

Southeast Asia: From ASEAN to ASEAN Community towards COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper describes how ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asia) was established and why ASEAN Community was founded after the cold war. It also analyses the success and failure of ASEAN Community compared to EU. Sub-regional groups in ASEAN and intra-region organizations such as India Act East and Mekong-Ganga Cooperation which try to cooperate with ASEAN Community and East Asia are also discussed. Regional organizations in Asia and Southeast Asia are impacted by COVID-19 instead of working to meet the objectives in 2025. The impact of COVID-19 to regional cooperation are tremendous, especially in social security and labor movement. These lead to the worst sectors affected by pandemic, such as accommodation and food services, tourism, wholesale trade, transportation, and construction, etc. The author suggests that concept of ASEAN way (no interference) should be changed to flexible or constructive engagement in order to help each other, not leave any countries in the region behind. The success of ASEAN cooperation after the COVID-19 has been solved are also recommended by the author.

Keywords: ASEAN, ASEAN Community, India Act East, Sub-regional groups, COVID-19 Pandemic

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Southeast Asia came for a long way to establish ASEAN. After the Cold war, Five Ministers of Foreign Affairs, namely Adam Malik of Indonesia, Tun Abdul Razak of Malaysia, Narciso Ramos of the Philippines, S. Rajaratnam of Singapore and Thanat Khoman of Thailand, agreed to sign the document to form the Association of Southeast Asia or ASEAN.

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These founding fathers were the first ASEAN leaders who initiated ASEAN by Southeast Asia region itself.

The cause of forming ASEAN was the Cold War which created tensions between the U.S., the Soviet Union and China shaped events related to the Vietnam War and CLM (Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) became the Communist countries in 1975. The leaders of five Southeast Asian Countries created ASEAN because they afraid of Domino Theory, a theory prominent from the 1950's to the 1980's.

The Cold War came to an end in 1989. The globalization became the issues that every country, including ASEAN, must adjust and adapt both internal and external affairs. The Omni direction was considered world-wide in shaping foreign relations making. It was collective will of the nations with the purposes of cooperation in social, economic, cultural technical, educational and other fields, especially in promoting of peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law and adherence to the principles of the United Nations (ASEAN Secretariat. 2008)

ASEAN celebrated its 30 years anniversary in 1997 once its membership increased to ten countries of Southeast Asia Region. Consequently, the shaves on logo rose to ten-representing ten countries with the norm of "One Vision, One Identity" (Ibid.) amid the economic crisis (Thomyam Kung) which started from Thailand. Anyway, countries of ASEAN had agreed with the visions to 2020 that were: Outward looking, Living in Peace, Stability and Prosperity which bonded together with partnership in dynamic development in a community of caring society. (Ibid.). Anyway, these visions did not meet the objectives enough because each country solved their economic problems by their own with no interference with each other regarding the principle of ASEAN since 1967. That is why there was inequality in ASEAN as of now.

After 1997, member states of ASEAN endorsed Bali Concord II in the 9th ASEAN Summit on 7-8 October 2003 in Bali, Indonesia. The main objective was to pursue closer economic integration by 2020. They agreed on forming ASEAN Community by agreement to establish 3 pillars of ASEAN namely, ASEAN Political and Security Cooperation (APSC), ASEAN Economic Cooperation (AEC), and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Cooperation (ASCC). In 12th ASEAN Summit in Cebu, Philippines on 13 January 2012, Cebu Declaration on Blueprint of ASEAN Charter was endorsed and agreed to accelerate the establishment of ASEAN Community by 2015. This is the long journey of ASEAN-to-ASEAN Community for 48 years. ASEAN COMMUNITY ascertained that the goal of ASEAN's founding fathers of improving the lives of its people was reflected on the region's economic and cultural development,

social progress, regional peace and security, mutual assistance in training and research, improving of living standard of the people of the member states.

The member countries have drafted the visions up to 2025 in order to:

1. Consolidate the ASEAN Community through deeper and more comprehensive process of integration.
2. Enhance ASEAN Centrality.
3. Deepen equitable development of the ASEAN member states.
4. Strengthen a more connected ASEAN.

The important matters are:

Some countries did not agree on which pillars they will be going to start first and ASEAN Secretariat had no power to enforce them. This different opinion affected the unity of ASEAN. Thailand wanted to concentrate the Economic Community first instead of the other pillars, like socio-cultural pillar. This is because Thailand wanted to solve economic problems in the country at that time. In the past, AEC was not successful in many matters such as Custom union and Economic union like European Union because ASEAN could not enforce AEC into Total Economic Integration like EU. Anyway, now we are more successful on Free Trade Area. Because of ASEAN way, we cannot interfere in internal affairs of each other which are the barrier of AEC in doing the other matters like European Union.

Unlike EU (European Union), Supra-national organization can enforce all the members that violate the rules and regulations, especially in economic matters but ASEAN does not has. This being so, the ASEAN is too slow in taking decision. This slow development is the cause of creating the sub-regional within ASEAN, which is more dynamic, closer and easier to coordinate and cooperate. The sub-regional within ASEAN which now active are: BIMP (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines); IMTGT (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand Growth Triangle; SIJORI growth triangle (Singapore, Johore Bahru of Malaysia, and Riau islands of Indonesia; GMS (The People Republic of China-Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Lao-PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand); Ayeyarwady-Chao Phraya-Mekong (Myanmar, Lao-PDR, Thailand and Vietnam). ASEAN also establishes sub-regional groups with the outsider, such as ASEAN plus Three (ASEAN+Japan, China, Korea) and ASEAN+6 (ASEAN+Japan, China, Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand); BIMSTEC which acts as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia composed of Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan Economic Cooperation. This sub-regional

group does not work well because of some conflicts within the countries. Another sub-regional group is Mekong-Ganga cooperation which is a component of the “Look East Policy” of India concentrating on connectivity with Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia Myanmar, Cambodia, Lao-PDR and Vietnam. This is the two large rivers in the region, Ganga and Mekong. Later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi upgraded it to “Act East Policy”. The “Act East Policy” was launched at the East Asia Summit in Myanmar in November 2014. The focus of the “Look East Policy” at that time was to increase economic cooperation with the Southeast Asian nations while the “Act East Policy” aims to create economic and security integration. The focus areas are Southeast Asia as well as East Asia. The objectives are to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties, and develop a strategic relationship with countries in Asia-Pacific region through continuous engagement at regional, bilateral and multilateral levels. Importantly is to increase interaction of the North-Eastern Indian States with other neighboring countries. Under the “Act East Policy”, the Government of India is relying on Culture, Connectivity, and Commerce (C’s). More than that India looks to bolster its standing as a regional power and a counterweight to the strategic influence of the People’s Republic of China. While China changed political reform to Belt and Road Initiative, India also changed strategy to create Indo-Pacific Cooperation (ASEAN Watch, p.9) by initiating “Act East India” at the first stage in order to expand economic.

If we look at the development of ASEAN Community, sub-regional groups and inter-regional groups that I mentioned earlier, they want to create the economic development within the countries and across the regions of which the people have different values. So, some ideas for development are not successful enough because they lack mutual understanding of each other.

If we consider the regional cooperation and integration according to concept of Karl Deutsch (Deutsch,1966). He suggested that the organizations will be successful if those organizations have Security Community which a group of people “believing that they have come to agreement on at least one point that social problems must and can be solved by processes of peaceful change”. People in this security community are also bound by “the sense of community, the mutual sympathy, trust, and common interest” (Adler&Barnett, 1998). Both Deutsch and Adler believed on Supra-national organization to control the community towards meeting the objectives. A major impetus in this, is the book entitled “Security Community” (Deutsch, Ibid.). If we consider this concept, ASEAN Community and other sub-regional and integration organizations in Southeast Asia and Asia have loosely structure. They unite by cooperation and coordination which do not have supra-national

organizations to enforce the member states followed the rules and regulations. That is why the success of the cooperation are less successful than the EU of which ASEAN Community tried to follow the concept of its integration.

Regarding ASEAN Community itself, the motto of “One Vision, One identity, and One Community” are rather far from reality because the people have no shared values and rather think of national interest than common interest. More than that the concept of interference in ASEAN is the barrier to cooperate among the member states regarding Deutsch and Adler’s concept. If ASEAN Community have no strength, it is easy to be intervened by the super- powers or by the countries who have more power in the region. So, the regional organizations in Asia including ASEAN Community just coordinate to do the matters loosely but the community building is successful or not depends on the common interest of the organizations. My suggestion in 21st century is that ASEAN should change the ASEAN way (no interference) to flexible or constructive engagement that every country can examine each other in development and solve the problems within the region. This will meet the objectives and motto of ASEAN Community. Otherwise, they will find extremely hard to solve the transnational issues that affect all of the countries in the region, such as migration, drug problems, human trafficking, COVID-19 at present. We should help and look at each other during the time of crisis.

Now I will focus on the birth of COVID-19 in 2019 that affected the cooperation of Asia and Southeast Asia. Before this crisis, both Regional and sub-regional were continually active to create connectivity but those plans of every country was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. The virus was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The World Health Organization declared a Public Health Emergency of International concern regarding COVID-19 on 30 January 2020, and later declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020. (IMF Blog.). This COVID-19 creates so many problems in the regions for development the regional cooperation and integration around the globe, especially in developing countries in Asia and Southeast Asia cooperation. Because of no barrier in this globalization, migration to each country is very easily and these people bring the decease to other countries which affect the development in many matters. Some countries changed the development plan or canceled the projects because they must concentrate on solving the COVID-19 first.

The impact of COVID-19 on Asia and Southeast Asia cooperation are tremendous, especially in human security. It is not only a health crisis, but also a human security crisis. The pandemic demands a human security approach of comprehensive, across-the-board human protection and empowerment. So, a medical solution alone is not enough. Measures

should also address knock-on effect in health, economics, politics, society and culture in Southeast Asia.

On economic front, the pandemic has caused an economic contraction more serious than the global financial crisis in 2008. The global value chain has been hard. The economic effect is everywhere. The closures and lockdowns have affected both goods and services industries. The pandemic also impact politics, both domestic and international, for example, China is claiming success in battling the virus and its spearheading the provision of medical assistance to ASEAN Countries competing with the U.S in order to seek power in this region.

Regarding the culture, COVID-19 has changed the characteristic of people of some countries, such as they have more discipline, keep cleaning, change the way of eating, being patient and generosity, etc. In shaping a regional response, ASEAN should utilize its existing ASEAN and East Asia Summit to evaluate the situation. Regular teleconferencing by leaders can help enable the identification of challenges, the sharing of best practices and the creation of new approaches to address the pandemic and its knock-on effects. Regional cooperation with common interest will ease the fear and want of entire regional population.

Aside from social security in many matters that I mentioned earlier, the pandemic has highlighted the weak foundations of Southeast Asia labor systems. Restrictions on the movement of people and the sudden stoppage or severe downscaling of economic activities to contain the propagation of COVID-19 are having a strong impact on informal workers. The sectors worst affected by pandemic, such as accommodation and food service, tourism, wholesale and retail trade, transportation, and construction-all have a particularly high proportion of informal labor. According the 2019 ASEAN Report, the informal employment rate in the accommodation and food services sectors ranged from 81 percent to 99 percent in Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia and it can be estimated that in the other six of ASEAN Nations. Before the pandemic, countries like the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam promoted the transition to formal employment, particularly by introducing voluntary social security schemes for informal workers. In Thailand and Vietnam this took the form of unconditional cash transfers, in the Philippines it was a form of work-for-assistance, and Indonesia expanded unemployment benefits to enable previously informally employed workers to gain access. ASEAN member states recognize this which reflected in a study recently published by the ASEAN Secretariat, "A Rapid Assessment: the impact of COVID on Livelihoods across ASEAN." (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020)

For conclusion, ASEAN developed its organization from Political oriented to economic oriented which followed the concept of European Union. Though it is not remarkably successful

like EU, but ASEAN can develop according to ASEAN Concept which is rather cooperation and coordination. The problem of ASEAN is that the member states concern on national interest rather than common interest. Now is the time for stronger commitment to make transition to Flexible or constructive engagement rather than no interference that ASEAN respect before. ASEAN should change according to the current situation. More important, transaction among the states should be done effectively.

For the Success after the COVID-19 has been solved, ASEAN should concentrate on the following matters:

1. Enhancing Macroeconomic and financial stability. From the past crisis, policy frameworks overly designed for rapid growth can destabilize financial market, damaging economic development.

2. Supporting equitable growth. ASEAN's economic growth must not only be rapid and sustainable, but also inclusive and equitable.

3. Promoting competitiveness and innovation. Globalization, marked by rapid progress in transportation and communication technology, has changed the way ASEAN production systems are organized.

4. Protecting the environment. Protecting the environment leads to a better quality of life on the path toward realizing the 22030 aspirations for a "RICH" ASEAN.

As ASEAN strives to fulfill its development in the future, the following enable factors should be considered:

1. Developing financial markets which need to provide efficient banks and financial institutions working alongside deep and integrated markets.

2. Harnessing human capital. Better human capital tends to generate large social gains for economy and to benefit individual.

3. Building seamless connectivity. This is the ability to travel, transit, and trade across the borders which build a borderless economic community between and among the regions.

4. Strengthening governance. The quality of governance has a huge impact on economic development, with institutions playing a large role. The lack of good institution makes it impossible for developing economies to attract high and sustained levels of investment.

ASEAN has traveled far since 1967. Its milestone of an AEC is fast approaching. The path beyond 2015, the formation of a borderless ASEAN economic community by 2030 requires a solid vision and strategy for retaining centrality in Asia and Southeast Asia regionalism.

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