



Why I Believe in ASEAN



Tommy Koh

Introduction

On 8 August 2017, ASEAN will turn 50. The difficult circumstances prevailing at the time of ASEAN's birth had pundits predicting that it would fall victim to infant mortality. Given the differences existing among its five founding members, sceptics thought that ASEAN would amount to nothing more than a venue for talking shop. Miraculously, ASEAN has survived many challenges to become the world's second most successful regional organisation after the European Union. My good friend, Kishore Mahbubani, thinks that ASEAN is even more successful than the European Union. I set out here the reasons for my belief in ASEAN.

Reason No. 1: From War and Conflict to Peace and Stability

The first reason for my belief in ASEAN is that ASEAN has transformed Southeast Asia from a region of war and conflict to a region of peace and stability. Let me invite you to travel back in time with me to 1967. What was the situation in Southeast Asia in 1967? The situation in the region was very unstable. The Viet Nam War was raging and threatening to engulf Cambodia and Laos. Several countries in the region were fighting against communist insurgencies or regional rebellions. As most of these countries had been ruled by different colonial masters and had been isolated from one another, there was a huge deficit of trust and understanding between them. Some western pundits thought so poorly of the region's prospects that they called these countries the Balkans of Asia.

Fast forward to 2017. What is the situation today? The region is peaceful and stable. Except for the border skirmishes that took place between Cambodia and Thailand, the good news is that no two ASEAN countries have gone to war with each other since 1967. War between two ASEAN countries is yet to be unthinkable, but has become more unlikely with every passing year. The bottom line is that the region is at peace with itself and with the world. There is a deep commitment by all the ASEAN countries to peace and to the peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law.

Reason No. 2: From Poverty to Prosperity

My second reason for believing in ASEAN is that it has helped its members achieve enormous social and economic progress. In 1967, the region's economic prospects were dim. Its countries were uniformly poor and backward. Most of its people were engaged in subsistence farming. Its natural resources were extracted and exported to the West with very little processing and value added. Manufacturing for export to the world was yet to start. In 1967, our economic prospects were not bright.

Fast forward to 2017. Today, all ASEAN countries have made impressive progress, with some enjoying high and middle incomes. Taken together, the ASEAN economy is the seventh-largest economy in the world. We are the

fastest-growing region in the world. If we continue our present trajectory, ASEAN will soon become the fourth-largest economy in the world. ASEAN has embarked on a historic journey to merge our 10 economies into a single market and production platform. We are down to the last mile. With political will, we will complete the journey.

Reason No. 3: Building a New Regional Order

My third reason for believing in ASEAN is the indispensable role ASEAN played and continues to play in building a new regional architecture. The first step was to unite the 10 countries so they could speak with one voice and act with the collective strength of the community. ASEAN has been able to act as the region's convener and facilitator because it is united, independent, and neutral. The moment we become disunited or partisan, we will be disqualified from occupying the driver's seat of regional institutions.

The 1997 Asian financial crisis demonstrated that the fortunes of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia were intertwined. ASEAN took the initiative to convene ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea [henceforth Korea]). ASEAN's initiative prompted these '+3 countries' to meet by themselves and negotiate for a trilateral free trade agreement.

After founding ASEAN+3, ASEAN soon realised that other powerful countries also have a stake in the region. This led ASEAN to convene the East Asia Summit, composed of ASEAN+3, India, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Russia. The East Asia Summit has become a very important political forum.

ASEAN has also used its free trade area policy to promote cooperation and economic integration. ASEAN has concluded free trade agreements or economic cooperation partnership agreements with China, Japan, India, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. ASEAN is also driving the ongoing negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement, involving ASEAN, China, Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and India.

By Way of a Conclusion

A few years ago, the European Union was conferred with the Nobel Peace Prize for its contributions to peace in Europe. I believe that the Nobel Committee should consider conferring on ASEAN the Nobel Peace Prize for its contributions to peace in Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Asia-Pacific.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tommy Koh is currently Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Special Adviser to the Institute of Policy Studies, and Chairman of the Governing Board of the Centre for International Law at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is Chairman of the International Advisory Panel of the Asia Research Institute (NUS) and Chairman of the Advisory Committee of the Master's Degree on Environmental Management (NUS). He is also Co-chairman of the Asian Development Bank's Advisory Committee on Water and Sanitation. He is Rector of Tembusu College at NUS and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the SymAsia Foundation of Credit Suisse.

He was Dean of the Faculty of Law of NUS, Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations (UN) in New York, Ambassador to the United States of America, High Commissioner to Canada, and Ambassador to Mexico. He was President of the Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea and Chairman of the Preparatory Committee for the Main Committee of the UN Conference on Environment and Development. He was founding Chairman of the National Arts Council, founding Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation, and former Chairman of the National Heritage Board. He was also Singapore's Chief Negotiator for the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement. He acted as Singapore's Agent in two legal disputes with Malaysia. He has chaired two dispute panels for the World Trade Organization. He is Co-chairman of the China-Singapore Forum, the Japan-Singapore Symposium, and the India-Singapore Strategic Dialogue.

In 2006, he received the Champion of the Earth Award from the UN Environment Programme and the inaugural President's Award for the Environment from Singapore. He was conferred with honorary doctoral degrees in law by Yale and Monash Universities. Harvard University conferred on him the Great Negotiator Award in 2014.