

# BACKGROUND PAPERS



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# The Future of ASEAN Political and Security Cooperation

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When the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967, its leaders knew their weaknesses very well. The five founding members – Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand – realised that they must band together to wield greater bargaining force and a stronger voice against the external powers. Failure was not an option given the previous unsuccessful efforts to set up regional organisations that would unify the newly decolonised countries. To keep the nascent organisation moving forward, the founding members set forth specific goals that covered the whole gamut of cooperation – accelerating economic growth, social progress, and cultural development; promoting regional peace and stability, and Southeast Asian studies; and collaborating for mutual assistance and trade.

Since then, the promotion of regional peace and stability has become the dominant ASEAN agenda. The regional environment in the early years was tense with a high-powered Cold War conflict looming large on which ASEAN had no influence. Furthermore, ties between newly independent countries in the region were still fragile and their leaders lacked mutual trust. Thailand's Foreign Minister, Thanat Khoman, understood the region's vulnerability and the potential that would emerge if only leaders could trust each other.

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He believed that if the Southeast Asian nations could learn to find the ways and means to band together and cooperate with one another, they might eventually be able to shape and implement a positive and concerted policy without ‘being squeezed or crushed by the weight and pressure of larger countries’.

That was exactly what the ASEAN founders have done together in standing up and engaging with the outside powers. In 1971, ASEAN declared a ‘Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality’ to ensure the organisation was well-protected from outside intervention. During the first 3 decades, rapport and longstanding relations among leaders helped a great deal in determining policy directions. To lay the groundwork for regional peace and stability, in terms of dialogue and policies, ASEAN first had to strengthen their political and security cooperation to manage and avoid conflicts that once plagued their bilateral relations. Despite border disputes, the ASEAN Leaders successfully engaged with one another without jeopardising their common objectives of unity and solidarity. A ‘mind your own business’ attitude, which ensured they would not enmesh themselves in the domestic politics of other members, was the unwritten rule of engagement. Such mutual accommodation gradually took root in the leaders’ psyche. As the grouping entered its second decade, strengthening the internal environment was the top priority for all members given that the threat of communism remained high on the ASEAN agenda even after the Viet Nam War had come to end. In Bali in 1976, the ASEAN Leaders signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia, the first regional code of conduct aimed at preventing conflicts and war from within and outside.

Three years later came the 13-year Cambodian conflict (1978–1992), which would test the grouping’s unity and commitment as well as its determination in dealing with imminent threats to its members and the relations with external powers. Thailand, which was at the front line of the conflict, played crucial roles in formulating the ASEAN policies and strategies in the beginning because of the direct border security threats posed by Vietnamese troops occupying Cambodia at the time. Thailand’s key ally, the United States (US), came to their assistance with increased military aid. China, which established ties with Thailand only in 1975, joined in with broader support to Thailand and ASEAN after its border war with Viet Nam in 1979.

The material and diplomatic efforts of China and the US helped boost the grouping's bargaining power in various international fora. However, they also complicated relations among ASEAN Member States as disagreements gradually surfaced. Preceding the Cambodia crisis, political discussion and decisions in ASEAN were made informally and confidentially. As the conflict heightened, the member states became more proactive and open in engaging Dialogue Partners. Indonesia and Malaysia were suspicious and distrustful of major powers' involvement in the conflict. The two countries wanted to have a resolution that relied on a region-driven process, without outside interference. Indonesia's brainchild, the Jakarta Informal Meeting in 1988 and 1989, as well as the Malaysia-initiated Kuantan Principle in 1980, were the outcomes of the same earlier efforts.

The ASEAN desire to strengthen political and security cooperation with major powers intensified after the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1991. ASEAN needed the international community to help in the reconstruction of war-torn Cambodia. Most importantly, ASEAN viewed the peaceful resolution of the Cambodia conflict as its biggest achievement in promoting stability and prosperity in mainland Southeast Asia. In many ways, the Cambodia conflict enabled ASEAN Leaders to reconcile their national interests with larger looming regional threats. At the time, they had two options: to preserve their collective power or dilute it by pursuing separate tracks. As the past 3 decades of ASEAN's handling of external threats and pressures has demonstrated, the grouping's Leaders preferred the first choice.

With the end of the Cambodia conflict and the rise of China in the 1990s, ASEAN moved assertively to expand its ties with all major powers. The new strategy called for a region-wide security dialogue platform known as the ASEAN Regional Forum, in 1994, that would allow countries in Asia and the Pacific to raise and discuss their security concerns under an agenda set forth by ASEAN. Fervent support from Dialogue Partners, especially Australia, Japan, and the US, made the ASEAN Regional Forum process possible. Earlier fears that such a forum would weaken existing bilateral security ties that the US had carefully built since the end of World War II almost derailed the first ASEAN-led regional mechanism. Within the first decade, the ASEAN Regional Forum allowed ASEAN to engage all major powers as equal partners. Today, ASEAN has retained the prerogative to set forth the agenda for discussion. As part of this process, ASEAN has succeeded in bringing

China in to engage with the forum members. This has helped to mitigate fear of China's perceived security threat to Southeast Asia. After all, the forum was China's first foray into any security platform.

Confidence among the ASEAN Member States increased following the democratisation of the grouping's largest member. Indonesia's role has gone through a dramatic transformation since the fall of former President Soeharto in 1998 to becoming the first among equals. With the First and Second Bali Concord in place, enshrining the ASEAN norms and values of peaceful coexistence, Indonesia sought a deeper commitment among ASEAN Member States to strengthen shared norms and values that would expand the grouping's commonalities. With its fresher profile and new enthusiasm as the world's third-largest democracy, Indonesia propelled ASEAN to further accelerate progress towards a more comprehensive integration. Indonesia's initial idea of establishing a security community burgeoned to encompass economic, social, and cultural communities. To form the ASEAN Community, its members must adopt a new attitude and fully comply with verbal and signed ASEAN commitments. At the end of 2008, the ASEAN Charter was ratified and put into force, turning this regional organisation into a legal entity. Gone were the days of voluntary actions. As a rules-based organisation, all ASEAN Member States must abide by and fully comply with the same rules and regulations. The charter has strengthened the members' resolve and determination to stay relevant in the ever-changing global security environment.

This essay attempts to explain the recent development of ASEAN Member States' political and security engagement amidst challenges arising from its members and Dialogue Partners. Pragmatic ASEAN approaches continue to serve as a foundation for crucial decisions within the grouping as well as with its Dialogue Partners.

## **New Dynamic ASEAN Engagements on Internal Conflicts**

On 19 December 2016, 3 weeks before ASEAN turned 50, Myanmar State Counsellor and Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi held a meeting in Yangon to brief her regional counterparts on recent developments in the northern region of Rakhine State. She voluntarily called for the special session to

provide first-hand information on her country's troubled northwestern region. Myanmar thus became the first ASEAN country to officially host a ministerial-level retreat to discuss sensitive internal matters – something that was once taboo in ASEAN. Previously, ASEAN had used retreats to exchange information on issues member countries were reluctant to put on the official agenda. Such gatherings served as a template to prevent external interference in domestic issues.

According to Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, the Myanmar retreat went well with open, frank, and constructive discussions on the complex situation in Rakhine State, including the provision of humanitarian aid. The ASEAN Ministers also discussed ways to help Myanmar solve the problem of ethnic conflict waged by Buddhists against the Muslim minority in Rakhine State. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi stressed the importance of clearing up differences among ASEAN Member States through friendly consultation. In October 2016, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak had urged Suu Kyi to respond to reports of violence committed by the Myanmar armed forces against the Muslim community in Rakhine State. Kuala Lumpur's tough stance reflected calls within the ruling United Malays National Organisation for Malaysia to help the Muslim community in Myanmar. Islamic groups in Indonesia were also demanding similar action by Jakarta. However, despite Malaysia's efforts to bring in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, ASEAN has maintained a neutral and non-interventionist approach. Indonesia's moderating role has kept Myanmar engaged with ASEAN on this turmoil.

If the Rakhine crisis remains unresolved in the long run, it threatens to create polarised positions within ASEAN. Both Cambodia and Thailand – two major ASEAN Buddhist nations – have made it clear that Myanmar should be allowed to address the Rakhine issue without outside interference. Their position contrasts with that of Malaysia, which vigorously tries to seek the involvement of outside organisations, especially the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. To prevent further politicisation of the Rakhine situation, Indonesia has continued to undertake shuttle diplomacy and consultations with Suu Kyi to engage with ASEAN on the issue, which led to her calling for the retreat. In October 2016, the Jakarta-based ASEAN ambassadors also moved quickly to prevent the ASEAN Rohingya Center, a new non-governmental organisation established by Malaysia, from using the ASEAN name and emblem, which could inflame the conflict further.

## Non-interference Does Not Mean Silence

Suu Kyi's handling of the Rakhine crisis and the regional response serves as a good case study of how ASEAN's political and security culture and cooperation have evolved in the past 5 decades. One cardinal rule – non-interference in the domestic affairs of member countries, established as part of the code of conduct enshrined in the TAC of 1976 – has remained sacrosanct throughout ASEAN's history. But gone are the days when a mere mention of a domestic issue would be immediately labelled as interference. As such, ASEAN has come a long way in interpreting and implementing the non-interference principle.

The December retreat in Yangon marks a breakthrough in the way ASEAN Member States can deal with domestic issues. Even before the establishment of ASEAN in 1967, there was tacit agreement among ASEAN Leaders that they would discuss their problems in a discreet manner to avoid public disagreements. Such an understanding was pivotal for such key founding members as Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, which were emerging from years of civil conflict. This has also led to many ASEAN meeting documents being labelled 'confidential,' whether they contained sensitive information or not.

Engagement between ASEAN Member States on issues affecting peace and security has become more open since the enforcement of the ASEAN Charter, although this has not been acknowledged officially. Outsiders often question the members' level of commitment on compliance with rules and regulations. But member states are still reluctant to be seen as succumbing to peer pressure when they make policy. This has allowed a high degree of flexibility among member states when they want to raise sensitive issues.

There had already been indications since the late 1990s that some ASEAN Member States were willing to push the limits of the non-interference principle. Former ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan recalls that when he was Thailand's Foreign Minister in 1997, he raised the issue of Myanmar's political development at a ministerial retreat in Kuala Lumpur to the surprise of some of his colleagues. This followed a proposal by Anwar Ibrahim, the then Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, to promote 'constructive engagement' to facilitate discussions on sensitive issues within ASEAN.



Later on, Surin came up with the concept of ‘flexible engagement’. That concept did not last long following an intense debate among the ASEAN Foreign Ministers. But their desire to speak more frankly eventually prevailed and they agreed on ‘enhanced interactions’, following the suggestion of then Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, who wanted to make discussions more informal and non-committal.

Another milestone was the request by Indonesian President B.J. Habibie for ASEAN to dispatch some troops to join the United Nations (UN)-sponsored international peacekeeping forces in East Timor. He wanted to include ASEAN troops instead of relying entirely on soldiers from non-ASEAN countries. After several rounds of shuttle diplomacy and negotiations, four ASEAN Member States – Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand – contributed troops.

Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid also breached the non-interference principle in November 1999. Surin recalls that Wahid voluntarily offered to informally brief his anxious ASEAN colleagues about the situation in Aceh and East Timor at an ASEAN Summit in Manila. Surin believed that Wahid’s willingness to update the other ASEAN Leaders laid the foundation for other ASEAN Member States to follow suit. Over the decades, ASEAN Leaders have gradually opened up the scope of discussions on domestic issues.

During the November 1999 summit, the chair’s statement issued by Philippine President Joseph Estrada referred to Wahid’s briefing on the latest developments in Aceh. It said that the ASEAN Member States reiterated ‘their full respect for the sovereignty and in territorial integrity of the Republic of Indonesia’. The statement was meant to assure all ASEAN Member States that the principle of non-interference was still intact. After that, Jakarta was more willing to raise domestic concerns with other member states and even requested their help with the situation in Aceh and East Timor.

Since then, Indonesia has felt more comfortable in proposing initiatives that touch on domestic affairs. When Indonesia served as the ASEAN Chair in 2011, its universal periodic review of the human rights situation in Indonesia for the UN Human Rights Council was circulated to all ASEAN Member States. This voluntary action by Indonesia could serve as a catalyst

for future discussions about human rights-related and other sensitive intra-ASEAN issues. Evidently, Myanmar's initiative to brief ASEAN on Rakhine has been the outcome of Indonesia's good practice.

## **New Modus Operandi for Political and Security Cooperation**

In establishing a new modus operandi, Indonesia and Myanmar are seen as among ASEAN's most dynamic democratic members. Indonesia is the world's third-largest democracy and its biggest Muslim nation. Myanmar, since its dramatic transformation in 2011, has embarked on simultaneous political and economic progress that is without regional precedent. Their growing willingness to initiate discussion on domestic challenges could be traced back to Thailand's frequently dramatic shifts of decisions. A decade ago, for example, Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra threatened to boycott the 2005 ASEAN Summit in Vientiane if Kuala Lumpur put on the ASEAN agenda the security situation in the three southern provinces of Thailand that border Malaysia. But nearly a decade later, his sister, Yingluck, when she was Prime Minister, reversed the trend urging her ASEAN colleagues to support her government's efforts to promote democratic developments in Thailand when political tensions were mounting in the country. It was an unusual move by a member state. After a lengthy debate, a statement on the situation in Thailand was released alongside the chair's statement at a special ASEAN–Japan Summit in Tokyo in 2013.

A year later, just before her government was toppled by a military coup, the Government of Thailand again called on the ASEAN Member States to issue a statement specifically addressing Thailand's political development. The statement said ASEAN continued to follow closely the developments in the country and emphasised its full support for a peaceful resolution to the political conflict through dialogue and the full respect of democratic principles and the rule of law.

In addition, the statement repeated another statement made by ASEAN Leaders on 14 December 2013 underlining 'the importance of democratic process in restoring law and order, promoting national

reconciliation and the return of normalcy in Thailand, in accordance with the will and interests of the people of Thailand.’ They also expressed readiness to ‘extend all appropriate support based on the principles provided in its Charter.’

Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand share a willingness to engage ASEAN colleagues on their sensitive domestic issues. The evolution of such interactions from being taboo to greater openness has taken a long time. It remains to be seen how high-level exchanges can further promote unity among the member states and help them mitigate the negative effects of local problems. The comfort level that exists within the ASEAN framework has played an important role in facilitating discussions on sensitive issues despite the lack of familiarity among the grouping’s newly elected leaders. However, questions remain regarding the next step that ASEAN as an organisation must take to help strengthen members’ resilience as the ASEAN Community moves towards closer integration.

## **Dynamic Engagement with First-Tier Dialogue Partners**

A decade after ASEAN was established in 1967, the ASEAN Leaders had enough confidence to engage with outsiders, but they were highly selective. The first batch of dialogue countries comprised the major rich and industrialised countries – Australia, the then European Economic Community, Japan, New Zealand, and the US. The rationale behind their decision was threefold: ASEAN wanted to promote economic development, gain access to Western markets, and attract capital and technological know-how.

These elite Dialogue Partners have been the major export destinations for ASEAN products for decades. As ASEAN commemorates its 50th anniversary in 2017, these industrialised countries are also marking their 40th anniversary of serving as the organisation’s prime movers in multiple roles. In retrospect, there was a division of labour among these industrial countries. As always, the US was responsible mainly for providing a security umbrella and protection in the region to ensure peace and stability. It remains to be seen how the administration under President Donald Trump

will change the nature of ASEAN–US relations. Despite all the uncertainties and rhetoric caused by Trump’s behaviour and diplomatic conduct, one strategic aim persists: ASEAN is the US’s most important strategic partner and it serves a moderating force in Southeast Asia.

For the US, ASEAN was considered at its inception an effective bulwark to counter the rise of communism after the end of the Viet Nam War. The reunification of Viet Nam in 1975 raised the spectre of the domino theory, which envisaged one mainland Southeast Asia country after another falling to communism. ASEAN was the only body that had survived as a collective regional organisation after the failure to set up new, smaller regional organisations in previous years. All along, the continued US support has been pivotal, particularly with China’s growing political and economic clout as a key strategic partner of ASEAN.

Alongside the US, both Europe and Japan took the lead to ensure that Southeast Asia would move towards economic progress and while strengthening the nascent community. Japan has been the only Dialogue Partner with a clear policy recognising that economic development would be the pathway for ASEAN to promote unity and bridge the gap between the communist and non-communist countries. Japan’s 4 decades of continued financial and economic engagement has helped ASEAN modernise and industrialise its economy.

Throughout these earlier years, Japan was the most active partner due to its historical link and its desire to forge closer ‘heart-to-heart’ cooperation with ASEAN. The desire to create production chains in ASEAN allowed Japan to take a long-term approach in terms of investment and human resources development. In the early 1970s, before Japan became a Dialogue Partner, the country was a target of demonstrations and political protests throughout Southeast Asia. But through its strategies, Japan’s assistance effectively helped reduce the gap between the core ASEAN members and the Indochinese countries – Cambodia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, and Viet Nam.

In response to dramatic political and strategic shifts in the region after China became the world’s second-largest economy, Japan has embarked on a new approach to ASEAN that places more emphasis on non-economic matters.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made it clear that Tokyo would like to cooperate more with ASEAN on strategic and security matters. Since he came to power in 2015, substantive progress has been made in maritime security cooperation with Indonesia, the Philippines, and Viet Nam. Other countries, such Malaysia and Thailand, also have benefitted from programmes to increase maritime security cooperation, capacity, and surveillance.

In the future, strategic and security cooperation with ASEAN will increase and diversify. In addition, specific ASEAN Member States will seek extra assistance and capacity building from Japan to strengthen specific areas of competence. The Philippines and Thailand, as the only ASEAN Member States that are US treaty allies, have already signed a memorandum of understanding with Japan for military equipment transfers. Under this framework, Japan will be able for the first time to provide used military hardware or spare parts to re-equip the military of these common allies of Japan and the US.

## **Closer ASEAN Relations with Europe**

For the past 4 decades, ASEAN's ties with what has become the 28-member European Union (EU) bloc could be best described as a roller-coaster ride. Despite being one of the oldest Dialogue Partners, ties have not been fully developed and maximised due to different viewpoints on values and norms. For more than 2 decades, the political situation in Myanmar was the main stumbling block to increased cooperation. Since Myanmar began its political and economic reform programme in 2011, EU-ASEAN ties have improved and progressed substantially.

Before the Trump administration came to power in January 2017, the EU often acted in unison by pursuing policies in support of the US objectives in Asia. On top of its anti-globalisation attitudes, Washington's sudden withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership have eroded confidence in American leadership in Europe and affected the foundations of US-EU relations and cooperation. For the first time, leading EU members have cast doubts on US leadership. German Chancellor Angela Merkel was succinct when she said Europe must 'take our fate into our own hands'.

This new realisation has prompted the EU to adopt proactive engagement policies with ASEAN, concentrating on shared interests rather than focusing on divergent values and norms. While issues related to human rights and democracy are still pivotal, efforts to promote multilateralism, combat climate change, and develop EU–ASEAN free trade agreements and maritime security cooperation have quickly become the rallying agenda to boost bilateral relations in the years to come. At the 50th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in August 2017, ASEAN and the EU even issued their first joint statement on climate change and restated their commitment to the Paris Agreement, much to the chagrin of the American counterparts. Their common plans of action reflect future closer collaboration and cooperation.

Taking advantage of the new shift in the global order, ASEAN has responded quickly and positively to the fresh EU outlook. The Philippine Chair, despite EU criticism of President Rodrigo Duterte’s drugs policy and the extrajudicial killings, took the dramatic step of inviting the EU to the 12th East Asia Summit to be held at Clark Air Base in November 2017. President of the European Council Donald Tusk is scheduled to attend the Leaders-only strategic forum. If this momentum continues, the EU will soon be given the status of a strategic Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, joining Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, and the US.

Australia and New Zealand are among the elite ASEAN Dialogue Partners. They have provided ASEAN with much-needed development assistance, capacity development, and foreign investment. In particular, Australia’s profile in ASEAN has stood out due to the unconventional approaches adopted by the Labor Government of former Prime Ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating in the 1980s and 1990s. Keating’s strong leadership and Foreign Minister Gareth Evans’s conviction helped link Australia with the regional economic and security architectures that made Canberra a key player in creating the new economic cooperation framework known as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), as well as facilitating the peaceful settlement of the 13-year-long Cambodia conflict. After the failure to launch a new, more comprehensive regional security architecture in 2003 under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop in August 2017 reiterated Canberra’s support of ASEAN centrality in the security schemes in the region.

In 2016, New Zealand was given the status of becoming ASEAN's sixth strategic partner in recognition of its goodwill and contributions to ASEAN's many development and capacity-building projects related to the three pillars of political-security, economic, and socio-cultural development. The ASEAN–New Zealand action plans serve as a model for long-term cooperation with other Dialogue Partners.

## Second-Tier Dialogue Partners

Nearly 15 years after the first group of Dialogue Partners was admitted, ASEAN included the second group of Dialogue Partners – China, Russia, South Korea, and India – in the 1990s. These countries had bright economic prospects to match those of the first set of advanced industrial countries due to their rapid economic growth and development. In retrospect, none of the ASEAN Member States thought that China would advance so rapidly to become the world's second-largest economy less than 2 decades after it became a Dialogue Partner in 2003.

China has emerged as ASEAN's most important Dialogue Partner not only in terms of trade and investment but also on security matters. The current disputes in the South China Sea have already transformed ASEAN–China relations into one of the biggest challenges. Both sides need to find exit strategies so that the maritime quagmire will not damage future relations, which would bode ill for their diplomatic cooperation at the regional and international levels. Both sides have agreed to expedite the process of drafting the code of conduct for the South China Sea. This will serve as a new pillar for future political and security cooperation. If this process drags on or is completed without any legal commitment, the future of ASEAN–China relations will remain shaky. It would also impact on Beijing's One Belt One Road Initiative. Today's efforts to synergise the initiative with the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 remain elusive. Without sufficient progress on the political and security front, the grouping's endorsement and full support of the Belt and Road Initiative will be further delayed. Only individual ASEAN Member States would take up proposals put forward by China, and these might or might not fit into ASEAN regional connectivity plans.

Other Dialogue Partners include India and South Korea. After decades of a Korean-Peninsula-centric approach to ASEAN, in July 2017 the new government of President Moon Jae-in formulated for the first time an ASEAN-centred foreign policy. Within weeks of his presidency, Seoul dispatched a special envoy to visit key ASEAN countries. South Korea wants to ensure that peace and stability will be maintained in the region given the increased economic cooperation and the rapid rise of investment in ASEAN. With intertwined security concerns in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, the Moon government has already urged ASEAN to play a role in reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula and to find new ways to engage North Korea using existing ASEAN-led platforms. South Korea is no longer pressuring ASEAN to condemn North Korea's behaviour at every turn, and instead has asked ASEAN to persuade Pyongyang to engage in peaceful dialogue.

North Korea is one of the 27 members of the ASEAN Regional Forum, which encompasses all countries belonging to the now stalled Six-Party Talks to end Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme – China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Russia, and the US. Seoul's fresh attitude will encourage ASEAN to take bolder steps to explore ways of increasing trust and confidence among concerned parties using ASEAN's diplomatic practices. ASEAN's active cooperation on the Korean Peninsula would also mitigate fears that some ASEAN Member States have not followed UN Security Council resolutions calling for economic and financial sanctions against North Korea. It is an open secret that despite sanctions, some ASEAN countries continue to trade and provide financial services to Pyongyang.

India is a security and economic Asian giant that ASEAN has targeted as a countervailing force among the leading Northeast Asian powers. India's economic growth has been impressive, especially under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has intensified cooperation with ASEAN. The 10 ASEAN Leaders have been invited to attend the 2018 Independence Day parade in New Delhi, a goodwill sign indicating the importance of ASEAN in India's new diplomacy. New Delhi's Act East policy also fits well with the ASEAN development agenda of broadening its economic bases. India and China were the first batch of signatories of the TAC in 2003. In the long run, India hopes that land connectivity with ASEAN, especially through its ambitious India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral



highway project linking eastern India to Viet Nam's seaport of Da Nang through the heartland of Myanmar and Thailand's eastern seaboard, will help improve the well-being of people in India's impoverished northwestern region and promote the country's economic growth.

While Russia is an indispensable major player at the UN and in Middle East crisis spots such as Syria, its role in Southeast Asia remains low-key. When Russia and ASEAN commemorated their 20th anniversary of relations in May 2015 in Sochi, Moscow mistakenly hoped that ASEAN would accord it the status of a strategic partner. But Moscow's ability to fulfil its promises is still limited. The previous 10-year action plans have passed without any major accomplishments. The current one has been reduced to a mere 5-year cooperation plan with less-ambitious targets. As far as Russia is concerned, its economic and security roles in the region are still marginal to the point of negligence. The collapse of the Soviet Union continues to negatively impact Russia's perceived role in the region. Without new approaches and fresher ideas, Russia will remain the only world power not on ASEAN's radar.

## Third-Tier Dialogue Partners

The latest set of Dialogue Partners, Norway and Germany, are peculiar ones in that they do not possess the distinctive qualities of the countries in the previous two sets. Since 1993, ASEAN has kept a moratorium on sectoral Dialogue Partners after both India and Pakistan were admitted to promote ties on trade, investment, and tourism. Norway and Germany were newcomers joining Pakistan in 2016. India's status was upgraded to Dialogue Partner in 1995.

Norway has developed close ties with ASEAN, providing capacity building in humanitarian and conflict-prevention programmes. Oslo now wants more access to political and security issues involving ASEAN, especially action plans contained in the ASEAN Political-Security Community. The same goes for Germany, whose economic stakes in the region are the greatest among the European countries. Any additional strategic role for Germany, beyond the EU framework, remains a work in progress at best.

As more countries want to become a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, the organisation needs to contemplate what kind of relations it wants with new members given the accompanying risks and challenges. New political and economic powers, such as Brazil, Chile, Kazakhstan, Mexico, and Turkey have expressed a desire to become ASEAN Dialogue Partners.

## **Future Relations between ASEAN and Dialogue Partners**

When the ASEAN Leaders got together in Kuala Lumpur in 1976 to work on a set of principles to protect themselves from external interference, they had no idea that the contents of the code of conduct in the TAC would remain relevant today.

The desire to draw up a regional code of conduct at the end of the Viet Nam War was critically important. China's ascension as a UN member was a key factor, causing anxiety in the region, according to former ASEAN Secretary-General Phan Wannamethee, who was one of the treaty's drafters. As ASEAN turns 50, the treaty remains an effective tool to manage inter-ASEAN relations as well as relations with non-ASEAN countries. At the 49th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Vientiane in November 2016, ASEAN issued a joint statement hailing the TAC for its positive contributions to promoting peace and stability in the region over the preceding 4 decades.

The TAC principles encompass the peaceful settlement of disputes, non-interference in internal affairs, renunciation of the threat or use of force, and the promotion of the rule of law. The Ministers also agreed to promote the TAC as a legally binding document to promote peace and prevent conflict not only in the region but at the international level. Since 1992, ASEAN has tried to get all the major powers to accede to this regional code of conduct. Currently, 23 countries have acceded to the TAC, including all permanent members of the UN Security Council, in addition to the 10 ASEAN Member States.

With the increased international recognition of the ASEAN regional codes of conduct, especially the TAC, ASEAN will need to reposition itself for the future. Using the TAC as the pillar of an emerging regional architecture is a necessary next step because it enshrines rules and principles accepted by all major powers that wield security influence in the region. As far as political and security cooperation with non-ASEAN countries and entities is concerned, it would be best to build on the foundation provided by the TAC. The 12th East Asia Summit in November 2017 at Clark Air Base will serve as a litmus test for ASEAN's overall capacity to manage major powers in a forum consisting of top political leaders.

After the inaugural East Asia Summit in 2005, there were frequent negative comments about the lack of strategic matters taken up by the ASEAN Chair and Member States. This might change as ASEAN's international profile increases and member states become bolder in adopting common platforms on such issues as terrorism, climate change, nuclear non-proliferation, free trade, and multilateralism.

In the previous two East Asia Summits, non-ASEAN countries played significant roles in shaping the agenda. To make the summit into a strategic platform, the ASEAN Leaders must be ready to engage in consultation and dialogue before and during the summit meetings. Jakarta-based envoys representing all East Asia Summit members could serve as a sounding board for setting the summit's agenda in coming years.

The participation of Canada and the EU as guests of the chair are significant to the summit process and could produce transformative outcomes. The time has also come for the US, which has been the major security guarantor in the region, to accept emerging regional security initiatives with ASEAN characteristics. Given the growing uncertainties in the international order and the rise of extremism and terrorism, North Korea's nuclear threat, and unknown challenges yet to come, ASEAN's embrace of key players is indispensable. After all, ASEAN remains a trusted fulcrum for all cooperative and competitive powers to converge and conduct dialogues, while taking up common actions to secure regional peace and stability.