, a comprehensive Social Reform Agenda was implemented to address the country’s long-standing problems, such as poverty, health and environment protection, resources development, and unemployment. In this period, the country’s gross national product averaged 5% annually.

He served as Secretary of National Defense in 1988–1991 and as Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines with the rank of General (4 stars) in 1986–1988. Prior to his post as Chief of Staff, he had also been active in the military since 1951. His decades of service brought him to lead the peaceful and non-violent People Power Revolution at EDSA in February 1986, which ended a dictatorial regime and restored the Philippines’ democracy.

After retirement, he has been focusing on creating a sustainable environment for citizens by pushing the ‘best practices’ of unity of purpose, solidarity in values, and teamwork in nation-building at every opportunity.

In the diplomatic field, he was awarded the highest civil award of Nishan-e-Pakistan by the President of Pakistan in 1997, and the highest award of the Most Exalted Order of the Crown – *Darjah Utama Seri Mahkota Negara* (D.M.N.) – of Malaysia in 1995. Both awards were given in appreciation of his effort in improving the lives of the people in the Philippines and establishing better international relations with the two respective countries.