



## ASEAN at 50: A Valuable Contribution to Regional Cooperation



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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) celebrates its 50th anniversary on 8 August 2017. Among the most important achievements of ASEAN at 50 are that as a regional organisation, it has gradually brought all countries in Southeast Asia together to achieve unity, stability, and peace. Another major accomplishment is that it has established an open and integrated regional market and promoted economic development and prosperity. The core value of the ‘ASEAN Way’ is its inclusiveness. All members of ASEAN participate in and benefit from regional cooperation by giving the new members time to adjust and accommodate themselves to the process. Unlike the European Union approach, which emphasises regional governance based on the legal

establishment, the ASEAN Way tries to provide a comfortable environment for all members to implement the agreements by adjusting and reforming their policies and legal systems. The backbone of ASEAN is the members' shared spirit of amity and cooperation for living in peace, stability, and prosperity by bonding together in partnership.

The establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015 was a big step forward by ASEAN. Guided by the ASEAN Charter, the ASEAN Community consists of three pillars: the Political–Security Community, the Economic Community, and the Socio-Cultural Community. The building of the ASEAN Community follows the ASEAN Way with 'One Vision, One Identity, One Community' as a gradual process with continuous efforts and progress. Thus, 2015 was not a deadline but a new starting point towards progressive community building. The ASEAN Political–Security Community aims to promote peace within ASEAN and with the world. It aims to achieve this by developing a just, democratic, and harmonious environment and by insisting on a people-oriented ASEAN with respect for diversity, equality, and mutual understanding, rather than by means of a strong ASEAN governing body in political affairs and a common ASEAN security force. The ASEAN Economic Community intends to build a highly integrated and cohesive economy that is competitive, dynamic, resilient, inclusive, people-oriented, and people-centred. It seeks to create a more globalised ASEAN by facilitating the seamless movement of skilled labour, goods, and services within ASEAN through progressive programmes and agendas, but avoiding an exclusive, inward-looking customs union and single currency. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community aims to achieve a committed, participative, and socially responsible community that uplifts the quality of life of the ASEAN people through cooperative activities. It emphasises multi-sector and multi-stakeholder engagement; deepening the sense of ASEAN identity; and enhancing the commitment, participation, and social responsibility of the ASEAN people while avoiding a conditioned common value or culture.

While there may be differences of opinion as to the value and model of ASEAN, there is widespread agreement that ASEAN as a regional organisation has made great contributions to leading Southeast Asia towards progress and prosperity and helping to create relations for peace and cooperation with other partners in the region and the world.

The most important characteristics of the ASEAN Way nurtured in the past 50 years may be summarised as follows:

- **Non-interference, inclusiveness, and harmony.** While they have learned from other regions' experiences with regional cooperation, especially those of European cooperation, Southeast Asian countries have worked hard to forge their own way, drawing from their traditions, values, and cultures. The ASEAN process of regional integration always gives special emphasis to the principles of non-interference, inclusiveness, and harmony. This does not mean that ASEAN takes a laissez-faire approach to its programmes and agendas; rather it intends to provide a suitable environment to guide all members towards the goals. ASEAN at 50 offers valuable experience for other regions in Asia and the world on how to forge regional integration while safeguarding diversity and on how to fulfil obligations for implementing the commitments while maintaining independent and sovereign decisions and defending the members' basic interests. ASEAN plays a leading role in forging East Asian cooperation in two ways. First, ASEAN has become a key player in bringing other East Asian partners together under the 'ASEAN+' framework with ASEAN at the centre. This has led to the creation of groupings such as the ASEAN+1 free trade agreements (FTAs); ASEAN+3, comprising ASEAN, China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea; and the East Asia Summit and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Second, the ASEAN experience plays a guiding role in providing the direction of regional cooperation, especially East Asian community building. Although East Asia needs to define a framework and regime for regional cooperation that is distinct from ASEAN, the ASEAN experience is a valuable reference for East Asian cooperation.
- **Liberalisation, cooperation, and community building.** ASEAN insists on an open development doctrine by promoting market liberalisation and economic cooperation. This started from the Common Effective Preferential Tariff, which led to the creation of the ASEAN Free Trade Area, and subsequently the ASEAN Economic Community with its goal of increasing the region's competitive advantage as a production base. Unlike the European Union, the ASEAN Free Trade Area eliminated internal tariffs but does not apply a common external tariff, and the newer members – Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, and Viet Nam – were given more time to implement the

arrangement schedules. Gradual and differential arrangements moving towards higher standards of market liberalisation in accordance with the capabilities of the members are essential for the success of ASEAN market liberalisation, integration, and community building. Considering its limited resources, ASEAN manages to build an open and friendly market environment that attracts outside investors, enabling it to become a centre for production networks and thereby enhance the level of economic development and the living standards of its people. Furthermore, with its experience and advantage as an integrated regional organisation, ASEAN plays a central role in developing FTA frameworks, especially the integrated regional FTA framework, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which aims to bring 16 countries together. This regional agreement will create the largest FTA in the world and will provide a dynamic new engine for the sustainable economic development of the region.

- **ASEAN centrality and a leading role.** ASEAN defends its centrality in regional relations and the regional order. This does not mean that ASEAN is only inward-looking and ignores the interests of the others. Rather, ASEAN uses its central position to invite other partners to conduct dialogue and cooperate to build new partnerships and promote peace. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is the most constructive dialogue scheme. It was initiated by ASEAN in 1994 with 28 members from the Asia-Pacific region and the European Union. ARF aims to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern, and to contribute to confidence-building efforts and preventive diplomacy. Unlike the traditional military union or security bloc, ARF adopts the security concept of peaceful solutions to differences and disputes through dialogue, consultation, and cooperation. ARF is not a place for bargaining, but a framework for working on common agendas. One may question ARF's soft approach to dealing with crises. However, it demonstrates its special value in improving understanding and confidence in facing the complex and risky political and security situation in the Asia-Pacific region. The East Asia Summit is another example of ASEAN's constructive role in building new partnerships for regional cooperation and peace. Before joining the East Asia Summit, all countries must sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. The treaty, drafted by ASEAN, calls for parties to respect and implement the principles of the ASEAN way. The treaty was signed in 1976 by

ASEAN members and was opened for accession by outside states in 1987. The treaty's purpose is to promote perpetual peace, everlasting amity, and cooperation within ASEAN and with other countries.

We are living in a fast-changing world and are facing many challenges ranging from economic development and social stability to international relations. Poverty, conflicts, and even wars are affecting many parts of the world today, ASEAN stands out as having been instrumental in turning Southeast Asia into the stable, prosperous, peaceful, and cooperative region it is today, and in nurturing a spirit of amity and cooperation with other partners.

Relations between China and Southeast Asian countries have a long history, but they became troubled in modern times for complex reasons, like the Cold War. Diplomatic relations between China and Southeast Asian countries were only normalised in early 1990. China and ASEAN began their engagement in 1991 and soon became Dialogue Partners. The most valuable experiences from the 26 years of China and ASEAN relations have been 'seeking common ground while reserving differences' and promoting cooperation. Differences are to be expected in any international relationship; the key is to manage them and not let them become obstacles to the development of cooperation. As their relationship has developed, China and ASEAN have worked hard to let the 'Chinese way' and 'ASEAN way' connect with each other. As both approaches emphasise sovereignty and non-interference, respect for diversity, and harmony, China-ASEAN relations have developed successfully in general and achieved a great deal of progress. China always supports ASEAN unity and its central role in regional affairs. It was the first country to initiate and negotiate an FTA with ASEAN as a group, the first to make the strategic partnership, and the first non-ASEAN member to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN.

The main principles and experiences of China-ASEAN relations are as follows:

- **To prioritise economic development based on open and cooperative principles.** The China-ASEAN FTA opened a new phase in their economic relations. The two sides worked out a unique approach to conduct the negotiations, including the early harvest arrangement, gradual and differential arrangements for liberalisation starting with trade in goods, then services and investment, and allowing less-developed countries more time to implement the agreement. Economic cooperation

is an essential part of China–ASEAN economic relations. Cooperation ranges from agriculture to industrial capacity and infrastructure. China has set up several special funds, including the ASEAN–China Cooperation Fund and the ASEAN–China Maritime Cooperation Fund, to support cooperation. ASEAN companies have invested in many projects in China, and China has significantly increased its investment in ASEAN and will continue to do so. Within the East Asian Community and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership frameworks, China and ASEAN will move towards an integrated economic area based on an open market environment and improved connectivity.

- **To manage the differences and disputes prudently with goodwill and a spirit of cooperation.** China and Viet Nam successfully completed negotiations on a land border agreement and an agreement on the North Bay maritime area. The South China Sea dispute involves several ASEAN members. It has a long history and is complicated by modern factors, and it is not possible to reach an easy solution. China proposed a two-track approach of negotiating directly with the relevant countries to define the sovereignty issues, while cooperating closely with ASEAN to preserve regional peace and stability. China and ASEAN issued a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002 with the aim of establishing the norms of behaviour in the dispute and to ensure a peaceful solution and regional stability. The results of the negotiations have been encouraging. Sovereignty disputes are always sensitive and risky and require patience, goodwill, and wisdom from all parties. However, the challenges are still substantial and will need to be met by both China and ASEAN in a manner that does not disturb the course of their main areas of cooperation.
- **To support regional cooperation and institution building.** China respects and supports ASEAN’s central and leading role in the region. However, China also makes initiatives of its own. China’s rapid rise has led to concerns over the scale of the country’s power and how it uses it in ASEAN. Chinese leader Xi Jinping advocates a doctrine of ‘community of common destiny’, which means China will live together with the outside world based on common interests and responsibilities. In this spirit, Xi has proposed a treaty of good neighbourliness and friendliness with ASEAN aimed at building a stable and peaceful relationship based on rules. China has no aspirations to dominate regional affairs and assert its will over ASEAN. It is expected that the two sides will start negotiating the treaty of good neighbourliness and friendliness soon.

Looking ahead, trust and confidence on both sides need to be further enhanced against the background of China's rise and the building of the ASEAN Community. New opportunities for cooperation ranging from economic development to political, social, and security areas should be explored by setting up working groups under the ASEAN–China cooperation framework. The parties need to complete and sign a code of conduct by the end of 2017 and work out a maritime cooperation agenda under China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative. Peace and development will remain two major issues and concerns for China and ASEAN. It is reasonable to be optimistic for China and ASEAN together to forge a better future.

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