



## The Golden ASEAN



**U Thein Sein**

ASEAN, initially established with five founding members on 8 August 1967, will celebrate its 50th anniversary this year. The Foreign Ministers of five countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore – signed the ASEAN Declaration, also known as the Bangkok Declaration, and announced to the world that ASEAN was successfully established on that auspicious day.

Over the years, other countries in the region joined ASEAN: Brunei Darussalam on 7 January 1984, Viet Nam on 28 July 1995, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia on 30 April 1999, making ASEAN a group that includes all 10 Southeast Asian countries. Most of the member countries of ASEAN were developing and newly independent countries. Countries around the world had witnessed the power struggles, political rivalries, and aggressive economic competition amongst the superpowers in the aftermath of the two World Wars of the 20th century.

The Southeast Asian region was no exception – the Cold War era saw the Korean War and the Viet Nam War, which not only caused tremendous loss of lives and livelihoods of the Korean people and the Vietnamese people but also affected the region as a whole.

The peace and stability of the region had been affected by the conflicts of the Cold War, while each and every developing nation of the region was struggling with their nation-building efforts concentrating on peace and development. Regional peace and stability became a prerequisite for the countries in the region in their endeavour to achieve political stability and economic development. Realising the fact that peace, stability, and sustainable development of the region could only be achieved through their collective efforts and solidarity rather than striving to realise their own goals individually, all the 10 nations of the region made a firm decision to be united as ASEAN.

After establishing ASEAN with the Bangkok Declaration, the member countries moved forward with the signing of the legally binding Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 1976 and the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) in 1995.

The Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the establishment of the ASEAN Charter was signed at the 11th ASEAN Summit in 2005 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This decision had been ASEAN's initial step in building a community with 'One Vision, One Identity, One Community'. Accordingly, the ASEAN Charter was signed at the 13th ASEAN Summit in Singapore on 20 November 2007. As Prime Minister of Myanmar at that important moment, it was a great honour for me to be one of the signatories. The Charter was ratified by all member states and came into force on 15 December 2008. ASEAN had successfully established a firm foundation in achieving the ASEAN Community by providing it with a legal status and an institutional framework. Thus, the ASEAN Charter has become a legally binding agreement amongst the 10 ASEAN Member States.

ASEAN turned into a stronger, more inclusive, and rules-based organisation with the conclusion of these important treaties, particularly through enforcement of the ASEAN Charter in 2008 and the membership of all Southeast Asian countries. ASEAN became more vibrant and active by adopting clear objectives and concrete plans and by implementing these accordingly on a yearly basis.

Over the years, ASEAN has adhered to the practice of solving issues and problems in a peaceful manner, by encouraging all the stakeholders to come to the negotiating table in a friendly atmosphere to discuss issues frankly and candidly, thus creating a unique tradition of peaceful settlement of disputes in the 'ASEAN Way'. ASEAN has moved forward to consolidate the group more. The Cebu Declaration on the Acceleration of the Establishment of an ASEAN Community by 2015 was signed at the 12th ASEAN Summit in the Philippines in 2007, facilitating member countries' efforts towards establishing the three communities – the Political–Security Community, the Economic Community, and the Socio-Cultural Community.

Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, and Viet Nam had to make concerted efforts to narrow the development gap between themselves and the other six members.

Myanmar appreciates and acknowledges the strong and determined political and economic support and encouragement given by its fellow ASEAN members while it was under tremendous economic sanctions and political pressure imposed by the Western countries during that time.

As it was the post–Cold War era, many countries around the world were also undergoing democratic transitions after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Myanmar became a member of ASEAN in 1997 as it was striving for peace and stability, economic development, and national reconciliation, which were the fundamental requirements for its political transition.

Myanmar is strategically located between the two most populous nations of the world – China to its east and India to its west – and situated between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Strategically, Myanmar can play a bridging role between ASEAN and the South Asia region as well as with the East Asia region.

Myanmar has been an active and responsible member of ASEAN during its 20 years of membership. Myanmar strictly adheres to the commitments and principles of ASEAN; respects independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and the national identity of all member states; and exercises peaceful settlement of disputes and non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN Member States. Myanmar values and abides by the decision-making process of ASEAN based on consensus. The uniqueness

of ASEAN is the ASEAN way of finding solutions in a peaceful manner on any issue – be it bilateral, regional, or with countries outside the region. ASEAN tradition, built upon its shared values and norms, allows its decision-makers to consult both formally and informally until they reach consensus. The ASEAN way of decision-making enables ASEAN to make collective decisions or take positions to prevent outside interference or pressures.

ASEAN had supported the seven-step road map of Myanmar's political transition, which started in 2003. As Prime Minister of Myanmar, I attended the ASEAN summits from 2007 to 2010 and I had the opportunity to update the Leaders of our fellow ASEAN Member States on developments in, and the progress of, Myanmar. Myanmar values the support and encouragement of the ASEAN Member States.

In 2008, Myanmar was hit by one of the worst natural disasters to have occurred in the ASEAN region. Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar's delta region and coastal areas on 2 and 3 May; more than 100,000 people lost their lives. It also destroyed the agriculture and livestock breeding sectors and caused great damage to the economy of the entire delta area. Infrastructure, such as road connections and river-crossing bridges, were also severely damaged. Even though the Government of Myanmar had made great efforts in their search, rescue, and recovery in the affected areas, the cyclone's impact was too severe. This led Myanmar to seek assistance from ASEAN and the international community.

A Foreign Ministers' meeting on post-Cyclone Nargis was convened on 19 May 2008 in Singapore. During the meeting, an ASEAN task force, led by Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan and with the cooperation of the United Nations, was established to assist Myanmar. In a family spirit, ASEAN mobilised itself and came to the assistance of Myanmar. The Pledging Conference for Myanmar was convened on 25 May 2008 in one of the cities affected by the cyclone – Yangon. I, as the Prime Minister of Myanmar, together with Secretary-General of ASEAN Surin Pitsuwan and United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon led the conference, and the international community pledged to assist Myanmar in its rescue, recovery, and rehabilitation efforts. Representatives from 51 countries, 24 international non-governmental organisations, and 22 domestic non-governmental organisations attended the conference. The conference formed the Tripartite Core Group composed of Myanmar, ASEAN, and the United Nations, and

tasked the group with coordinating the early recovery process for the affected population and areas. The timely cooperation and coordination between the Tripartite Core Group and the international community, and the relentless efforts of Myanmar made the quick recovery and rehabilitation a success and protected the people from a second wave of disaster in the form of outbreaks of waterborne diseases and related health and humanitarian issues. The Tripartite Core Group set an example and became a model for dealing with large-scale natural disasters.

After Myanmar's successful free and fair multiparty democratic elections in 2010, I was elected President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and took office in 2011. The democratic transition of Myanmar has been conducted in a peaceful and orderly way, compared to contemporary countries that also tried to transform their political systems. Myanmar's transition towards democracy has been recognised as a model by the international community. At the same time, Myanmar has been actively participating in ASEAN as a responsible member throughout its years of membership.

As an active member of ASEAN, at the beginning of 2011, Myanmar expressed its readiness to chair ASEAN in 2014. All the ASEAN members endorsed Myanmar's proposal. In fact, 2014 was an important year for ASEAN in terms of its preparation for the ASEAN Community in 2015. While serving as Prime Minister from 2007 to 2010 and as President from 2011 to 2016, I had maintained Myanmar's active participation throughout its chairmanship, particularly in the final architecture of the Political-Security Community, the Economic Community, and the Socio-Cultural Community of ASEAN. At the same time, Myanmar coordinated effectively with other Dialogue Partners, and necessary statements and declarations were released through ASEAN's consensus decision-making process.

The year 2014 was a significant year for Myanmar and ASEAN. The theme of Myanmar's chairmanship 2014 was 'Moving Forward in Unity to a Peaceful and Prosperous Community' to welcome the ASEAN Community. The 24th ASEAN Summit was successfully held on 10 and 11 May 2014 in Nay Pyi Taw; it adopted the Nay Pyi Taw Declaration on Realisation of the ASEAN Community by 2015 – Nay Pyi Taw Declaration (1). The 25th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits were held on 12 and 13 November 2014 and adopted the Nay Pyi Taw Declaration on the ASEAN Community's

Post 2015 Vision – Nay Pyi Taw Declaration (2). The declarations set the framework, schedules, and programmes to move forward in the implementation and realisation of the ASEAN Community. The related summits included the Ninth East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN+3 and ASEAN+1 summits with Dialogue Partners. Important decisions for the future relationships with Dialogue Partners were taken at these summits, which further enhance and strengthen ASEAN’s role in regional and international relations.

During Myanmar’s chairmanship in 2014, important regional issues – such as the natural disaster caused by Typhoon Haiyan, the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, the tragic loss of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 and the terrorist attack on Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17, terrorist activities by extremist groups, the outbreak of Ebola pandemic disease, a military takeover, and the issue of the South China Sea – were discussed in a constructive and cordial manner to reach a peaceful resolution.

Myanmar as the Chair of ASEAN had maintained ASEAN centrality in dealing with these regional and international issues with the full cooperation of ASEAN Member States. The decisive role of ASEAN leadership was also maintained in finding solutions on matters related to the interest of ASEAN and its members, based on the unity of ASEAN. It is of utmost importance for ASEAN to keep ASEAN centrality at the forefront in every aspect. As some powerful actors consider they have interests in our region, the principle of non-interference in the internal or regional affairs of ASEAN should also be strictly adhered to, for the maintenance of peace and stability in the region.

As Myanmar is strategically located as a land bridge between Southeast Asia and South Asia as well as East Asia, it can contribute practically to regional integration and cooperation. The East–West Corridor Project and the North–South Corridor Project are important components of ASEAN connectivity. Myanmar stands ready to fulfil its bridging role in establishing the ASEAN Community and work towards the further development of the region.

ASEAN is becoming a community with the strength of harmony in diversity. ASEAN must play an integral role not only in its regional affairs but also in

international affairs as well as in the United Nations. ASEAN should actively participate and cooperate in the maintenance of international peace and stability, security, and development. ASEAN must be in the driving seat when it comes to dealing with all matters or issues concerning our region.

It is the responsibility of all ASEAN Member States to preserve ASEAN centrality and unity in our endeavours to further strengthen the ASEAN Community. ASEAN has achieved significant progress and development during the 50 years since its establishment. However, ASEAN's successes and achievements did not come about without difficulties and hardships; they were the result of building ASEAN in the ASEAN way, through a combination of goodwill, farsightedness and determination, mutual trust and respect, and patience and understanding. As ASEAN strives for the peaceful development of its people and the ASEAN Community as a whole, member states are bound to maintain the momentum of success ASEAN has achieved for the further progress of the community. Myanmar wishes ASEAN every success on its way to becoming a peaceful and prosperous ASEAN Community.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The illustrious military career of **U Thein Sein** started when he joined the army in 1963, achieved his Bachelor of Arts degree from the Defence Services Academy in 1967, and served as Second Lieutenant to General until 2010.

After he was appointed member of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, he served as a senior ranking member of the SPDC in 2003–2004. He became Prime Minister of Myanmar in October 2008 and served until March 2011. In 2010, he retired from the army and became Chairman of the Union Solidarity and Development Party. In the same year, he was elected to the House of Representatives to represent Pyithu Hluttaw.

He took his oath as President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar on 30 March 2011, after his election by the Presidential Electoral College of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Assembly). He served in this capacity for the next 5 years.

He is currently the Central Patron, Central Leading Committee, the Union Solidarity and Development Party.

He is married to Daw Khin Win and has three daughters.