



ASEAN: 50 Years After and Into the Future



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At the outset, I wish to sincerely thank the Government of the Philippines, the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, and the ASEAN at 50 Team for inviting me to share my views and perspectives on ASEAN on the occasion of its 50th anniversary.

Since the inception of ASEAN 50 years ago and especially following the accession of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) to ASEAN on 23 July 1997, I have observed how ASEAN has evolved. The following are some of my thoughts and perspectives on ASEAN.

Southeast Asia is a unique region characterised by diversities not only in cultures, religions, and languages but also in political systems and levels of economic development, among others. Looking back at the efforts

of countries in various parts of the world to form regional cooperative frameworks or regional organisations, with some succeeding and others failing, we can say that ASEAN is a uniquely successful one.

Over the past 5 decades, ASEAN has gone through many tests and challenges and has adjusted itself to the changing regional and international landscapes. By taking into account its diversities, it has gradually evolved into the ASEAN Community with a firm and strong foundation.

ASEAN has not only expanded its membership to cover 10 nations in Southeast Asia but has also deepened and broadened its intra-ASEAN cooperation to gradually include political–security, socio–cultural, and economic fields of cooperation. ASEAN has strengthened its external relations not only through strengthened partnerships with its dialogue partners that now include all major countries, but also through various appropriate forms and modalities of engagement with other external parties. ASEAN has initiated the ASEAN+1, the ASEAN Plus Three, the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the East Asia Summit, which serve as key platforms for ASEAN’s engagement with its dialogue partners and external parties to discuss, among others, regional and international issues of common interest and concern that require collective responsibility. In the meantime, those same platforms also provide venues for these dialogue partners and external parties, including the major powers, to engage one another on issues of common interest and concern. All these have contributed to the enhancement of mutual understanding and strategic trust, and the creation of an environment conducive to the maintenance and promotion of peace, stability, and development cooperation in the region and the world. Most importantly, ASEAN’s centrality has been recognised in the evolving regional architecture that is being built upon the above-mentioned ASEAN-initiated mechanisms.

I am confident in saying that one of the most remarkable achievements of ASEAN is the peace, security, and stability in the region, which have served as a favourable condition under which the ASEAN Member States can develop their respective socio–economic status, deepen intra-ASEAN cooperation, and strengthen ASEAN’s external relations. As a result, the ASEAN Community was established on 31 December 2015.

Many people ask how ASEAN, with its diverse member states, has become a successful inter-governmental regional organisation. Different people may have different views, but my own is that ASEAN's achievements over the past 5 decades have been possible due to many factors. One of them is the 'ASEAN Way', a result of, among others, the due consideration given to the particularity and reality in the region as characterised by diversities among and between the ASEAN Member States, mutual understanding, and the adherence to the ASEAN fundamental principles enshrined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Charter, and other ASEAN instruments.

The Lao PDR is proud to be part of the ASEAN family as its membership in ASEAN since 1997 has been a milestone in the country's foreign policy. The Lao PDR has been proactive in pursuing the work of ASEAN through its participation in all areas of cooperation under the three ASEAN Community pillars, including ASEAN's external relations, and the fulfilment of its obligations. The Lao PDR had the honour to chair ASEAN twice in 2004–2005 and in 2016. Our third ASEAN chairmanship is expected within the decade.

The Lao PDR's ASEAN chairmanship in 2016 under the theme 'Turning Vision into Reality for a Dynamic ASEAN Community' concluded successfully, with many important outcome documents produced. These include the Initiative for ASEAN Integration Work Plan III and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 which are an integral part of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. Those outcome documents serve as frameworks for cooperation within ASEAN in further strengthening the ASEAN Community, and ASEAN's partnerships with its dialogue partners and external parties for the years to come. The success of the Lao PDR's ASEAN chairmanship in 2016 was made possible by the valuable assistance, kind support, and close cooperation of the ASEAN Member States, dialogue partners, external parties, friendly countries, and regional and international organisations.

The regional and international landscapes continue to evolve. Recent developments in various regions of the world are characterised by rapid and unexpected changes and uncertainty associated with risks and complexity. Against this backdrop, ASEAN, in moving forward as an inter-governmental regional organisation, should continue to adhere to its principles and the

ASEAN Way and further deepen regional economic integration within it and with the wider region. ASEAN should continue the pursuit of its outward-looking policy by further strengthening the ASEAN-led mechanisms and consolidating the momentum gained so far in the relations with all its dialogue partners. It is also imperative for ASEAN to continue to engage other external parties in appropriate and practical forms, and modalities of cooperation. ASEAN also needs to uphold its centrality and unity in its external relations and in the evolving regional architecture, among others. Most importantly, ASEAN, as a community and master of its own destiny, should continue to adhere to the fundamental principles enshrined in the ASEAN Charter, and move forward at a pace comfortable to all.

I am confident that under the Philippines' ASEAN chairmanship in 2017, with the theme 'Partnering for Change, Engaging the World', we can meaningfully commemorate the golden jubilee of ASEAN and further strengthen the ASEAN Community through the effective implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and its integral documents, namely the three community blueprints, the Initiative for ASEAN Integration Work Plan III, and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025, coupled with the priorities introduced under the Philippines' ASEAN chairmanship in 2017, among others.

The Lao PDR is ready to fully support and closely work with the Philippines and other ASEAN Member States as well as ASEAN dialogue partners and other external parties to ensure the success of the Philippines' ASEAN chairmanship in 2017 and greater achievements of the ASEAN Community in the years to come.

I wish all a happy 50th anniversary of ASEAN. We, the ASEAN family, will continue to move forward together as one sharing and caring community.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thongloun Sisoulith is the Prime Minister of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

From 2001 to 2006, he held positions as Deputy Prime Minister, President of the Committee for Planning and Investment, President of the Investment Management Committee, President of the Lao National Committee for Energy, and member of the Lao National Assembly.

His professional career includes positions as Minister of Labour and Social Welfare in 1993–1996, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1987–1992, Director of Public Research Department of the Prime Minister's Office in 1985–1986, Secretary to the Minister of Education in 1979–1981, Professor at Vientiane University in 1978–1979, Senior Officer at the Office of the Representative of the Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao National Patriotic Front) in 1969–1973, and Senior Officer of the Educational Department of the Neo Lao Hak Sat in 1967–1969.

He holds a PhD in history of international relations from the Academy of Social Sciences in Moscow, a Masters in linguistics and literature from the Gerzen Pedagogy Institute in Saint Petersburg, and a diploma from the Pedagogy College of Neo Lao Hak Sat in Houaphanh Province, Lao PDR.