



# Retrospectives and Perspectives on the Making, Substance, Significance, and Future of ASEAN



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Brunei Darussalam joined ASEAN on 7 January 1984, after resuming its full independence at the beginning of that year. As a relatively small country, it was important to ensure that Brunei was accepted as a fully independent state in the community of nations. Back then, it was all about political and economic survival.

Brunei's foreign policy was, and still is, based on extending a hand of friendship to everyone, and built upon mutual respect, recognition, and non-interference in the internal affairs of each other.

As an observer before joining ASEAN, Brunei concentrated its initial years on learning. During this period, the cooperation and understanding of the original five members of ASEAN were invaluable. Bruneian officials, many of them recruited from other departments, soon learned the ASEAN Way and the intricacies of diplomacy and protocol.

We soon started to contribute to ASEAN and see the benefits gained from our membership. We attended ASEAN dialogue meetings with Japan, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Europe, and the United States of America. These meetings provided our officials exposure and experience in dealing with external partners.

In 1989, Brunei hosted the 22nd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, the first ASEAN annual meeting hosted by the country. It was opened by His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam, and chaired by His Royal Highness Prince Mohamed Bolkiah, the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

In the years that followed, Brunei contributed in its own way to ASEAN's initiatives, including the expansion of dialogues with partners such as China, the Republic of Korea, and India; the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit; and the expansion of ASEAN to the present 10 members.

Since 1984, Brunei has witnessed and participated in many ASEAN developments. One in particular, which touched many of us, was the efforts to resolve the Cambodia issue in the 1980s and 1990s, which galvanised ASEAN as one united and politically adept organisation, and enhanced its status as an organisation in the international arena.

In addressing the Cambodia issue, ASEAN produced many initiatives such as the Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM) and 'Baby' JIM, which involved many of our Leaders, Statesmen, and Officials. Indonesia's Ali Alatas is one such individual, whose leadership during this time cannot be forgotten.

Of the many ASEAN initiatives, the lobby missions on Cambodia in many parts of the world were a brilliant idea as they brought together many officials from ASEAN member countries in lobbying other countries, a task that sometimes put us in difficult and dangerous areas. I recall one such

mission with Singapore's Barry Desker, Malaysia's Dato Amir, and Thailand's Dr Praport, where we travelled to Somalia, Uganda, and Swaziland, in the midst of ongoing civil wars, and were stopped by armed boy soldiers at almost every junction.

Apart from getting votes for resolutions at the United Nations, what these missions had achieved might not have been recognised. The officials on these missions developed bonds of friendship, understanding, and tolerance for each other, and have remained close later in life.

At the United Nations, our Permanent Representatives and Senior Officials were actively lobbying on the Cambodia issue. Through this process evolved a culture of working together as one, and ASEAN's prestige was notably enhanced.

After the Cambodia issue was resolved, some of us wondered what other issues could unite ASEAN.

Aside from political–security cooperation, ASEAN also began moving forward on the economic track. In the 1980s, many ideas and projects were mooted such as the ASEAN Industrial Projects, which resulted in the Aceh urea fertiliser project in Indonesia.

Incrementally, but slowly, and rather than competing, the ASEAN Member States were trying to build up their cooperation in the economic field. The economic landscape at that time, however, was also evolving. China's economy was beginning to loom as a competitor for investment and trade, with India's economy closely following. The two economic giants were even viewed by some as threats to ASEAN's economic prosperity.

This prompted ASEAN to get its act together. If they were to compete with China and India, the idea of 10 individual economies was no longer feasible. Thus emerged the idea of a single ASEAN economy with limited integration.

While the intent to compete with China and India at the time was challenging, the move to establish a single ASEAN economy was exceptional. Between the 1980s and 1995, the economies of ASEAN Member States grew at an incredible rate, with some more than doubling their gross domestic

product. Importantly, competition transformed into cooperation, with China and India becoming among the top 10 trading partners of ASEAN.

By the time the Asian financial crisis struck in 1997, ASEAN was a collective market of around 500 million people with a combined gross domestic product of US\$600 billion. Defying calls to protect their economies from the fallout of the crisis, ASEAN Leaders met in Kuala Lumpur and announced the ASEAN Vision for 2020. This marked the beginning of what we now know as the ASEAN Community, embracing three pillars: political–security, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation.

As we travelled down the road towards a community, we also needed to relook at what ASEAN was. We then agreed on the idea of a charter, and appointed a group of eminent persons to come up with some recommendations. By 2006, they had completed their work and a special task force was appointed to draft the ASEAN Charter. It was finally signed by Leaders in Singapore in 2007, giving ASEAN, for the first time, a legal personality.

Although much has been said about the ASEAN Charter, my view is that this is a process with the charter as the beginning. It contains many good elements but not all the recommendations of the eminent persons appointed for the job. This is to be expected, and it is important that we move on with what is in the Charter.

This takes me to the present. It has been 50 years now since the Bangkok Declaration, over 30 years of Brunei’s experience in ASEAN, 26 years since the Paris Peace Agreements on Cambodia were signed, 10 years since we signed the ASEAN Charter, and 1 year of calling ourselves a Community.

Considering the diversity and divisions that have existed in the region, the ASEAN Community 2015 is a remarkable achievement. Today, Brunei’s population of over 400,000 people very much benefit from their access to the US\$2.4 trillion ASEAN market, which is made up of more than 629 million ASEAN citizens.

However, community building is a process that must continue. The environment in the region itself continues to change, what with the speed of technological advances and the rapid pace of globalisation

taking place. We are now entering what some call the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The use of artificial intelligence, autonomous vehicles, and the Internet-of-things is changing the very way we live and work. Meanwhile, globalisation, long viewed as inevitable, is now being rejected by some of the very societies that were originally expected to reap its benefits the most.

What about the future of ASEAN? Some see ASEAN integration as an illusion, while others see it as a modern miracle. ASEAN will face many political–security and economic challenges in the coming years. How should ASEAN respond to these?

ASEAN today is trying to better position itself for tomorrow. The ASEAN Community Vision 2025, which includes an economic component, aims to take advantage of this Fourth Industrial Revolution and move ASEAN up the global value chain, into higher technology and knowledge-intensive activities, where competition and innovation can thrive.

At the same time, however, competition between member states is holding back ASEAN’s economic potential. Businesses still say the regional market is fragmented because of behind-the-border non-tariff measures. If member states could raise intra-ASEAN trade from 24 % of total trade to around 60% (like the European Union), the region as a whole would prosper and be more resilient.

Aside from the benefits of economic cooperation, people have also experienced the positive impact of ASEAN in other fields. ASEAN cooperation now covers almost everything from disaster relief to coordinating health responses to epidemics. The extensive network of cooperation between ASEAN Member States involves summit-level meetings all the way to working groups on technical aspects of cooperation.

In all, over 1,000 ASEAN meetings are held each year. Although meetings cost time and money, they also help strengthen the integration process within ASEAN and, more importantly, nurture and cultivate people-to-people bonds. In fact, the close personal rapport between ASEAN Leaders and Ministers and officials is a key component that has facilitated the success of ASEAN.

As ASEAN's cooperation grows, so do the demands placed upon its Secretariat. Currently, ASEAN is implementing recommendations of a high-level task force to strengthen the Secretariat. Still, some believe these changes are too modest.

Firstly, the ASEAN Secretariat must provide symbolic leadership. When a natural disaster strikes, its Secretary-General should be the first to fly the ASEAN flag by responding quickly and appropriately. This is the same logic that has convinced ASEAN Member States to fly the ASEAN flag at their overseas missions.

Secondly, the Secretariat should be given human and funding resources so it can truly coordinate the increasing number of projects, meetings, and research required in the future. Only with more resources can we task the Secretariat to do more in terms of coordinating and monitoring programmes.

Thirdly, the Secretariat should prepare the research papers necessary in all aspects of ASEAN's political-security, economic, and socio-cultural work. In particular, this should include providing early warning to member states on economic matters.

ASEAN can use some of the best research institutes available, such as the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies – Yusof Ishak Institute, and the ASEAN Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) network, which includes the Centre for Strategic and International Studies Indonesia and ISIS Malaysia. Also, the Secretariat should look at building up a core group of intellectuals and academics who are involved and committed to ASEAN.

Looking forward, ASEAN Member States would very much benefit from greater research and forecasting of future trends and challenges. These are particularly important as recent trends in international politics have reminded us that 'certainty' is no longer the norm. Even if we believe that this is the Asian Century, the future is unpredictable.

For many countries in the region, this is a difficult and complex situation. In Brunei's case, charting these waters in the future means it would need friends and supporters. Here, together with ASEAN, we give each other the confidence to move forward.

ASEAN itself is affected by external dynamics, specifically on how to manage major power relations. Relations between the United States and China, as global powers, will continue to influence the direction of regional affairs. Both countries have contributed to the region's peace and prosperity and, in this regard, ASEAN has a stake and a part to play.

ASEAN has created several institutions that contribute to regional affairs. We are perceived as fair and neutral, and our institutions are built in such a way that trust is given to us as a small organisation that is non-threatening. In other words, ASEAN can be used as a 'sounding board' and can provide a venue or environment where participants can openly and candidly discuss issues. Such initiatives include the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN+1, the ASEAN+3, the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus.

In particular, the East Asia Summit is a Leaders-led process. The whole idea is to allow Leaders to discuss openly and reach consensus. Rather than a debating forum, it is about consulting and promoting confidence. As we move to the future, it is important to have platforms such as the East Asia Summit to allow us to discuss openly and reach consensus over any particular issue. This would contribute to confidence building and the promotion of peace and prosperity in the region.

At the same time, the East Asia Summit should deal with practical projects where we can cooperate for tangible results. One example is joint humanitarian relief exercises, which bring in militaries and civilian agencies from 18 countries to work together.

Pulling all these efforts together is a big challenge for ASEAN Member States and requires a strong unified ASEAN at the centre of regional cooperation.

To achieve this, it is important that ASEAN build the community based on understanding, trust, and tolerance by developing a habit of moving together as a group, as we have done so well in the past. In this way, we enhance the centrality of ASEAN and reaffirm it as a cornerstone. For us in Brunei, it is the main pillar of our foreign policy, as some have suggested.

ASEAN's programmes and initiatives must address issues, create awareness, and, most importantly, benefit our peoples. This would enhance regional development and promote a greater sense of belonging to the ASEAN Community.

In my view, ASEAN's work in socio-cultural cooperation is perhaps the most complex yet crucial aspect of its community building. Here, the underlying objective is to instil mutual trust, confidence, and a sense of belonging. It is thus the most challenging because a lot of time and resources are required before we see actual results.

While a difficult one, it is also the most fundamental. The question of trust among us is crucial in moving cooperation forward. If you can trust each other, half the battle is won. Enriching a culture of trust and understanding must be repeatedly emphasised. It is important to get the people involved, especially women and the youth, to achieve this objective.

The youth (those below age 35) represent over 65% of ASEAN members' combined population. This is an amazing number of young people, which can build and shape our region.

In the future, more needs to be done to foster community building in a practical sense such as building on the Young Entrepreneurs Forum and the Youth Volunteer Corps.

Brunei has also emphasised education. ASEAN should have a curriculum of studies to inculcate the idea of the region's rich historical, cultural, social, religious, and ethnic diversity. Essentially, this means learning how to reach cohesion or 'unity in diversity' as Indonesia has emphasised. It is also important to include the mass media to spread the positive messages and good values of ASEAN.

We should encourage and expand the process by involving the youth in schools, sports, business, and governments. In this way, a web of relationships can be spun. Out of ASEAN diversity, the youth can help promote understanding, tolerance, and trust, and contribute to the future.



I know the process is long and the path ahead is full of pitfalls. But the destination is an ASEAN that we have been working for over all these years.

If the past was about political and economic survival and the present is about preparing for the unknown, then the future is about people, especially the youth. And through all this, it is about the understanding and friendships that keep us united and strong together.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Lim Jock Seng** received his Bachelor of Science (BSc) in sociology/social anthropology at the University of Swansea and Master of Philosophy (MPhil) in social anthropology from the London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom.

He started his career at the Brunei Museum as Deputy Director and Director and was subsequently transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brunei Darussalam as Director-General of ASEAN-Brunei Darussalam in August 1983. He was then appointed Brunei Darussalam's High Commissioner to New Zealand in February 1986. In May 1986, he became the Director of Politics at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and was promoted to the post of Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the same year.

He was appointed by His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah as a member of the Privy Council in 2003 and as an official member of the Legislative Council in 2004. For his services, he was conferred the title of Pehin Menteri and Dato Seri Setia, as well as other meritorious awards by His Majesty. He was appointed Second Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade in May 2005. He is currently a Minister in the Prime Minister's Office.