



# The Critical Importance of Socio-cultural Community for the Future of ASEAN



**Abhisit Vejjajiva**

Half a century ago, when the founding fathers of five Southeast Asian nations signed the historic declaration creating the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the region was mired in conflict and war. Peace and security were the motivations for the creation of the organisation. Its members were anxious that economic development in their respective countries was being threatened by the potential instability created by communism. Thus, regional cooperation and the mechanisms of it were deemed essential for the achievement of peace and prosperity.

Seen in this context, ASEAN can be judged to have been a success. Not only was peace and stability achieved, but the organisation has expanded to include 10 countries, with East Timor the only country in the region that has not joined the grouping.

The ‘success story’ did not stop there. The extent of regional integration has grown considerably. The setting up of a free trade area, the crafting of a new charter, and the establishment of the ASEAN Community with its three pillars reflect how far ASEAN has come. Moreover, with its engagement with dialogue partners; free trade agreements with Japan, China, the Republic of Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand; and ASEAN centrality in key international forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, one could argue that ASEAN now has a voice at the global level. Given that all this was achieved in the 5 decades that had seen much volatility (at least two major financial crises spring to mind), as well as threats in the forms of pandemics, natural disasters, and others, the progress ASEAN has made can seem remarkable.

Yet, there is always the other side of the coin. Five decades on, the world has also moved on. Compared with the integration or cooperation of other regions, it would be hard to make a convincing case that ASEAN has been more advanced than the other arrangements in other parts of the world. Given the degree of globalisation, the many challenges we face today that do not respect borders, and problems that require at least a regional solution, ASEAN has yet to demonstrate its readiness to tackle such issues. Given the generally recognised economic success of its members, one can also make a strong case that ASEAN has been punching below its weight, so to speak.

Many explanations have been offered. The intrinsic diversity between ASEAN members and the modus operandi or the ‘ASEAN Way’ necessary to conform to the culture of the region meant that there are limitations to the speed at which ASEAN can progress.

Whatever the case, a balanced assessment of ASEAN achievements can provide important lessons as we seek a path forward for the organisation.

## ASEAN's Aspirations

In assessing ASEAN's future as it moves forward, we must begin with the vision set out for the ASEAN Community, which aims to create a region that is outward looking and living in peace, stability, and prosperity. From this, we may broadly conclude that ASEAN aspires to be economically competitive, with a peaceful and stable environment, and actively engaged with the global community.

There is no doubt that much attention and focus have been placed on ASEAN's economic goals. Building on the achievement of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and given the understandable dominance of economic concerns in all member countries, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) has almost become synonymous with the ASEAN Community itself. The desire to remain competitive and relevant as a market with giant economies to the north and west, in China and India, contributes to this emphasis on AEC.

Yet, expectations that the success of this pillar alone would provide the main driving force towards the creation of a true and single community in the region would be misplaced for the following reasons. Firstly, given the different stages of economic development amongst members, the blueprint for AEC will not lead to a rapid or high degree of integration. In the meantime, AEC's importance is being undermined by two important trends. Member economies, particularly the more economically advanced, continue to seek bilateral trade agreements with outside partners, many of which are deemed to be of higher quality. On top of that, many members have also joined some bigger multilateral economic agreements – the Trans-Pacific Partnership, for instance – which are of greater impact. Therefore, the importance of AEC in creating a single market continues to be diminished.

Secondly, despite the progress made on economic integration in terms of trade agreements, and despite the growth of intra-ASEAN trade, such trade as a proportion of the region's total trade remains small, especially when compared to those of other economic groupings, notably the European Union (EU). Of equal concern is the fact that in many member countries the take-up rate of the benefits from AFTA and other ASEAN agreements

remains low. This suggests that not enough effort has been made to encourage and facilitate intra-ASEAN engagements or that economic actors continue to look elsewhere for opportunities.

Thirdly, some pillars of AEC will require considerable changes in domestic laws that will be difficult to achieve unless strong political will is present at the national level. Some goals, such as equity, require much more than domestic policy and cross-border assistance to be attained.

Finally, there can be no escaping the fact that member countries will continue to have to compete in the economic realm.

Establishing a single community in the true sense of the word and attaining its vision, therefore, would require all of us to look beyond economic cooperation as the main driving force. At the same time, even AEC itself will find progress tough to achieve if the peoples of ASEAN are not brought closer socially and culturally. Issues such as foreign labour and common standards, to name but two, cannot be successfully tackled as part of a single market until greater social integration allows policymakers in member countries to place them high on their respective domestic political agendas.

## **The Role of the Socio-cultural Pillar**

ASEAN therefore needs to work on social integration if it hopes to strengthen the organisation. The achievement of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASSC), one of the three pillars of the Community, should be a key driving force for doing so. ASSC stipulates that its key elements are human development, welfare, rights and justice, environmental sustainability, narrowing the development gap, and building an ASEAN identity. The AEC Blueprint 2025 continues these themes with a vision encompassing participation and governance, inclusiveness, sustainability, resilience, and identity building. All these elements are clearly important goals for the Community to enhance its credibility and enable it to play a more global role. A review of their implementation would confirm that there has been steady and measurable progress on all fronts. Yet at least two aspects need to be addressed if the ASSC is to play a key role in strengthening ASEAN's future.

The first is that although much of the progress has surely been due to policies and progress at the domestic level of member countries, many regional problems remain unsolved. Two examples illustrate this. The annual haze issue has yet to lead to a concrete regional process dealing with the problem, let alone finding a solution to it. A true community would engage all member governments and multinational companies (many of them of ASEAN origin) to take responsibility and be held accountable for what is clearly a regional problem. Or take the issue of rights and justice. Despite the establishment of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, its mandate remains limited and ordinary people have not seen its role whenever human rights in their respective countries are at stake, even in high-profile cases. The case of the Rohingyans, which caught the attention of the international community, as a regional problem did not produce an effective regional response from ASEAN. All this means that ASEAN is not seen to be helping countries attain the goals specified in the ASSC vision.

The second is that while a broad consensus supports the various goals set out in the vision, including the detailed initiatives and projects in the blueprint, ASSC lacks a clear underpinning principle that supports them. In other words, the blueprint itself has not set out in holistic term what kind of a community ASEAN wants to be. In short, it has not spelled out what the ASEAN identity is, or should be. This is the most important issue to which we must turn.

A true community must be a community of people, a concept that should be at the heart of the ASEAN Community. ASEAN must strive to bring its member countries together and create a sense of shared destiny of peace and prosperity for all ASEAN peoples based on common ASEAN values with an ASEAN identity. Otherwise, ASEAN will continue to be seen as a loose grouping struggling to find its voice on the global stage. Creating such an identity is possible despite the diversity in the region. But it must be done by looking back and by looking forward. For instance, raising awareness through education, particularly of the region's history, especially the affinities and close cultural ties amongst members, will contribute to building trust and a common sense of belonging. At the same time, we also need to look ahead and ask ourselves what kind of a community we would like to be. One natural starting point is revisiting the 'ASEAN Way'. But before we turn to that crucial issue, let us digress a bit to see what we might learn from the experience of the EU.

## The EU, Grexit, Brexit, and Beyond: The Lessons

The progress and success of regional integration are often measured against the benchmark set by the EU, considered as the most successful and advanced integration arrangements, at least until very recently. With origins like ASEAN and motivated by the desire to avoid another war on the continent, European countries began their cooperation on coal and steel and subsequently established a free trade area, an economic community, a common currency, and an economic union. Membership was expanded to include countries that would lead to greater diversity. The organisation itself evolved into a system that would include a parliament, a commission on human rights, a central bank, and a large administrative unit (clearly much more advanced than ASEAN's comparable counterparts in the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, the ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office, and the small ASEAN Secretariat). A tighter, even a full, political union is often seen as the logical next step for the EU, whereas ASEAN's institutions are better described as being intergovernmental.

There is no doubt that the EU has created a Europe with greater economic and political power and a bigger role on the global stage. In the context of our analysis of ASEAN integration, it is interesting to see the relative roles played by the economic dimension vis-à-vis the social one.

While much focus and attention are on the economic aspects, it becomes immediately clear that even economic integration needs social and political support. Once economic cooperation moves beyond the removal of tariffs, closer integration would require a strong political and social integration agenda to enable progress. For instance, a common currency requires the harmonisation of fiscal and monetary policies which, in turn, raises questions of economic and political sovereignty. With a single market requiring common standards and regulations, freedom of movement of labour and people becomes an important social challenge for all member countries. Even with all members having a well-established system of democracy and participatory politics, a system of elected representation at the EU level becomes necessary.

With the increasing pressures from the mounting requirements, real strain began to show on EU's member countries when the debt crisis struck a number of them, especially Greece, leading to speculations of 'Grexit'. The very severe austerity measures demanded of Greece and other debtor countries, on the one hand, and the financial burden on taxpayers in creditor countries in terms of bailout packages, on the other, were seen as a threat to the Union. Yet despite tension and some political and social turmoil, Grexit has not happened. Had a similar situation occurred in ASEAN, it would be hard to imagine governments and people of member countries being willing to endure such a painful adjustment process to remain part of ASEAN.

What kept the EU together was not so much the desire for economic integration or competitiveness per se. Rather, Europeans have come to accept that they have established a union with agreed common values offering the best guarantee of peace and giving them a strong voice on the global stage. These include democracy, rights, justice, and environmental protection that have become part of the European identity. It is important to note that such an identity could not have been created in a vacuum as this was clearly deeply rooted in European tradition. Also, the Union would push the envelope to make them more progressive over time.

The opposite case of 'Brexit' can also be seen in this light. Even during the days of speculations about Grexit, this writer had always suggested that Britain was the more likely to withdraw from the Union. This is because Britain and the British people had always felt different from the rest of Europe in terms of philosophy, culture, legal traditions, to name but a few. Hence, it had always been a reluctant member of the EU, refusing to join the eurozone and the Schengen Area (an area comprising 26 European states that have officially abolished passport and all other types of border control at their mutual borders). It is, therefore, not surprising that the older generations voted 'Leave' the most. It is also worth noting that the sentiments mentioned, exacerbated by the migration problem, dominated economic factors in the referendum. Despite the threats and part realisation of massive capital flight, a falling stock market, and a weakening currency on a huge scale, the majority who voted felt that the price and/or risk of all these was worth paying to 'regain control' of their own destiny.

While outsiders may question the wisdom of the judgment of the Brexit supporters, it would also be hard to say they did not have a point. Even the

British supporters of the EU owned up to the fact that the Brussels bureaucracy had become bloated, and EU processes and regulations were seen as cumbersome. The general complaint was the lack of enough accountability. People did not feel that the EU parliamentarians can truly represent their voice. Even with the benefits provided by the EU, the missing sense of ownership and belonging meant the people could not identify themselves with the Union.

The lessons are therefore clear. If ASEAN were to aspire to closer integration, the development of a widely accepted ASEAN identity (part of the ASSC vision), values, and principles is the most critically important factor. Of equal importance is that the process by which such an identity is developed needs to engage the peoples, not just political leaders and bureaucrats of member countries. Moreover, while such an identity needs to be progressive and forward-looking to provide the Community with aspirations, it cannot be seen to be out of line with the realities of the members' past and present. These are huge challenges faced by ASEAN, to which we now turn.

## **Revisiting the ASEAN Way I: The ASSC Building Process**

For many decades, the debate over ASEAN's success or non-success has revolved around the 'ASEAN Way' idea. Without an agreed definition and with the term carrying both positive and negative connotations, it at least demonstrates what appears to be a unique way in which the business of ASEAN has been conducted. For this reason, revisiting this process should provide us with some foundations on which to build the ASEAN identity central to the vision of ASSC, which, we have argued, must drive ASEAN's future.

On the positive side, the ASEAN Way claims to be a way of addressing the challenges of the region while conforming to its cultural roots. The general sense is that there is that emphasis on cooperation, consensus building, informality, and the avoidance of causing someone's loss of face. Carried to extremes, this interpretation can also mean non-interference in members' domestic affairs.



These traits have allowed ASEAN to achieve some of its objectives, contributing, for instance, to ASEAN's ability to play a role, often a central or pivotal one, in managing conflict even outside the region. The ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, amongst others, have been able to play their roles partly because the ASEAN Way makes it easier for participants, including those outside the region, to build trust in each other.

Myanmar's case is illustrative of this. Had ASEAN followed the Western way and decided to alienate Myanmar, it would be hard to imagine the country achieving its tremendous progress today. The Western powers had probably mistakenly thought that ASEAN did not take the issue seriously. In reality, ASEAN always took up the issue at its meetings, encouraging Myanmar to change from within through constructive engagement and by letting it know the concerns of the outside world. No condemnation, public statements, sanctions, etc. were used. That this approach can be productive could be seen clearly when cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar. With the rest of the world unable to get into the country to provide assistance, ASEAN was able to serve as a bridge and was only able to do so because the ASEAN Way had built up trust and respect. ASEAN should learn from this experience to guide its way through current and future challenges such as the conflict in the South China Sea.

On the other hand, critics point to the fact that the ASEAN Way has led ASEAN to become too slow and unambitious on many issues. They say that the grouping's informality, flexibility, and the requirement of consensus are not suited to all issues. Certainly, a case can be made of how member governments exploit the ASEAN Way to sidestep important issues or how the lack of political will hinders regional progress.

With this analysis in mind, we need to see how we can modify the ASEAN Way to drive ASCC and the future of ASEAN forward. Clearly, the goal is to make ASEAN meaningful to people's lives for them to truly care about ASEAN. This can be done by ensuring engagement from the people at large and using regional initiatives to realise the vision of the Community. Decisions and implementation of the various projects must no longer be exclusively in the hands of government leaders and bureaucrats, both at the national and regional levels. A concerted effort must be made to create a new process of running ASEAN.

Compared with the EU, there is clearly a democratic deficit in ASEAN at all levels and this makes this endeavour all the more important and urgent.

With its goals on rights, justice, and engagement, ASSC must, at the national level, do more to encourage the progress of democratisation and public participation in the whole region. While it would be unrealistic to expect quick progress on this front, a much more proactive role must be played by ASEAN to gain the ASEAN people's confidence and trust it as a mechanism that could address their concerns.

Within itself, ASEAN must improve the level of participation of stakeholders in its work. An attempt in the past to have representatives from parliamentarians, youth, and civil society meet with leaders at the ASEAN summits indicates how ASEAN might move in this direction. Yet, even that is far from sufficient. Much more can and needs to be done to build partnerships and networks with institutions such as the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, various business councils, and non-governmental organisations.

It is also time to think about the possibility of a body of elected representatives from member countries driving much of the work of the organisation. Decision-making in ASEAN might also need to veer away from strict consensus (which effectively grants every country veto power). Informality can be preserved without allowing it to lead to inaction. Of course, given the diverse current political systems in member countries, all this would have to be done in a gradual, pragmatic, and possibly informal way. Whatever the means, it must be emphasised that all this is necessary to make the word 'community' in ASSC and the ASEAN Community become concrete and to create a sense of belonging so that ASEAN becomes an integral part of people's lives.

In short, the Community building process must engage the people with trust and confidence earned by ASEAN using a modified 'ASEAN Way'.

## Revisiting the ASEAN Way II: Characteristics of the ASEAN Community

What about the underpinning principle that should drive the vision of the Community? What characteristics should the ASEAN Community have? We should begin by looking at the relationship between ASEAN and the global community for two reasons. First, ASEAN integration is based on a philosophy of open regionalism. The proof of this can be seen from the ever-increasing partnerships with countries outside the group, the free trade agreements with dialogue partners, and the ongoing negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Secondly, ASEAN aspires to be an important voice in global matters, as evident in its promotion of the idea of ASEAN Centrality in many international forums.

Clearly, for ASEAN to attain its goals, the world must see it not only as a united group of countries but also as an arrangement that stands for something in tune with global trends and values. This is why the goals of ASSC, from the issue of rights to the issue of the environment, very much reflect the global agenda.

Yet, ASEAN's current characteristics do not identify with these goals. Moreover, in many member countries a degree of discomfort can be felt as a result of pressure to conform to values seen as Western. It is time for the region to reconcile this with the redefined ASEAN Way by partly using ASSC. This means the ASEAN Community must define itself by tapping into the region's characteristics drawn from commonality amongst the members and by framing its traditions and goals to conform to today's global challenges. The following provides initial thoughts and suggestions.

For instance, on the issues of rights, justice, and welfare, which are not easily identifiable with the region, ASEAN might want to begin with the idea that it is a caring or a giving community. Even in countries in the region that are not wealthy, the degree of their sharing and giving is highly recognised. From this starting point, much of the work on the issues mentioned above can be framed in this way. The phrase 'We care to share...' is even part of the official ASEAN Anthem (also named the 'ASEAN Way'). A caring community will not allow its people's rights to be violated. A giving community will provide for the needy and the poor. The objectives remain the same but the new frame lends them an ASEAN identity and character.

Moreover, the ASEAN Way might even contribute in achieving these goals. The role of institutions such as the family, traditional thought leaders in local communities, etc. would play a role in contributing to these causes through informal channels, in line with how the region is already perceived.

Or take the issue of the environment and at least two important facts related to it that should draw attention. First, the region is rich in biodiversity and thus has a genuine interest in ensuring that its ecosystem is well protected. Secondly, the region is also most prone to natural disasters, events likely to be exacerbated by global warming, and hence must work together on issues that range from prevention to a concerted response to such events. Again, this would infuse the issue into the identity of the region.

At the same time, the region should seek to be a leader on some global issues. As a region whose economic success was only disrupted by the 1997 financial crisis, ASEAN should take the lead to demand global financial and economic reforms, seeing that the West in particular has not made much progress in this area. It might even go further by creating alternative development models. His Majesty the King of Thailand's 'sufficiency economy' springs to mind. Predominantly Muslim member countries can also contribute much to the issue of risk sharing and management by applying the principle of Islamic financing.

In the area of security, the region can lead the way in building a coalition of moderates to fight religious extremism and terrorism. Even the region's diversity can be turned into opportunities to create an identity. Interfaith dialogue in a region with diverse religious traditions could show the world the way to peaceful coexistence amongst people with differing beliefs.

It is important to reemphasise that in enhancing ASEAN's reputation, the more ASEAN mechanisms are used to drive these values, the better. So, if, for instance, ASEAN sets a minimum standard of living for its people so that a caring community leaves no one behind or marginalised, it must have a mechanism to ensure members would achieve the goals that have been set.

Likewise, issues that require a regional response such as migration or the haze problem must get one through an ASEAN mechanism.

Only by operating in this new ASEAN Way will ASEAN's future matter not just to ASEAN people but also to the world.

## Leadership and the Road Ahead

So far, we have seen how the goals of ASSC are of critical importance to the future strength of ASEAN. In particular, the most important aspects of ASSC are the goals of participation or engagement and the creation of an ASEAN identity. This paper has suggested an approach that could be applied in the future. It means moving away from a vast number of projects to the primary aim of conceptualising the agenda to give a big picture of what the Community is about and what it deserves or aspires to be.

More specifically, ASEAN community-building and the goals of ASSC must encompass:

- the recognition that ASEAN as a community needs to move on to the next level, beyond narrowly defined goals and individual projects in order to find its identity and to gain an effective voice on the global stage;
- the acceptance that the issue of governance, both at the national and regional levels, is essential to the evolution of the Community;
- the increased engagement of all stakeholders and the people at large as the only way to make the Community meaningful to the people and to make people care about the direction and progress of ASEAN; and
- the modification and redefinition of the ASEAN Way both as a process and as a reflection of ASEAN identity to guide the next stages of ASEAN integration.

This leaves one last issue. How can ASEAN reorient the work of community building to this approach? While different stakeholders must all contribute to this process, the answer to this is the all-important political leadership by ASEAN Leaders. This does not mean we are advocating a pure top-down process and many of the suggestions here will be well served by bottom-up initiatives.

Yet, if we reflect on the past, had there been no top-down political leadership, ASEAN would not be where and what it is today. Indeed, it might not even exist at all. It took visionary leadership from our predecessors who recognised security problems and economic challenges that enabled ASEAN to evolve and respond to the needs of the day. We are facing new and perhaps more complex challenges now. If we believe that to overcome

the challenges of today we must move as a strong unified community with a clear purpose, then political leaders must provide the leadership. While technocrats and think tanks (ERIA included) can still make significant contributions, the hard part of the work is not of a technical nature. Political leaders, not bureaucrats, must take on the responsibilities to move things forward.

When we see the face of the EU reflecting the values it wants to project, we see political leaders. We might sometimes see the German chancellor or the French president or the political leaders in the European Commission or European Parliament. We do not see that face coming from the European bureaucracy. Indeed, even the most pro-EU people admit that the details, the bureaucracy, the regulations often bring out negative reactions against the EU.

ASEAN Leaders must therefore rise to the challenge. They must take the initiative, set out this vision, and give guidance. From there, we, the peoples of ASEAN, will create our identity and values that will steer ASEAN into the future. If there is to be a bottom-up support, it would be from a network of various stakeholders in all parts of our society who could pressure or encourage our respective governments and leaders to take up this important task. Success is more likely if leaders prioritise ASEAN matters in their domestic political agenda.

ASEAN has made considerable progress and achievements in its 5 decades of existence. But in this age of rapid global change, it cannot afford to be complacent. To remain relevant, to forge ahead and to be a true global player with a significant voice, and, indeed, to be a true community, ASEAN needs a big push now. And if the right approach is taken, ASSC can play a critical role.