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Is ASEAN a Community?

By Barry Desker

Synopsis

As ASEAN celebrates its 50th anniversary it is instructive to ask whether the grouping has achieved its primary goal of creating an ASEAN Community.

Commentary

ON 8 AUGUST, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Bangkok Declaration commemorating the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The regional grouping's signature achievement is that it has created an environment of regional security and growing mutual confidence among member states, which promoted economic growth and internal stability. It has also facilitated regional relationships with the major powers as well as international and regional organisations.

Initially, ASEAN provided the gel which helped the pro-Western governments in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand broaden their international support in response to the threats of domestic communist insurgencies and a widening war in Indochina. But progress was slow. As newly independent states, the focus was on building a sense of nationhood, not creating a commitment to a broader regional identity. This changed in 1975 following the emergence of communist regimes in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos and an awareness that the United States was unlikely to intervene to combat the threat posed by communist insurgencies after its defeat in Vietnam.

Most Successful Regional Body after EU

While strengthening economic cooperation provided the public rationale for the first ASEAN Summit held in Bali in February 1976, security considerations shaped the

internal dynamics of the process leading to the Summit. The Bali Declaration of ASEAN Concord was the key document arising from the Summit. Its political provisions included a commitment to settle intra-regional differences by peaceful means as well as agreement on the establishment of the ASEAN Secretariat.

A major outcome of the Summit was the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which became the foundational instrument for ASEAN in the ensuing decades. As the Treaty is open for accession by other States in and outside Southeast Asia, it now boasts 35 states parties, including all ASEAN countries and major powers.

The Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia in December 1978 provided the sternest test for ASEAN. The effective ASEAN response at the United Nations led to the 1991 Paris Peace Accords, Vietnam's military withdrawal from Cambodia and prevention of a Vietnamese fait accompli. This resulted in international recognition of ASEAN as the most successful regional organisation after the European Union.

Underlying Reality

Nevertheless, the underlying reality is that ASEAN succeeded because of the consensus among the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. This was facilitated by the end of the Cold War, highlighted by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, as well as China's efforts to break its diplomatic isolation following Western sanctions after the 1989 Tiananmen massacres. This paved the way for Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia to join ASEAN from 1995 to 1999.

Until the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in November 2007, ASEAN was essentially a diplomatic community linking the foreign ministries of the region. As the ASEAN states, with the exception of Singapore, were commodity producers, their economies were competitive, not complementary.

Substantive ASEAN economic cooperation was only agreed at the fourth ASEAN Summit held in Singapore in 1992, which declared that an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) would be established within 15 years.

Although ASEAN has played an important role in promoting trade liberalisation, the most significant deregulatory measures took place at the national level when ASEAN states were faced with collapsing economies during the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98.

Two-tier ASEAN

But the lack of pre-conditions for membership has resulted in a 'two-tier' ASEAN. While the six earlier members plus Vietnam could meet the demands for greater economic integration, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos remain mired in their least developed status.

The adoption of the ASEAN Charter in November 2007 marked the institutionalisation of a hitherto loosely structured organisation. The creation of a

legal personality, an enhanced role for the Secretariat, the establishment of an inter-governmental human rights body, promotion of a 'people-oriented' ASEAN and adoption of the principle of 'shared commitment and collective responsibility' were significant outcomes contained in the Charter.

Supporters of ASEAN see the establishment of the ASEAN Community at the end of 2015 as a demonstration of its institutional maturity. Considerable attention within ASEAN is given to the three community pillars – political-security, economic and sociocultural. However, there is poor cross-sectoral interaction and the lack of a 'whole of ASEAN' approach.

The focus of ASEAN policymakers is on their own sectors and enhancing cross-sectoral coordination is a work in progress. One cause is that the ASEAN Secretariat continues to be poorly funded and is ineffective in playing a bridging role. The gap between rhetoric and commitment is seen in the humble budget for the ASEAN Secretariat at US\$20 million in 2017.

Limits to Regional Institution Building

More importantly, those of us who participate actively in ASEAN activities need to recognise the limits to regional institution building. Aside from Thailand, the ASEAN countries only became independent after World War II. Although ASEAN states are old societies (except for Singapore), they are new states.

Loyalties are centred on the local level. Clan, village, religious, language and ethnic ties tend to be emphasised. Only in recent years is commitment to the nation-state receiving greater support, especially in the urban areas, with better education, improved connectivity and greater capacity of the central government.

The challenge for each of the ASEAN states is to build a sense of loyalty and commitment to the state. Ethnic, religious and class cleavages test the stability of ASEAN states. ASEAN has helped to ensure a more secure external environment but we need to recognise that the greatest challenges confronting member states at this time are internal.

A commitment to ASEAN only exists among policymakers, academics, journalists and those who participate in ASEAN-centred activities. By contrast, for most of the diverse peoples living in Southeast Asia, the idea of an ASEAN Community with shared values and a common identity looking towards a common destiny is a wish still to be fulfilled.

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