

Part III

Concluding Section:

Whither ASEAN Institutions, including ASEAN Secretariat?

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Concluding Section: Whither ASEAN Institutions, including ASEAN Secretariat?

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By 2040 ASEAN is expected to realise its goal of a people-oriented, people-centred, rules-based community – a region of one vision, one identity, one community, where no one is left behind.

It will be a region where member states will be fully engaged in enhancing its community building efforts, to the extent that 'I am ASEAN' is uttered in the same breath as 'I am Bruneian', or Cambodian, Indonesian, Laotian, Malaysian, Myanmaris, Filipino, Singaporean, Thai, or Vietnamese.

So how will this be achieved? ASEAN can go from platitudes to reality by addressing this challenge from at least three perspectives: the people perspective, the business perspective, and the political perspective. A key element will be the institutional strength to effectively support the region's goals.

This final section will recapitulate the aspirations of and challenges for the region from these three perspectives and highlight the way forward through institutional reform.

An ASEAN Citizen

'We need more appropriately mandated ASEAN Centres and programmes in all AMS so that there can be more visibility, proximity and joint ventures with like-minded Dialogue Partners and non-ASEAN bodies. NGOs in ASEAN require more resources for their work. Existing bureaucratic processes can be eased up to facilitate availability of funding for such NGOs in people-related activities.'

Amb Ong Keng Yong

'The ASEAN enterprise cannot be the invention of the elites, or a diplomatic feat of a few, but it will have to be an open space for interaction of the majority of peoples... To continue to thrive in the next 50 years, ASEAN will have to be more equitable in its prosperity, egalitarian and democratic in its domestic power relations and cohesive in its posturing towards global challenges.'

Dr Surin Pitsuwan

'Moving forward, the human dimension of ASEAN cooperation and integration to enrich its people from all walks of life will become indispensable to the ASEAN project.'

Amb Le Luong Minh

The challenge is to put ASEAN at the top of the mind of all citizens of the region. This calls for a multi-dimensional approach to make it relevant for schoolchildren, youth, the elderly, people with different abilities, members of civil society, and the media.

It requires a review of how the ASEAN bodies both at the national level and within the ASEAN Secretariat work and support each other; as well as of the substance of the collaboration. The review and substance of the collaboration should cover core aspects of, but not be limited to, education, disaster management, health, consumer and environment protection, and sustainable development. The institutions must support initiatives to engage people in the region and make them feel and think ASEAN.

The Business Community

The challenge for ASEAN is to ensure that the region continues to be an attractive place to do business. This challenge arises from technological advancement and disruptive technologies which impact productivity and innovation, and how business is conducted.

ASEAN bodies that deal with economic matters – such as the Coordinating Committee on the Implementation of the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (CCA), the Coordinating Committee on Services (CCS), the ASEAN Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI), as well as the ASEAN sectoral bodies (for transport, standards and conformance, customs, etc.) – need to evolve and change while working to ensure the effective implementation of agreements and commitments. Regulation, processes, and procedures in the region must reinforce the fact that ASEAN is business friendly. In the face of these challenges, empowering the Secretariat so that it can play a more active role in driving and supporting the efforts towards a single and competitive ASEAN market becomes even more compelling.

The Politics

After the ASEAN charter took effect at the end of 2008, huge power shifts in the international environment caused much disruption. ASEAN now finds itself in a highly unpredictable world with major powers competing and intensely engaged in diplomatic and trade ‘wars’.

This makes it more urgent for ASEAN to accelerate the establishment of ASEAN-led regional architecture in both the economic and security spheres. The evolving power dynamics call for ASEAN to review its mechanisms for intra and inter-ASEAN integration, as well as its role in international organisations.

Constructing Regional Architecture

To be a credible regional leader ASEAN needs effective ASEAN bodies, driven by political will.

ASEAN Secretariat

Institutional transformation is necessary. ASEAN leaders have been discussing the need to increase the overall capacities of the Jakarta-based ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC) to cope with emerging challenges, real or imagined. Although various recommendations have been made, changes in the ASEC have been too little and too slow. Going forward, the ASEC must be reinvigorated, if necessary restructured, to increase the effectiveness of cross-cutting planning, coordination, and implementation across the three pillars – economic, political/security, and social/cultural.

The evolving geo-political and economic dynamics call for an effective and efficient ASEC, one that is agile enough to promptly adjust and respond to the changing global environment, and one that can effectively support and advise ASEAN Member States.

As it stands, the ASEC is quite capable of dealing with economic issues. But ASEC’s capacity to engage Dialogue Partners in non-economic areas

needs to be strengthened. Although the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) unit was established in 2003 within the ASEC, it needs to be made more effective.

Recently, another unit related to EAS (External Relations Division 1) has been established at the ASEC. More area experts and researchers are urgently needed to follow up on regional and global issues that require strong ASEAN voices and consensus. It is highly likely that EAS will soon evolve into a genuine ASEAN-led regional security organisation. A stronger ASEC would strengthen ASEAN centrality in a multi-polar world.

Promoting seamless ASEAN Community integration

To prepare for community-building, the ASEAN Charter created five new organs to improve ASEC's overall efficiency and coordination: the ASEAN Coordinating Council (Article 8), the ASEAN Political–Security Community Council, the ASEAN Economic Community Council, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Council (Article 9), and the Committee of Permanent Representatives to ASEAN (Article 14). And Article 44 of the ASEAN Charter has a provision for the intensification of cooperation with ASEAN external partners.

These organs are supposed to help ASEAN members to fully implement all rules, procedures, and action plans. To do so, the various councils must synergise with one another. The number of ASEC's professional staff members should be increased and their mandates expanded to facilitate their activities. At this juncture, the ASEC is more in tune with the ASEAN Economic Community because of its growing involvement in economic-related meetings and projects involving ministers and senior officials, and in working groups in preparation of meetings and monitoring implementation of ASEAN commitments.

If ASEAN is to be a leading force in the years ahead, it must assess the relevance of the various ASEAN bodies, in the following areas:

1. Alignment and coordination;
2. Strengthen ASEAN Leadership or ASEAN collective leadership;
3. ASEAN Summits;
4. Ministerial and Councils;
5. Review ASEAN Way of decision-making;
6. Joint Consultative Meeting (JCM);
7. Committee of Permanent Representative;
8. ASEAN Centrality; and
9. Sub-regional groupings.

Promoting ASEAN engagement on global issues

Foreign leaders visiting the ASEC often urge ASEAN leaders to play a more active role in regional and global affairs, such as climate change, disaster management, pandemic diseases, nuclear disarmament, economic development, and United Nations reforms. They also would like to help the ASEC so that ASEAN can participate actively in the global discussions around these matters. New units must be created to liaise with foreign partners in tackling new issues. It is important to note that ASEAN is now a leading discussant in two global issues: sustainable development and nuclear disarmament.

ASEAN is represented in the G20 meeting and specific meetings all year round. ASEAN should make its voice heard on the global stage concerning political and social issues.

To prepare for the new challenges posed by the possible reframing of the Asia–Pacific to Indo–Pacific region, ASEAN must increase consultations at all levels and coordinate closely the region’s views and cooperative projects. As major powers in the Indo–Pacific region have unanimously called for a stronger ASEAN role and voice through their support of ASEAN centrality, ASEAN has to adopt pro-active policies and earn their trust.

The ASEC also has to engage various international organisations and advocacy groups such as the World Bank, the International Monetary

Fund, the African Union, the OSCE, Human Right Watch, and Amnesty International.

Role of ASEAN Secretary-General

With the ASEAN Charter up for a general review, the expansive role of the ASEAN Secretary-General must be re-examined. One major task that requires greater focus is engaging ASEAN civil societies and non-government sectors. The Secretary-General must be given the autonomy to take new initiatives in humanitarian and disaster management without prior consultation with the ASEAN leaders. Since both making ASEAN more people-centred and sustainable will dominate ASEAN's agenda in the years and decades ahead, the Secretary-General must be empowered to engage the public at large.

Conclusion and recommendations

As ASEAN contemplates its vision and aspirations in the light of global, regional, and technological developments, it would be useful to take the narrative to a more granular level and consider what needs to be done. What are the implications for ASEAN bodies and the ASEAN Secretariat? How feasible would it be to have several supranational bodies in ASEAN overseen by an inter-governmental organisation? At the same time, there may be a need to strengthen the national secretariats considering that the ASEAN blueprints and strategic plans require that the ASEAN commitments be embedded in the policies and programmes of each ASEAN Member State.

In light of these, the following would have to be prioritised:

- i. ASEC's organisational structure and governance need to be reviewed. The review should cover all the ASEAN bodies, including the committees across the three pillars. The review should take into consideration two options – an ASEC that is empowered (supranational); or an ASEC that is strengthened with an enhanced role.
- ii. Staffing: regardless of the options, ASEAN needs an ASEC which is managed by professionals and staffed by technocrats.
- iii. Funding: A new funding model for the Secretariat to enable it to recruit the right staff, in the right numbers, and to build the right systems to drive integration. The current funding level of roughly US\$20 million a year is not enough. The Asian Development Bank estimates that, by 2030, the ASEAN Secretariat will need an annual budget of US\$220 million to manage the ASEAN Community effectively. The following are possible options for funding that might be considered:
 - (i) United Nations model – contributions linked to the economic size of countries;
 - (ii) World Trade Organization model – contributions linked to world trade;
 - (iii) Others.