



Is the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) too Diverse for Effective Cooperation?

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Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is hardly a household name, including in its own yard. Knowledge of the trading bloc and upcoming ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) remains essentially limited to scholars, government agencies, and large organizations, with many people - including many AEC stakeholders - still largely unaware of its existence. This knowledge deficit, however, does not reflect ASEAN's increasing international stature and role in the Asia-Pacific rim and beyond. The purpose of this article is to introduce ASEAN and the Southeast Asian region and discuss whether the political, economic, and cultural diversity that characterizes it is an impediment to effective cooperation among its ten members in light of the upcoming integration at the end of 2015. While achieving unity may seem to be a tall order, this paper argues that the Association is less fragmented than it may appear to be due in no small part to the so-called 'ASEAN Way' and a recognized sense of benefits the ASEAN confers on its members.

Keywords: ASEAN, Southeast Asia, Diversity, Unity, ASEAN way.

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จะร่วมมือกันไหนหรือบนพื้นฐานที่หลากหลายของประชาคมอาเซียน ?

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บทคัดย่อ

คำว่าสมาคมประชาชาติแห่งเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ (อาเซียน) ต้องยอมรับว่ายังเป็นคำที่ไม่คุ้นกับหูของชาวบ้าน ข้อมูลความรู้เกี่ยวกับคู่ค้าและประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน (เออีซี) ยังรู้จักกันน้อยมากในแวดวงของนักวิชาการ หน่วยงานของรัฐ และองค์กรใหญ่ ๆ จำนวนคนไม่น้อยรวมทั้งผู้ที่มีส่วนเกี่ยวข้องกับ เออีซี ส่วนใหญ่ก็ยังไม่รู้ถึงความเป็นมา ถึงจะไม่รู้แต่ก็ไม่มีผลต่อการปรากฏตัวและบทบาทระหว่างประเทศอย่างแพร่หลายของสมาคมในแถบเอเชียแปซิฟิกและอาณาบริเวณรอบ ๆ

จุดประสงค์ ของบทความนี้ เพื่อที่จะได้แนะนำอาเซียนและภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ คุยเบื้องเรื่องการเมือง เศรษฐกิจ ตลอดจนถึงความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรม ที่สื่อว่าจะเป็นอุปสรรคต่อความร่วมมือที่ประจักษ์ในหมู่สมาชิกทั้งสิบประเทศที่จะรวมตัวกันในปลายปี 2015 ขณะที่การร่วมสร้างความสามัคคีดูว่าจะยากเหมือนเข็นครกขึ้นภูเขา บทความนี้ขอยืนยันว่าสมาคมฯ ไม่ได้ดูแย่อย่างที่เห็นตาม “วิถีทางอาเซียน” และส่งกลิ่นไอของความสำเร็จที่เอื้อผลประโยชน์ต่อมวลหมู่ภาคีสมาชิก

คำสำคัญ: อาเซียน, เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้, ความหลากหลาย, ความเป็นเอกภาพ, วิถีทางอาเซียน

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Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed on 8 August 1967 with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (more commonly known as 'the Bangkok Declaration') by the Foreign Ministers of the five original signatories, five Southeast Asian countries: the Republic of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Republic of the Philippines, the Republic of Singapore, and the Kingdom of Thailand. By virtue of that document, ASEAN was created. Security concerns - not economic purposes - drew the five Southeast Asian nations together and prompted them to enter into regional cooperation.

Initially established as a five-member intergovernmental geo-political organization, ASEAN has since evolved into a regional socio-economic grouping of ten Southeast Asian countries. Brunei Darussalam became the sixth member in January 1984. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam was admitted in July 1995, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and the Union of Myanmar (formerly Burma) in July 1997, and the Kingdom of Cambodia in April 1999.

Although ASEAN's enlargement did not change its character, it created economic disparities and development

gaps. So much so that the low level of economic development of the four 'late starters', Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (collectively referred to as CLMV or 'ASEAN-4' as opposed to the more developed ASEAN-6 countries), prompted ASEAN leaders to launch the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) in November 2000, which focuses on four priority areas: infrastructure development; human resource development; information and communications technology; and the promotion of regional economic integration.

Is ASEAN a cohesive trading bloc or on the contrary a divided house? Will economic integration and the establishment at the end of 2015 of an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) due to transform the region into a single market and production base be enough for ASEAN to promote itself as a global player? Is China's growing influence in the region driving a wedge between maritime and mainland member states?

This article addresses these issues. First, it provides an overview of Southeast Asia as a regional entity (or sub-region of the Asia-Pacific sphere, if considered from this wider perspective). It then focuses on

the political, economic, and socio-cultural diversity which, in spite of the geographic proximity of its members, characterizes ASEAN. Next, it considers the impact of these disparities on ASEAN's unity. It concludes by stressing that in spite of its wide diversity, effective cooperation among its members is possible as ASEAN's 47 years of existence attest.

Southeast Asia in a Nutshell

Southeast Asia refers to that part of the world located south of China, east of India, and north of Australia. The region is home to approximately 600 million people. The population, low for a long time (33 million in 1800), exploded with the massive immigration of South Asians and Chinese, who, starting in the mid-1800s, "came to Southeast Asia on a scale similar to the great migrations to the United States" (Chandler et al., 2005a).

With a total land area slightly exceeding 1.5 million square miles, Southeast Asia is a little smaller than the Indian subcontinent. The sea area is about three times larger than its land counterpart. Half of the region is a peninsula and the rest a series of archipelagos (nearly 25,000 islands, many uninhabited) unevenly

spread among Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste. Some are believed to hold significant oil and natural gas reserves as well as substantial fishery resources. This is the case, for instance, with the Spratly and Paracel islands at the core of the current territorial disputes in the South China Sea between China and some ASEAN member states (The Wall Street Journal, 2013).

Wedged between two fast-emerging economic giants, India and China, the region is crisscrossed with vital sea lanes that support the region's trade. Linking the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, between Malaysia and Sumatra, Indonesia, and those of Sunda and Lombok, which cut across Indonesia, is critical to global trade and security in the area, and they rank among the world's most important maritime passages (The Wall Street Journal, 2012).

The region is marked by a long history of resistance to absorption of the latter by "outsiders." No real symbiotic relationship has developed between hill and lowland peoples (Milton, 1983). A few of the highlands are even the scene of 'tribal' rebellion and dissent, most notably in Myanmar's mountainous north, where



the armed wing of the Kachin Independence Organization continues to clash with government troops, pushing thousands of Kachin refugees across the border into China's Yunnan province with many ending up being forcibly returned to Myanmar. Moreover, claims to self-determination and bloody separatist conflicts continue to vex some Southeast Asian states. Aceh in Indonesia, the southern islands in the Philippines, and the southern provinces in Thailand are the scenes of deadly terrorist attacks by separatist movements whose grievances are expressed in a language of religion and ethnicity and which challenge the present nation state.

On the mainland, the landscape is dominated by several prodigious rivers and vast deltas downstream as these ubiquitous waterways split into many branches before reaching the sea. These fertile mega-deltas are the "rice bowls" of Southeast Asia and crucial to meeting global grain demand (The Nation, 2012a). They produce enormous surpluses exported across the world. One of these major rivers, the Mekong River, flows from China through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam before

reaching the South China Sea. The river has galvanized its riparian states, the so-called 'Greater Mekong countries,' and turned the area, known as the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), into one of the world's potentially fastest-growing areas (ASEAN Development Bank).

Representing a market of around 350 million people, the GMS economies; those of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and the southern Chinese provinces of Yunnan (the fourth largest province in China) and Guangxi, have been attracting massive investment from China and the Asian Development Bank, essentially channeled into infrastructure, most notably, the three so-called 'economic corridors,' multi-country arteries crossing the region. The resultant lopsided development is transforming the GMS into a region of its own; a trend that reflects China's growing influence in the area and could potentially divide ASEAN (International New York Times, 2013).









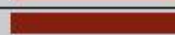
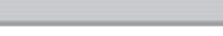
As modern states, all Southeast Asian countries are relatively new. Except for Thailand, all of them were under colonial rule, going independent in the post-World War II period. State consolidation and nation-building have

been facilitated to a great extent by the considerable economic development of the region since the mid-1960s (Chandler et al., 2005c). And although the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which infected Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines and caused massive layoffs, has tarnished Asia's "miracle economy" image (with its seemingly unstoppable economic growth that averaged 9% per year before the bubble first burst), the area has since recovered and is enjoying a robust growth rate, albeit a more erratic one, as the dependence of its export-driven economies on the rest of the world - and its attendant vicissitudes - has increased.

A Complex and Highly Diverse Area

In spite of the commonalities which, as we have just seen, make it sensible to speak of Southeast Asia as a single region, there is much diversity. The region encompasses a widely varied group of states. A few examples will drive this point home.

As shown in Table 1 below, the per-capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of ASEAN's wealthiest member state (Singapore, US\$ 61,461), as computed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), is about 45 times that of the (imperfectly measured) poorest one (Myanmar, US\$ 1,490). Cambodia follows next (US\$ 2,515), then Laos (US\$ 2,904), and Vietnam (US\$3,706).

Member State		GDP per capita US\$
Myanmar		1,490
Cambodia		2,515
Laos		2,904
Vietnam		3,706
Philippines		4,339
Indonesia		4,971
Thailand		9,609
Malaysia		16,975
Brunei		55,405
Singapore		61,461

Source: International Monetary Fund



While ASEAN includes the world's fourth most populated nation, Indonesia, home to almost 240 million people, it also counts among its members one of the least populated, miniscule Brunei, with less than half a million people (401,890 in July 2011). And the total land area of the city-state of Singapore, at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, (714.3 square kilometers) is almost 2,700 percent smaller than that of Indonesia (1,919,440 square kilometers), which also happens to be one of the world's two largest archipelagic states (the other being the Philippines). Simply put, in spite of the geographic proximity of its members, ASEAN's diversity is probably greater than in any other regional arrangement in the world, which, on the face of it, makes achieving unity a tall order.

Political diversity

Politically speaking, ASEAN is home to a collection of regimes that runs the whole political gamut: two of the world's five remaining communist states claim territory in the region (Laos and Vietnam); two of the member states are oligarchies, one, ruled by a monarchy, is benign (the sultanate of Brunei), the other,

long a brutal military dictatorship, has been undergoing political reforms (Myanmar); the remaining six members espouse some form of democracy. Two of them are heavily managed democracies with one party in continuous rule since independence (Malaysia and Singapore). Although a democracy, the Philippines has had a long history of military coups and extra-legal political changes. Indonesia has been democratizing since the end of Suharto's 32-year reign in 1998. Cambodia, a freewheeling fragile democracy, and Thailand, a constitutional democracy with a highly influential sovereign, also make up, along with Brunei, the three monarchies which the group includes (abandoned in 1955, the Cambodian's monarchy was restored in 1993).

Economic Diversity

ASEAN is also characterized by significant economic disparities and wide development gaps. Nowhere is the development divide more apparent than in underdeveloped and poverty-stricken Cambodia and Myanmar on the one hand, and developed and ultra-rich Singapore and Brunei, on the other. The latter are in a league of their own albeit for different

reasons and according to a recent Regional Report issued by the World Bank, the only ASEAN members to belong to the upper-income cluster. The other eight are equally divided between the middle- and low-income clusters (The World Bank Report, 2011).

Tiny Brunei owes its prosperity to its vast oil and gas reserves which have turned the country into something more like a Persian Gulf state than a Southeast Asian one (it is the third largest oil producer in Southeast Asia, after Malaysia and Indonesia, and the world's fourth largest producer of natural gas). As to Singapore's wealth, it has been generated by the global leadership it has gained in the shipping, electronics, and banking sectors in particular and its strong culture of innovation. Singapore's research and development (R&D) spending totals 2.6 per cent of its GDP (private and public sectors combined), largely accounting for its success story. Also a significant factor in the city-state prosperity is the competitiveness of its economy. Singapore is ranked as the world's second most competitive economy on the Global Competitiveness Index (among other ASEAN countries, Malaysia ranks 25th, ahead of Thailand, 35th,

Indonesia, 50th, the Philippines, 65th, and Vietnam, 75th) (World Economic Forum, 2013).

Four member states, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, fall into the middle-income cluster. By and large, they have followed a similar path to development, "moving in the space of one generation from inward-looking economies dominated by agricultural production to industrialized outward-looking, market-oriented economies open to trade and capital flows" (World Bank Report, 2011). Relying extensively on foreign direct investment (FDI) to build manufacturing capacity and master production technology, they have developed competitive manufacturing industries and achieved large localization rates through supporting industries. Nevertheless, their indigenous technological capabilities remain limited to simpler downstream activities, with their biggest gains at this stage still coming from applying, assimilating and adapting new technology.

As middle-income countries, they have now reached a critical turning point, running the risk of being caught in the "middle-income trap" forever. The key for them to escape the trap is innovation. But



with the four of them currently spending on aggregate a low 1.1 per cent of their GDP on research and development (R&D) activities, with Thailand the lowest (0.18 percent) and Malaysia the highest (1.5 percent), investments in R&D clearly fall short of the mark and need to be significantly increased if the four are to close the gap with the more developed countries (The Nation, 2013a). In contrast, Japan allocates 3.4 percent of its GDP to R&D, China 1.4 percent, India 0.8 percent, South Korea 3.5 percent, the U.S 2.7 percent, and the EU 1.8 percent, with Germany leading the pack with 2.5 percent (World Bank, 2013). Escaping the middle-income trap will also require companies to operate more productively in sourcing inputs and accessing information and technology, all of which militating for the creation of regional clusters (Bartlett et al., 2011).

The low-income cluster includes the four late starters; Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Except for Myanmar, they have gradually transformed themselves from socialist to market systems with the help of the ASEAN-6 nations. The four began industrializing in the 1990s, and it shows in their

development levels. “They are mainly assemblers and processors, at a lower level of technological competency and lower points in the value chain than the four member states in the middle-income cluster” (World Bank Report, 2011). Even though Vietnam and Cambodia are building manufacturing capacity, the nature of their exports indicate they have yet to rise beyond the low-tech, labor-intensive stage of manufacturing. Save for Vietnam, they are likely to remain in the learning mode for some time. This is especially true of resource-rich Laos and Myanmar, further behind in terms of manufacturing capacity, and, to a lesser extent of Cambodia, where light manufacturing and simple assembly operations predominate. Although Vietnam’s once booming economy has somewhat foundered lately, thrown off balance in part by the burgeoning debts at some of its sprawling state-owned enterprises (which control about 40% of the economy), it remains a likely candidate to join the middle-income cluster soon. Vietnam is also less dependent on donors than the other three ASEAN late starters, especially land-locked Laos, highly dependent on China for economic support.

Two important points should be made here. Firstly, after decades of autocratic rules and international isolation, Myanmar - long ASEAN's black sheep - has embarked on a series of wide-ranging political, economic, and legal reforms that have, among other, caused the EU and the U.S. to ease their long-standing sanctions against the country and brought a temporary end to its international isolation (The Straits Times, 2013a). As financial and political institutions are being built and the economy is modernizing, the former pariah state is becoming the new 'darling' of investors and entrepreneurs. Business delegations, state officials, and investors (obsessed with establishing a first-mover advantage) are descending on the country in search of opportunities. As with China when it opened its doors to foreign investment in the early 1990s and when companies around the world could not contain their excitement at the possibility of entering the world's largest market, boardrooms across the globe have become fixated on entering the Myanmar market even though their decisions may be clouded by unrealistic expectations on entering the market.

Secondly, the establishment by 2015 of the AEC, which will transform the region into a single market and production base, is expected to boost intra- and extra-ASEAN trade and FDI. However, the AEC, the latest steps in a Southeast Asian push to integrate its economies and present itself as a viable investment alternative to China, is also expected to exacerbate competition for FDI among members, most notably from Headquarter (HQ) economies, as Southeast Asian countries seek "to extend the gains from industrialization and trade, move up the value chain in manufacturing, and increase the productivity of the growing service sector," thereby further underscoring the potential conflicting nature of the national interests of the member states on the one hand and those of the Association on the other (World Bank Report, 2011). Regionalism invariably promotes both competition and cooperation.

Cultural Diversity

Southeast Asia also presents considerable cultural diversity. In addition to the most obvious signs of cultural variety such as language, dress, sets of holidays, eating habits, and traditions



(among member states as well as within each individual country, since each country is multiethnic and multilingual), there exists significant differences in the values, norms (legal regimes), customs, attitudes, behaviors, and ideas about what each country believes to be good, right, and desirable (for instance, marriage, freedom, the role of women in society, and gender equity).

Multi-confessional Southeast Asia lacks such EU advantages as a shared religious culture and a common legal heritage. Unlike Europe, it has no common high religion and classical culture. Three world religions predominate: Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. Although slightly different from those of India, Arabia, and Europe from where they had spread (elements of the animist and mystic traditions of Southeast Asia have mingled with them), these three religions have played important roles in the life and beliefs of Southeast Asian peoples, each one bringing its own code of ethics, set of behaviors, and way of life and creating artistic, architectural, and cultural contexts that have reshaped Southeast Asia and added to its diversity (Chandler et al., 2005e). Each religion is associated with

particular areas in the region. Of the two schools of Buddhism, the “southern school” (Theravada Buddhism) enjoys a stronger presence, spreading from Myanmar to Cambodia and Laos, with the “northern school” (Mahayana Buddhism) found essentially in Northern Vietnam, where it occupies a modest place in society as compared to Theravada Buddhism countries. Muslim Southeast Asia (predominantly Sunni) stretches in a crescent from Southern Thailand through Malaysia (including Malaysia Borneo) and the islands of Indonesia to the Southern Philippines, except Bali which has remained untouched by Islam and continues to adhere to Hindu beliefs and practice. Although both Catholic and Protestant Christianity can be found in small numbers throughout much of Southeast Asia, its most important community is by far in the Philippines which, with the exception of the Muslim South, is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. As aforementioned, Hinduism is also present in the region but on a far more limited scale. So is Taoism.

Though identification with religion remains strong, people now identify with the nation more than with the “tribe”

or “local community.” Identification with the region, however, remains tenuous.

Developing a regional mindset and a sense of ASEAN Community will take time and require efforts from the bottom up. In a region divided by language, culture, ethnicity, old rivalries, and mutual suspicion and characterized, as we have just seen, by vastly disparate economies, creating a rule-based community of shared values and norms is one of the biggest challenges for ASEAN. This will require, among other, much harmonization (Hew, 2007).

Achieving Unity: a Tall Order?

Admittedly, Southeast Asia lacks natural coherence. So what does this mean for ASEAN? Is the region politically, economically, and culturally too disparate for the Association to adopt a common stand on major issues of concern to it or, on the contrary, are the factors bonding the ten neighboring states strong enough to prompt them to overcome differences?

Obviously, not every regional or global issue is likely to bring a unified response from ASEAN leaders. Common values do not necessarily mean common interests. Cultures, however, develop different ways of dealing with conflicts. The

ten Southeast Asian nations have promoted their own way of coping with divisive issues and maintaining harmony (central in Southeast Asian cultures) within the grouping. It is termed the ‘ASEAN Way’ (Ramcharan, 1998).

This Southeast-Asia-specific conflict management approach is based on consensual decision making that does not reduce sovereignty or interfere with internal affairs. The key point here is simple. Only where national interests permit is common action feasible; otherwise it is best left undisturbed (Anthony, 1998). In other words, ASEAN leaders deal only with non-contentious matters so that no member feels its national interests are threatened by a group decision, thereby making it possible for them to present a unified front on the farewell stage. So, coming back to our initial query, if unity there is (political unity that is), it is often achieved at the lowest common denominator and at a low level of collaboration. Clearly, the way ASEAN achieves unity though is highly unusual by global standards.

For illustrative purposes, consider the dispute over maritime rights to the reportedly resource-rich South China Sea claimed in whole or in part by Brunei,



China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam; arguably one of the most significant tests of ASEAN solidarity in recent years (The Nation, 2012b). Even though ASEAN and the Chinese government had just concluded a two-day meeting on the implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties on the East Sea (DOC), the joint communiqué at the end of the 45th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, which gathered ASEAN's ten Foreign Ministers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, made no mention of the dispute. Why was it left out?

ASEAN leaders knew that, because of differing national perspectives between maritime states with significant economic and strategic interests in the South China Sea and mainland countries closer to China, they would be unable to speak in one voice (let alone the fact that even within maritime states, opinions were divided). Because of the value they placed on their relationships with China, mainland members were noticeably silent. They did not want to risk damaging their close economic, political, and social ties with China now the primary external force and influence and source of outbound FDI in mainland Southeast Asia. In short, they refused to stick their neck out and support

Manila for fear of antagonizing the Chinese (The Strait Times, China is a major investor and key driver of ASEAN economies.) It is now ASEAN's largest trading partner and the third investor in terms of share of the total FDI net inflow to ASEAN (5.3%). China was also the first country to enter an FTA with ASEAN (it took effect in 2010 in ASEAN-6).

ASEAN members have long accepted that they cannot intervene in each other's domestic affairs and that consensus must be reached on all policies (Mak, 1997). Since ASEAN leaders were not able to reach consensus, common action was not feasible. As a result, in keeping with the ASEAN Way, the entire issue was deemed - albeit in a contriving manner - best left out. The chairman (at that time, the Cambodian Prime Minister) blocked mention of the dispute. Officially, the dispute was a nonissue. From an ASEAN perspective, avoiding confrontation and maintaining unity (or a semblance of unity as has been argued) is thus often consonant with avoiding collaboration.

Staying on the sideline during a row is common practice among ASEAN members. That the alliance has survived the conflicting interests and mutual suspicion of its member states is due in no

small part to this way of doing business (Ramcharan, 2000). But the failure to work collaboratively and adopt a common stand on divisive issues makes the grouping a much less effective organization in solving major issues of concern to all its members. It also weakens its bargaining power. The association has collective clout that its ten members do not have individually. In the South China Sea instance, ASEAN's inability to pursue a united solution amid simmering tensions left open the door for the dispute to be resolved on an individual basis, giving China greater leverage than dealing with a bloc.

ASEAN's failure to close ranks behind some of its members during crises also leaves open the question of whether ASEAN can unite to solve major issues of concern to all and still protect each member's interests. The subtext is clear; many ASEAN countries struggle with whether to put ASEAN's interests above their own national interests. Political issues will most likely continue to test ASEAN's unity, leadership, and coherence for years, and the coalescing of political will, or the failure to do so, be largely determinative of the progress of ASEAN integration.

This is not to say that all is lost. These diverging interests should not disguise what the ten members have in common and have achieved. ASEAN has enjoyed greater success than outsiders often bother to notice. In spite of a low level of collaboration on a number of pressing political issues, ASEAN has been a fairly cohesive and increasingly more cooperative (economically speaking) regional bloc (after a very modest beginning), suggesting that the factors bonding the ten members have been strong enough to obliterate their divides, starting with the ASEAN Way. So, apart from this indigenous conflict-management approach, what are the other sources of ASEAN's relative unity?

In addition to some important commonalities which we discussed when we introduced Southeast Asia (a collectivist culture, highly stratified and group-focused societies, low social mobility, high respect for power, etc...), the ten nations are held together by their commonality of membership in ASEAN. Self-reliance on a regional basis appears to be an acceptable alternative to national self-reliance, found to be difficult to pursue in a world increasingly more defined by regionalism



(preferential trade liberalization) and its attendant economic blocs. The Association is greater than the sum of its parts. As a regional entity, addressing regional issues collectively (mostly economic ones as we have just seen), it can offer something more than the ten separate countries that constitute it, creating some interest in cooperation for mutual gains (Muthiah, 1987).

Southeast Asia today is also a much more predictable and stable region than the Southeast Asia of the early post-independent era, truly a time of turmoil. And while territorial disputes among ASEAN countries persist to this day, all member states are deeply committed to resolving their differences through peaceful means and in the spirit of mutual accommodation. Although, in some cases, a settlement may be far off, there is little prospect that these disputes will lead to military clashes, all the more as, as we just saw, there is still a strong preference for national self-help in bilateralism in managing security affairs. Differences and disputes are often settled through negotiations or shelved in the interest of promoting better bilateral relations.

Another unifying factor, one closely related to the factors we have just discussed, has been ASEAN's plan to move the grouping to a higher plane of cooperation through the establishment of an ASEAN Community and the momentum it has gained since. Built on three pillars (economic, political, and social) under the motto 'one vision, one identity, one community,' and scheduled to come into effect by the end of 2015, it envisions "an integrated community politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible" and aims to "strengthen existing bonds and break down borders." Still, getting member states' citizens to think of the region as a whole and develop an ASEAN mindset will take time.

Conclusion

As the largest, most comprehensive, and best-known regional grouping, the EU readily invites comparison with other regional trading arrangements, none of which having practiced anything approaching the level of economic integration and political cooperation practiced by the union. The EU has become the benchmark by which the level of integration of other regional groupings is

assessed and a model to emulate; which raises the issue of whether ASEAN leaders should look at the EU as a model to follow or, on the contrary, as a cautionary tale. In other words, should ASEAN become a Southeast Asian version of the EU (a highly-institutionalized organization with a common currency and a central bank) or on the contrary should it adhere to the principle of organic growth and follow its own paths (which some commentators view as an obstacle to close cooperation)?

ASEAN leaders have long played down ideas such as a common currency or a regional financial market for Southeast Asia. So, let's dispense with the fiction that one day ASEAN will become a Southeast Asian version of the EU. The paths taken by ASEAN and the EU will never be identical if for nothing else, for the simple reason that ASEAN leaders will not accept the pooling of sovereignty that an Asian version of the EU would imply. It is their view that a high level of diversity and interests with a regional grouping does necessarily require strong supranational authorities. In other words, effective cooperation can be achieved without a high level of institutionalization.

First, as former colonies (except for Thailand), ASEAN members have been extremely sensitive about being “bullied” not only by the West but also by any foreign entity (including within their own ranks) and have been animated by the same resolve not to relinquish any significant measure of their national sovereignty to any transnational ASEAN institution. In short, they are determined to follow their own path and do it “the ASEAN Way.”

Second, all members understand the benefits of working together as a group. This is precisely what brought them together in the first place. They knew that if each country pursued its own limited objectives and dissipated its meager resources in overlapping or even conflicting endeavors, their fragmented economies would not prosper. ASEAN leaders have long realized that only united action would enable them to tap into the rich potential of the region.

Third, although differences of outlook among member countries will remain, they will continue to be overcome through a maximum of goodwill and understanding, faith and realism as has been the case for most of the last 47 years,



all the more as the level of cooperation among members has been steadily growing, with the region now marching toward economic integration.

Fourth, ASEAN leaders have long recognized that unless they assumed their common responsibility to shape their own destiny, the region would remain fraught with danger and tension. In other words, members have long recognized that to succeed, they have to marry national

thinking with regional thinking and think not only of their respective national interests but posit them against regional interests.

Clearly, the choice of “unity in diversity” as the motto for ASEAN Community is no accident as it epitomizes the belief among ASEAN members that regional cooperation is not incompatible with a high level of diversity within the grouping

.Appendix

The Five Founding Fathers of ASEAN and the current Logo which represents the 10 member nations. (google)



A group picture of the Founding Fathers (1967)



Additional members

From left : Narciso Ramos (the Philippines), Adam Malik (Indonesia), Thanat Khoman (Thailand), Tun Abdul Razak (Malaysia) and S. Rajaratnam (Singapore)

- Brunei Darussalam (1984)
- Republic of Vietnam (1995)
- Lao People's Democratic Republic (1997)
- Union of Myanmar (Burma) (1997)
- Kingdom of Cambodia (1999)

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