

ASEAN: AN UNEXPECTED SUCCESS STORY

Against All Odds, the Ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, Has Grown into One of the Most Viable and Successful Regional Organizations in the World

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When the Organisation of African Unity decided to change its name to the African Union in 2002, it was clear that this change was inspired by a desire to replicate the most successful regional organization in the world: the European Union. This may have been a major strategic mistake. The European Union experience holds few lessons for Africa or other developing regions.

By contrast, the second most successful regional organization in the world, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), provides more valuable lessons. This is because ASEAN was destined to fail, not to succeed. Indeed, when ASEAN was founded on August 8, 1967 in Bangkok by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, it would have been difficult to find a more troubled region than Southeast Asia.

This is how veteran Singaporean diplomat, Bilahari Kausikan, described the fraught climate in the region in 1967: “Consider the situation in 1967. All five ASEAN countries faced Chinese-inspired, if not directly backed, internal Communist insurgencies.... At the same time, almost every member of the five original ASEAN members was at the other’s throat.”

He notes that racial tensions were running high between Malaysia and Singapore, which had recently separated. Indonesia, which had undergone a failed and bloody coup in 1965, had just ended an undeclared war against Singapore and Malaysia. The

Philippines had laid claim to a large chunk of Sabah, an east Malaysian state. And proto-irredentist movements on their borders plagued relations between Malaysia and Thailand as well as between Indonesia and the Philippines.

Many contemporary observers shared this pessimistic view of Southeast Asia’s prospects. United States Supreme Court Justice William Douglas was quoted as

▷ A meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) foreign ministers in Singapore, Feb. 6, 2018.
Calvin Wong/Reuters



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saying that Southeast Asia, “confronted with staggering problems...rich in people and in resources and a prize for the Soviet empire builders—will long be turbulent and uneasy.” Columbia University professor Nathaniel Peffer was dismissive of the potential benefits of a Southeast Asian regional organization: “For practical purposes, having regard to the situation that confronts us in Southeast Asia in 1954, what would a Southeast Asia organization amount to? The situation is clear enough; Indo-China falling partly under communist domination at the best, wholly under communist domination at the worst, and Thailand first and then Burma falling under the red shadow.”

Even if politics had not troubled the region in 1967, Southeast Asia would still have been unsuitable ground for an exercise in regional cooperation. Samuel Huntington’s famous argument on the “clash of civilizations” is pertinent. The current conflicts in the Middle East and the recent strain of xenophobic populism rising in the West would seem to bear out his theory. And given that no other region on our planet is as diverse as Southeast Asia, we should have expected to find ASEAN dead on arrival.

“Balkans of Asia”

In most of the world, the major civilizations largely live apart in separate geographical areas. Christians live in Europe and the Americas, Chinese–Confucianists live in China and East Asia, and Muslims live in an arc from Morocco to Indonesia. Hindus live mostly in India, and Buddhists are found sprinkled from Sri Lanka to China, Korea, and Japan. Only in Southeast Asia do all these different cultures and civilizations meet. No other region in the world can match its cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic diversity. In a relatively small geographical space, there are 240 million Muslims, 130 million Christians, 140 million Buddhists and seven million Hindus. This range is remarkable in itself. Yet, it actually masks an even deeper cultural diversity. For instance, most of the Acehnese and Javanese people in Indonesia are Muslim. However, culturally, these two ethnic groups could not be more different. This is one reason why the Acehnese fought a bitter war of separation from Indonesia for several decades.

One well-known British historian, C.A. Fisher, described Southeast Asia as the “Balkans of Asia,” adding that it was even more diverse than the Balkans of Europe. He predicted trouble for the region. Similarly, Thanat Khoman, one of the five founding fathers of ASEAN, wrote: “In terms of power politics, Southeast Asia became more or less Balkanized, as Eastern Europe had been on the eve of World War I. Each nation, following its own destiny, spoke a political language of its own, which was not generally understood. There was neither unison nor a lingua franca.”

In short, when ASEAN was founded, there was understandably very little hope for its survival. But ASEAN has done more than survive: it has succeeded. No other regional organization has done as much to improve the living conditions of a broad

swath of humanity. The more than 600 million people living in the region have seen remarkable progress in the fifty years since the formation of the association. ASEAN has brought peace and prosperity to a troubled region, generated inter-civilizational harmony in the most diverse corner of the planet, and brought hope to many people. In an era when globalization and technological advancements are bringing once-distant civilizations closer together, ASEAN is a living laboratory which proves that the clash of civilizations can be avoided.

The Far-Reaching ASEAN Effect

The organization may have also acted as a critical catalyst for China's peaceful rise. As Mahbubani wrote for the *Straits Times*, "In the 1980s, the strategic alignment of interests between ASEAN, China, and the United States to reverse Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia enabled China to open up to the world. In the 1990s, after the West isolated China following the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, ASEAN kept engaging with China. In the 2000s, ASEAN reacted enthusiastically to China's proposal for enhanced economic cooperation, which also coincided with China's entry into the World Trade Organisation."

ASEAN also provided China with a face-saving platform to engage with other major powers during times of tension. In 1998, for example, tensions ran high between China and Japan, in part because Chinese President Jiang Zemin had criticized Japan's wartime atrocities during a visit to Japan. It was politically difficult for the Chinese and Japanese leaders to meet bilaterally—to diffuse tensions and build bridges—without losing face. However, they were able to do so at the ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, and South Korea) meeting in Hanoi later that year. And, perhaps most importantly, by creating stability in Southeast Asia, ASEAN allowed China to focus on achieving growth instead of concerning itself with regional security.

Southeast Asia also provides a burst of optimism in an era of growing economic pessimism. This once-impoverished region has experienced remarkable economic growth. World Bank President Jim Yong Kim observed that in just thirty years, Vietnam has reduced extreme poverty from 50 percent to roughly 3 percent—"an astounding accomplishment." Indonesia, once an example of continuing and persistent poverty, has one of the most optimistic youthful populations in the world. According to the Conference Board Global Consumer Confidence Survey, in the fourth quarter of 2017, Indonesian consumer confidence was the third highest in the world. The Philippines's was the highest.

ASEAN has provided its member states with a better negotiating platform than they could have achieved on their own. Their economies have been boosted by the ASEAN Free Trade Area agreement and by ASEAN's free-trade agreements with

other major economies such as China, India, Japan, and South Korea, as well as Australia and New Zealand. And, following the launch of the ASEAN Economic Community on December 31, 2015, ASEAN now has a projected average annual growth of 5.2 percent from 2016 to 2020. By 2030, analysts estimate, its combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) could increase fivefold to \$10 trillion, and it could become the fourth-largest single market in the world.

Moreover, ASEAN has created an indispensable diplomatic platform that regularly brings all the great powers together and provides conducive environments for them to talk to each other. Such platforms are crucial, as many leading geopolitical thinkers predict rising tensions between great powers—especially between America and China. Within ASEAN, a culture of peace has evolved as a result of assimilating the Indonesian custom of *musyawarah* and *mufakat* (consultation and consensus). Now ASEAN has begun to share these cooperative norms with the larger Asia-Pacific region—and beyond. More than thirty countries have acceded to ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). Besides providing an important platform for the great powers and regional players to engage with each other, ASEAN-led regional fora—such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus)—further solidify these cooperative norms in the region.

ASEAN has facilitated China’s peaceful rise by generating an ecosystem of peace that moderates aggressive impulses. Thai journalist Kavi Chongkittavorn notes that, for example, China acceded to the TAC, which specifies that ASEAN-China relations are to be “non-aligned, non-military, and non-exclusive.” China then applied what it learned from this experience with ASEAN to its relations with central Asia. Scott Blakemore writes in *Culture Mandala* that in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), China “has taken a leading role in developing its principles and norms and therefore it has seen the benefit of the ‘ASEAN Way’ and adopted it to Central Asia. Indeed, it is not surprising to find that the ‘ASEAN Way’ is, in many ways, similar to the SCO’s ‘Shanghai Spirit’ of mutual trust and benefit, equality, consultation, respect for different civilisations, and common prosperity.” Thus, ASEAN’s effect has grown far beyond the confines of the region.

Perfect Organization?

Does this mean that ASEAN is the perfect regional organization? Absolutely not. Its many imperfections have been well documented, especially in the Western media. For example, *The Economist* observed on January 2, 2016 that “grandiose statements from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are the region’s Christmas crackers: they appear at regular intervals, create a commotion but contain little of

substance....There is no mechanism to enforce the group's many agreements and treaties. Regional banking systems and capital markets remain unintegrated. Tariffs may vanish, but non-tariff barriers pop up in their place. Members continue to set their own intellectual-property, land-use and immigration policies."

These criticisms are not wrong. ASEAN never progresses in a linear fashion. It often moves like a crab: it takes two steps forward, one step backwards and one step sideways. Viewed over a short period, progress is hard to see. But when one takes a longer view, analyzing progress decade by decade, ASEAN's evolution becomes visible. Initial ASEAN meetings were characterized by a palpable distrust, in light of the bilateral disagreements between the founding members. Yet, twenty years later, an undeniable camaraderie had developed. Although ASEAN was formed to fight against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, especially from Indochina, thirty years later, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia actually joined ASEAN. ASEAN had even operated with no formal charter since its founding until 2007, a whole forty years later. Each of these crucial developments must have seemed inconceivable in 1967.

ASEAN has also escaped dysfunctions that beset many other regional organizations. For example, many regional organizations are dominated by one country, instead of operating on a basis of equality. Because the Organization of American States is dominated by the United States, it cannot—unlike ASEAN—be inclusive and incorporate a Communist Party-run state like Cuba. Similarly, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is dominated by China, which sets the agenda. When a regional organization is dominated by one power, its other members have less of a say over the workings and decisions of the organization. Naturally, they will not develop a strong sense of ownership of the organization. Furthermore, the fact that no one member state dominates ASEAN is a source of trust for third parties. It means that the organization will not make decisions which serve only to promote the interests of a major power.

One essential paradox about ASEAN needs to be observed: ASEAN's strength can be found in its weakness. ASEAN has emerged as the indispensable platform for great-power engagement in the Asia-Pacific region precisely because it is too weak to be a threat to anyone; as a result, all the great powers instinctively trust it. This even allows for dialogue with North Korea, which is what the Philippines's foreign ministry spokesman Robespierre Bolivar noted when he lauded the ASEAN Regional Forum (or ARF) as the only venue in which governments of the region can have candid, free-flow dialogue with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. As George Yeo, the former Singapore foreign minister, explained it: "In the end, everybody came to the conclusion that however ungainly, however inefficient, however elliptical ASEAN's ways are, it's still better than not having an ASEAN. That is the genius of ASEAN foreign policy. In the end, almost with a sneer, they accepted that ASEAN should be

in the driving seat. Yes, ASEAN's leadership is the most preferred because no other driver would be trusted by the others.”

In comparison, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), founded in 1985, is dysfunctional because the bitter India–Pakistan rivalry prevents any real cooperation. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is dysfunctional because the level of trust among its members is low, despite the organization having been around since 1981. In principle, the level of trust and confidence should have been high within the GCC since the member states share many commonalities, including language (Arabic), religion (Islam), social structure (traditional ruling families), and geopolitical interests (fear of Iran). Yet, the recent diplomatic crisis in the Gulf has revealed undeniable fault lines within the GCC. The SAARC faces a similar issue: *The Hindu* reported in December 2017 that speaker after speaker at an international conference on the changing dynamics in SAARC cited the trust deficit as one of its biggest challenges going forward.

The strongest regional organization is, of course, the European Union. Its combined GDP of \$18 trillion dwarfs those of the other organizations. But it is difficult to take the European Union as a model for regional integration. Its nature is not easy to discern. In theory, it is an economic union designed to promote economic integration. In practice, it was set up primarily to prevent another major war in Europe. Because the Europeans had a huge incentive to put their violent rivalries behind them, and because the European Union is a mono-civilizational club of Christian countries, it is not surprising that the European Union is the world's most successful regional organization. And even though it is organizationally strong, it has faced unique challenges and vulnerabilities, with the threat of Grexit in 2012 and the surprise development of Brexit in 2016.

On the other hand, ASEAN is a multi-civilizational club of unparalleled diversity. It has helped its members overcome the unresolved and seemingly insurmountable conflict and distrust that roiled the region in 1967. It has achieved remarkable economic growth and raised its people out of abject poverty—combined, ASEAN's GDP is now the fifth largest in the world. It has taken a position of geopolitical weakness and turned it into a strength. This is why all developing countries and regional organizations should make a deep effort to study and understand the hidden genius behind ASEAN's success. In theory, ASEAN should have failed. But in practice, it has succeeded brilliantly. By transforming one of the planet's most conflict-ridden and poverty-stricken regions in the 1960s into one of its most peaceful and prosperous regions, it is clear that ASEAN has delivered a true miracle. This is why only ASEAN can serve as a beacon for the rest of the world.

Parts of this essay are adapted from Mahbubani's book, The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace.