



## My ASEAN Story



**Delia D. Albert**

‘ASEAN will survive because it is ours.’ This was how the Philippines’ Secretary of Foreign Affairs Narciso R. Ramos, speaking to his immediate staff in the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), expressed his optimism on the future of ASEAN after signing the Bangkok Declaration that founded ASEAN in August 1967.

My own ASEAN story began in February 1967 when I joined the DFA as a foreign service staff officer. My first assignment was to serve as the social and appointments secretary to Secretary Ramos, one of the five ‘founding fathers’ of ASEAN. I was told that I was chosen to work in his office because of my ability to convey a diplomatic ‘No’ in different languages.

As such, I acted as ‘cordon sanitaire’, screening his callers and ensuring a productive, well-spent day for a much-sought-after official of the government. It was a privileged position as it gave me access to foreign policy issues of national and international relevance as well as into the thinking of a highly experienced diplomat as Secretary Ramos.

Moreover, it gave me a unique opportunity to learn how the foreign service of the Philippines worked and, more importantly, how foreign policy was crafted and implemented to serve the country’s interests. It was a unique experience which, in hindsight, prepared me to face and surmount the many challenges in the course of my 4 decades of diplomatic work, including my own term as Secretary of Foreign Affairs.

Soon after I joined the DFA, I found myself in the midst of active discussions among senior officials from relevant government entities, including the Office of the President, on the growing challenges to the peace and stability of the Southeast Asian region and the urgent need to address them jointly and collectively with other countries. From them I also learned that attempts were made earlier to address bilateral issues that arose between neighbours in the region following the end of colonial rule, the devastation wrought by World War II, and the complex and daunting challenges that individual countries faced after independence.

In efforts to address these bilateral issues, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines created the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) in 1961. In 1963, this was followed by MAPHILINDO (Malaysia–Philippines–Indonesia), which added Indonesia to the dialogue between Malaysia and the Philippines. However, the objectives of both groups were not responsive enough to the bigger and more threatening challenges of the time. The region was caught in the throes of the ideological division created by the ‘Cold War’ being played out at the doorstep of Thailand in the Indochinese peninsula as well as the impact of the revolution raging in neighbouring China. These were among the political and security imperatives that the leaders of the region agreed to address. Danger appeared to be too close for comfort and the DFA was in the forefront and a major player in the search for solutions.

Other groups initiated by countries outside the region, like the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Asian and Pacific Council (ASPAC), also met to address brewing challenges to the security

of the region. However, the growing desire not to be influenced nor held hostage by either of the competing ideologies was gaining ground in the region, particularly in the wake of the historic Bandung Conference of nonaligned nations that Indonesia hosted in 1955.

Meanwhile, the five Southeast Asian Foreign Ministers – Adam Malik of Indonesia, Tun Abdul Razak of Malaysia, Rajaratnam of Singapore, Thanat Khoman of Thailand, and Narciso Ramos of the Philippines – continued to meet bilaterally even after the end of ASA and Maphilindo. I monitored closely and with great interest their numerous meetings as I had to ensure that the Secretary met all scheduled appointments. These meetings culminated in the momentous gathering in Bangkok, Thailand where they signed the agreement to form the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN. They highlighted the need to work together, build stronger political cooperation, and draw the peoples of the region closer to each other through economic and other forms of cooperation. There was comfort to be gained in numbers. While the Bangkok Declaration spoke of economic cooperation, what was foremost in their minds was collective action to face the escalating challenges to the peace and stability of the region.

Secretary Ramos returned from Bangkok fully convinced that the effort to widen and tighten the circle of friendly nations surrounding the Philippines was the best strategic option for the country. His statements following the signing of the declaration signalled his deep belief that ASEAN would be the core of Philippine foreign policy, a vision that has held true to this day and which has guided me consistently in my own diplomatic career. However, he also recognised the importance of addressing existing territorial boundary issues if ASEAN were to move forward. For the Philippines and Malaysia, this meant their overlapping claims over the territory of Sabah. The Indonesians had their *konfrontasi* with Singapore while the southern border between Thailand and Malaysia posed some problems.

In an effort to find a solution that would be acceptable to the Philippines and Malaysia, Secretary and Mme Ramos invited Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak (who was concurrently Foreign Minister), his wife, and immediate diplomatic staff to visit Baguio City, which happens to be my hometown. Baguio was a congenial setting; it reminded the guests of the Cameron Highlands in Malaysia because of its cool and invigorating climate. The friendship that grew between the two ministers extended to

their spouses and staff, making discussions over the highly controversial subject of Sabah constructive and less confrontational. Witnessing and participating in the friendly dialogue between Secretary Ramos and Deputy Prime Minister Razak was indeed a unique opportunity and privilege for me. It left me with a tremendous impression that personal relationships play an important role in international relations. It was a lesson I tried to practise throughout my diplomatic career.

It was also my first exposure to the ‘golf diplomacy’ in ASEAN, which I later realised was a hallowed practice in most ASEAN meetings, especially among the men. In time, I had to take up the game myself in order not to miss the important discussions that took place on the golf course. In a sense, the game provided the space for colleagues to get to know and feel comfortable with each other and made discussions more constructive at formal meetings. Golf sessions were enjoyed mainly by the senior officials during the so-called ‘documentation day’ when the working-level staff were hammering out documents to record the minutes of the meetings.

Soon after the retirement of Secretary Ramos, I was posted at the Philippine Mission to the United Nations (UN) in Geneva where I first experienced being in the working group of the ASEAN Missions to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), where ASEAN ambassadors played leading roles in the Asian Group in the Group of 77 developing countries.

The growing attention of the UN to ASEAN became evident in a 1972 UN report recommending to intensify intra-ASEAN economic cooperation. Based on the UN study, the Philippines and Singapore suggested to ASEAN Leaders at their 1976 Summit in Bali the creation of an ASEAN common market. However, due to the big differences in the levels of economic development among the ASEAN members, the idea failed to prosper. It was only in 1992 that ASEAN Leaders finally agreed to create the ASEAN Free Trade Area. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, it was decided that a highly respected leader make the proposal to avoid strong objections. It was a timely decision reached in the proverbial ‘ASEAN Way’.

In 1974, the Philippines made a strategic decision to open diplomatic relations with countries ‘behind the Iron Curtain’ in Eastern Europe. I was sent to pave the way for the move. It was heart-warming for me to find

the well-established Indonesian embassies in Romania, Hungary, and the German Democratic Republic, who, treating us like long-lost relatives, were most helpful and welcoming. The shared spirit of ASEAN helped us to get over the many challenges we faced in establishing diplomatic posts in centrally planned economies, a system which was completely foreign to us at that time. It was a good example of regional cooperation transported beyond the geographic limits of ASEAN.

On my return from my European posts, I was appointed Assistant Secretary for ASEAN Affairs in the DFA (1992–1995), an office that served as the ASEAN National Secretariat of the Philippines. As provided for in the ASEAN Declaration, the national secretariat in each member country was led by a director general, generally referred to as DG, and charged ‘to carry out the work of the Association on behalf of that country and to service the Annual or Special Meetings of Foreign Ministers, the Standing Committee and such other committees as may hereafter be established’.

I value those 4 years as the most professionally educational period in my diplomatic career. I learned not only to think of narrow national interests but also to consider what was right and good for the region. To do this, I closely studied the history of each member country in an effort to understand and ultimately appreciate the country’s culture and why its people think and behave the way they do. It was inspiring that we in the region shared many interests, seriousness of purpose, and a keen desire to contribute as much as we could in building ASEAN. I nurtured close ties with the DG of Thailand, Laxanachantorn Laochapan. By strongly and consistently supporting each other, we managed to succeed in attaining most of our initiatives, sometimes to the consternation of our male colleagues, as we represented the ‘majority of two’ in our group of six DGs.

This was one of the many negotiating skills I learned in a multilateral setting. One had to think both vertically, about one’s own national position, and horizontally, by considering the views of the others, and to cultivate the support of like-minded persons whose country shared with us similar interests.

I admit there were inevitable differences that surfaced which the DGs had to surmount. This was to be expected. The diversity of interest, historical background, culture, language, and even eating habits surfaced now and then. But a larger interest – the greater good for the greater number – ultimately won the day.

The meetings did not always deal with solemn matters but even these had the value of fostering familiarity and ease among us. We even had serious discussions on changing the logo of ASEAN which then consisted of six rice stalks bound together. There was a thought that with membership extended to 10, the stalks would make the logo look like a fat lady tightening her belt. Fortunately, reason won the day and we retained the original rice stalks.

In time, I experienced something of what Professor Estrella Solidum of the University of the Philippines wrote in an article when she described how each of the original ASEAN members would react to an agenda item during an ASEAN meeting.

Typically, she said, in the spirit of cooperation, everyone would initially agree to the tabled agenda. The Philippines, known to be ‘legalistic’ in its approach to issues, would ask for the ‘legal basis’ of an action. Indonesia would ask for the ‘principle’ behind the action, bearing in mind the *panjasila* principles that are the philosophical basis of the Indonesian state. Malaysia would ask for time to refer the matter to the ‘home government’. Thailand would prefer to refer the issue to ‘committees’, while Singapore would ask, ‘What do we get from it anyway?’

During my term as DG of ASEAN Philippines, I coordinated ASEAN–European Union (EU) and ASEAN–New Zealand relations during the chairmanship of the Standing Committee of the Philippines. The rotating chair in ASEAN wields a certain amount of influence over group decisions. I had, for instance, the opportunity to initiate ASEAN–EU projects for the Philippines, such as the Centre for Biodiversity now located in Los Baños, Laguna.

The growing importance of ASEAN was eventually recognised by China which in 1992 invited us, the ASEAN DGs, to start the dialogue relationship with projects in science and technology. It was my introduction to a China that was making great strides in addressing socio-economic challenges as it systematically and consistently opened itself to the world. Twenty-five years later, I was privileged to participate in one of the many activities to celebrate the anniversary of the ASEAN–China Dialogue partnership.

I also participated in the opening of ASEAN relations with India following rather difficult discussions with other members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

In 2003, to my great surprise, I was appointed Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines after a 36-year career in diplomacy. This made me the first woman career diplomat to become a Foreign Minister in ASEAN and in the rest of Asia. I then joined the Foreign Ministers in the ASEAN Standing Committee, which was the link or ‘neck’ that connected the ASEAN body to the Heads of State.

Having witnessed and experienced the early, albeit crucial, formative years of ASEAN gave me the confidence to take over the leadership of the DFA. I was familiar with most of the ASEAN colleagues not only in the region but with ASEAN’s Dialogue Partners, having met them in hundreds of ASEAN meetings.

In the intervening years, I served as Ambassador to Australia, a strong, active, and dedicated partner of ASEAN, where the Canberra ASEAN Committee connected very well with the host country. Individually, we addressed our bilateral interests; collectively, we effectively promoted our regional interest.

In Germany, where I served in the capitals of Bonn and Berlin, I had the opportunity to work closely with German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, to whom I had the honour of giving the title ‘Father of ASEAN–EU relations’ in recognition of Germany’s initiatives in supporting ASEAN–EU relations at all levels.

As ASEAN celebrates its 50th anniversary, I feel it is time to share with the wider Filipino community the knowledge and experiences of Filipinos who were privileged to serve not only in the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta but also of the hundreds of Filipinos who have participated in ASEAN-related activities. To this end, I have initiated the formation of the ASEAN Society of the Philippines to serve as public space to raise the level of awareness of ASEAN among the population as well as serve as a link to connect the three pillars of the growing ASEAN Community, the building of political–security, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation in our home region.

It is my way of celebrating the much-valued peace dividend that has given the member countries of ASEAN the space to evolve as an Association of Energetic and Ambitious Nations.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Delia Domingo Albert** is the first woman career diplomat to become Secretary (Minister) of Foreign Affairs in Asia. She represented the Philippines in Switzerland, Romania, Hungary, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the Commonwealth of Australia.

As Chair of the United Nations Security Council in 2004, she introduced the agenda ‘The Role of Civil Society in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding’.

She attended the University of the Philippines, the Institute of International Studies in Geneva, the Diplomatic Institute in Salzburg, Boston University Overseas in Bonn, and the J.F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, among others.

The Philippine Women’s University conferred on her an honorary Doctor of Humanities for building a gender-fair society and was awarded ‘Most Distinguished Alumna of the University of the Philippines’ in 2012.

For her exceptional service to the country, she was conferred the Order of Sikatuna rank of Datu and the title of *Bai-A-Rawatun sa Pilimpinas* for assisting Muslim women in their search for peace and development. She received the Knight Commander’s Cross of the Order of Merit with Star (*Bundesverdienstkreuz*) from the Federal Republic of Germany and the single award to celebrate 70 years of Philippines–Australia relations from the Government of Australia.

She is a member of the advisory board of the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy in Berlin, the Asian Institute of Management, the Global Summit of Women, the Business and Professional Women Philippines, and other women’s groups.

Currently she is Senior Adviser to SGV & Co/Ernst & Young Philippines.

She is married to Hans Albert, and is mother to Joy and Arne Jerochewski and grandmother to Oskar.