



Thoughts on ASEAN and Leadership



Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono

Our ASEAN Community is first and foremost one of solidarity, of give and take, and of supportive friends seeking unanimous solutions to difficulties, in order to build, via sustainable growth and poverty reduction, a peaceful, stable, and inclusive society.

ASEAN differentiates itself from other international groupings and organisations by the culture and values it applies in reaching wise agreements. As members of the ASEAN family, sometimes we give, sometimes we receive, and sometimes we must be considerate in reaching compromise. As I have said before, this is the beauty of ASEAN.

Due to Indonesia's position as ASEAN's most populous nation with the largest economy, expectations of its leadership were high during my tenure as President. We worked hard with our ASEAN family to carry out, with intellectual leadership, our duties using ASEAN statecraft and diplomatic skills and by building trust.

When Indonesia chaired ASEAN in 2011, our theme was ‘ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations’. This was an Indonesian initiative and I was happy for the opportunity to try to contribute in an area that is particularly close to my heart.

ASEAN wanted to reach out to the world and play a greater role in global affairs. We wanted ASEAN to speak with greater cohesion on global issues – at that time we spoke nationally or bilaterally – and set a 10-year goal to achieve this, although we had hoped to reach this sooner. Our 2011 summit resulted in the Bali Concord III.

I felt it was ASEAN’s duty to participate more deeply in global affairs. And to contribute jointly would mean we could contribute beyond our individual strengths in building a peaceful, just, and prosperous world. Such a global environment is also essential for Indonesia’s own continuing national development and security.

We have learned lessons from our recent achievements in Indonesia: our steady recovery from the Asian financial crisis, our resilience in the face of the recent global economic turmoil, and the building of democracy from the remnants of military rule. These achievements have strengthened Indonesia’s willingness and ability to play greater and more diverse roles: norm setter, consensus builder, peacekeeper, bridge builder, and voice of the developing world, both regionally and globally.

These global links and partnerships are also vital in promoting development, preventing famine, and supporting food security. In connection with the latter, as climate change is beyond national solutions, it is important for Indonesia and ASEAN to be proactive in reaching global solutions.

I also place great importance on the ASEAN–United Nations (UN) relationship. During Indonesia’s year as chair of ASEAN, we also signed in Bali the UN–ASEAN Comprehensive Partnership. I thought then, as I still do, that the two organisations should work together to strengthen ASEAN’s capacity to assist globally in conflict resolution, building on Indonesia’s own national commitment to UN peacekeeping operations.

It was important for us that Indonesia would exercise constructive leadership, not merely chairmanship, while chairing ASEAN. ASEAN's goals that year were not only these global aspirations but also, hugely important, regional aims, including driving real action and implementation of agreements to achieve the ASEAN Community 2015.

ASEAN also wanted to maintain regional peace. We of course strive for peace for its own sake, but we also recognise that peace and stability bring economic growth and prosperity.

In the conflict that erupted in 2011 between two ASEAN nations – Cambodia and Thailand – over the Preah Vihear temple area, Indonesia stepped up and took the lead in mediation, ably and proactively led by Marty Natalegawa, Indonesia's foreign minister at the time. We wanted to inject an ASEAN answer, an ASEAN narrative, into this crisis and resolve it by enacting ASEAN principles.

I remember, however, that despite the fighting and tragic deaths, Marty Natalegawa and I felt that there remained the will and the opportunity to defuse this complex conflict and solve it by peaceful means. After meeting the UN Security Council, Marty secured a UN mandate for an Indonesia-led ASEAN to pursue conflict-resolution efforts. Eventually, both sides withdrew their military forces from the area, and observers from Indonesia, by then a trusted third party in this conflict, moved in.

Although in the end an agreement was made on a bilateral basis between Cambodia and Thailand, regional support was vital in creating an environment in which constructive talks could flourish. I was delighted to see how successful ASEAN was.

I believe the situation demonstrated not only ASEAN's maturity but also Indonesia's leadership ability and credibility in facilitating a process of mediation and negotiation. I recognised that ASEAN should continue to build its abilities in preventing and resolving conflict, and in ensuring that ASEAN nations are comfortable in resorting to them. In 2011, backed by the ASEAN family, Indonesia proposed an ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation. The newly formed body held its first governing council meeting in December 2013.

The South China Sea is an issue that unsettled the region while I was President of Indonesia – and it continues to do so. Although the chairmanship of ASEAN had switched to Cambodia in 2012, Indonesia again played a role. Following the impasse at the July summit, ASEAN supported Indonesia in its diplomatic quest for members to reach a consensus. This resulted in the Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea.

A swift shuttle diplomacy was initiated by Indonesia to seek a common denominator among the ASEAN countries. Reaching agreement was not without obstacles and the result was criticised by some external parties, but ASEAN was successful in reaching consensus, again due in no small part to the efforts of Marty Natalegawa. We also continued to push for a code of conduct in the South China Sea, although unfortunately this has yet to come to fruition.

Indonesia's diplomatic style is quiet and low profile. In line with our active and independent approach to foreign policy, we were engaged for many years with Myanmar's military leaders and began to persuade them to loosen their hold on political power. Although this was done bilaterally, I believe it is critical work that ultimately served to strengthen ASEAN.

In Myanmar's move from military rule to democratisation, Indonesia recognised its own struggle of 1998. We took the view in government that countries in transition need encouragement and support, and we veered away from what we viewed as excessive embargoes. I visited Myanmar in 2006 to share Indonesia's experiences with the junta, and, at the same time, called for a tangible movement towards democracy.

By 2011, we tried to view the changes in Myanmar as a half-full, rather than a half-empty, glass. We felt that developments – not progress as such, but certainly developments – were significant, including the elections and the subsequent release of Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2010, the ability of the opposition to engage in political activities, and increasing openness to foreign international envoys.

This opinion led to our view in 2011 that Myanmar should chair ASEAN in 2014. ASEAN eventually reached unanimity on this matter and it was agreed Myanmar would take its turn. My final ASEAN summit was therefore a special moment for me because it took place in Nay Pyi Taw.

Stability and security in Myanmar is of course also important for the whole region as it is a prerequisite for economic progress and prosperity. Myanmar's problems became ASEAN's problems.

In addition, Indonesia has also tried to lead discussions on an Asia-Pacific regional architecture, to maintain regional peace and security, and to ensure that ASEAN remains at the centre of regional initiatives with external partners. We envisaged a broader East Asia Summit than was originally planned, and Russia and the US were also successfully admitted in 2011.

Of course, ASEAN will continue to face challenges in the future. We must continue to work towards sustainable regional integration and development. We must also work harder and faster to calm the situation in the South China Sea, particularly as China is reclaiming land, but we must proceed carefully and avoid missteps.

But my hopes for ASEAN's future are sincere. I wish for strong leadership and unified progress towards prosperity. I hope ASEAN is able to contribute in solving global and regional problems with moral courage and determination and for Indonesia to remain a responsible member of ASEAN. And above all, I hope we remember that despite all the rules and the structures, we are most importantly a family and a community.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (known as 'SBY') is the sixth President of the Republic of Indonesia (2004–2014), and the country's first directly elected President in the democratic era.

During his two terms in office, he delivered what the World Economic Forum called 'Indonesia's golden decade', a period marked by democratic development, political stability, high economic growth and resilience, conflict resolution, and a robust international role. Under his leadership, Indonesia became an emerging economy, a regional power, and a G-20 member, and assumed important roles on issues ranging from climate change to the post-Millennium Development Goals, terrorism to geopolitics, inter-faith to architecture, and so on.

His life story has been nothing less than phenomenal: a military officer who became a four-star general, who became cabinet minister and then politician, who became President and then one of Asia's most respected statesmen. His time in office was hardly a breeze: he was faced with the destructive tsunami and a series of natural disasters, separatism, terrorism, financial crisis, and more. But he managed to overcome these challenges with a steady hand: the country recovered from the tsunami and other disasters; the conflict in Aceh was peacefully and permanently resolved in mid-2005; terrorist groups were disbanded and detained; and the economy rebounded. At a time when democracies around the world were in distress, Indonesia's democracy steadily moved from strength to strength.

With a PhD in agricultural economics, he relentlessly pursued his four-track economic programme of 'pro-growth, pro-job, pro-poor, and pro-environment'. His development mantra was 'sustainable growth with equity'.

As President of the country with the world's largest Muslim population, Yudhoyono has become a strong advocate for peaceful and moderate Islam, both internally and on the global stage. He devoted great efforts to develop closer relations between the Western and Islamic worlds. He also staunchly promoted and architected military reforms, and championed Indonesia's robust peace-keeping operations around the world.

He placed ASEAN as his top priority foreign affairs agenda. Through his commitment and the support of the ASEAN family, ASEAN was able to maintain overall peace and security which had brought economic growth and prosperity in the region.

In 2011, he exercised constructive leadership while chairing ASEAN, not merely chairmanship. When he was the President, Indonesia stepped up and took the lead in numerous affairs, such as driving real action to achieve the ASEAN Community in 2015, settling the dispute between Cambodia and Thailand in Preah Vihear temple, managing any surfaced tensions in the South China Sea dispute, and helping Myanmar in the country's democratisation process.

He is actively engaged in social media. Today, he has around 10 million followers on Twitter and 6 million on Facebook.