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# DOES ASEAN MATTER?



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*This book is dedicated to my loving family.*

*Sranya, who has been at my side throughout our life-journey; whose love, ceaseless support, understanding and encouragement have made all possible. She is the reason for my being.*

*Annisa, her husband Ryan and son Samudra; Anantha and his wife Carla; and our youngest, Andreyka, and their future children; forever sources of joy, happiness and pride to their parents. Driving motivations to wage a better future.*



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# Introduction

## Does ASEAN Matter?

The world that greeted the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) upon its formation in 1967<sup>1</sup> differs sharply from the one that prevails today<sup>2</sup> — fifty years after ASEAN's inception. And, more likely than not, the world in the next fifty years will bear little resemblance to the one which is current.

Indeed, for the future, as it is sometimes said, the only certainty is uncertainty itself. Change is permanent.

This book is about the present and future relevance of ASEAN. It is about ASEAN's quest for security and prosperity in a region marked by complex dynamics of power. Namely, the interplay of relations and interests among countries — large and small — which provide the settings within which ASEAN must deliver on its much-cited leadership and centrality in the region.

How can ASEAN build upon its past contributions to the peace, security and prosperity of Southeast Asia, to the wider East Asia, the Asia-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific regions? More fundamentally, and a *sine qua non*, how can ASEAN continue to ensure that peace, security and prosperity prevail in its own region: Southeast Asia? And, equally central, how can ASEAN become more relevant to the peoples of ASEAN, such that its contributions can be genuinely felt in making better the lives of its citizens?

## **Will ASEAN Continue to be Relevant in Facing Future Challenges and Opportunities?**

The milieu within which ASEAN finds itself as it commemorates fifty years of its existence is certainly a radically complex one, marked by at least two overriding qualities: connectivity and change.

More than ever, ASEAN confronts an interconnected world in which the delineation between local, national, regional and global issues is increasingly blurred. It is facing a milieu in which economic, political and social issues increasingly converge. It is navigating a world in which the indivisibility of peace, security and prosperity holds a greater truth than ever.

Yet, recent developments suggest that the apparent reality of an interconnected world does not necessarily translate into a world with a greater sense of unity of purpose and cohesion. While the past fifty years have witnessed a tremendous proliferation of formal interstate institutions and organizations, regional and global alike, all committed to manage, facilitate and, even, promote global and regional cooperation, signs of unrest and dissatisfaction currently abound. Of course, care needs to be exercised in making generalizations or extrapolating the recent experiences of specific countries or regions, the circumstances of which may be unique. However, rising populist nationalism — the sharpening of rhetoric — suggesting a zero-sum relationship between national priorities on the one hand and regional and global cooperation on the other, cannot altogether be ignored. Nor can ASEAN be oblivious to the apparent retreat of diplomacy — as a means to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts — as states increasingly demonstrate rhetorical flourishes that aggravate open divisions among them. It is certainly an environment within which ASEAN must work, both now and in the future; it must navigate the reality of an interconnected world, but which is also a politically disconnected one.

And, not least, it must address a world in which change is inherent, permanent even. External to ASEAN, as well as within it, are power dynamics that inject momentum or give life, virtuous or vicious, to this interconnected world. In essence, power dynamics which determine whether the connectivity between the local, national, regional and global levels — as well as between economic, political and security

issues — become foundations for peace and prosperity or sources for discord, conflict and underdevelopment.

This book is premised on the argument that whilst the linkages among nations are certain, their “dynamics” — the nature of such linkages — are not preordained. Countries or issues are not predetermined to be permanently mired in vicious dynamics; nor, however, are they perpetually ensconced in a virtuous setting. The dynamics are the direct outcomes of policy decisions and policy choices.

This book is about such dynamics — the dynamics of power — that confront ASEAN as it pursues peace and prosperity. It is focused on the experience of ASEAN, an organization that commemorated fifty years of existence in 2017. An organization that began life as a loose association among some of the countries of Southeast Asia but which has steadily expanded to cover virtually all the countries of the region. Not least of all, an organization that has steadily transitioned from what had been some of the sharpest, bloodiest and most destabilizing geopolitical Cold War divides the world had known, to five decades of economic development. Also, an organization that began with modest ambitions and which steadily widened and deepened the scope of its collaboration, resulting in the attainment of the ASEAN Community in 2015. And, an organization that gradually took the lead in ushering in a complex network of regional architectures in East Asia, the Asia-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific. In short, ASEAN’s contributions in Southeast Asia, and indeed beyond, have been nothing less than transformative.

However, the objective of this book is not to dwell on ASEAN’s past. Rather, it will look at episodes of the past only as they are instructive in anticipating ASEAN’s future challenges and opportunities. What have been some of the lessons learnt by ASEAN over the past fifty years? How relevant are they in addressing some of the challenges and in seizing the opportunities facing the region? How can ASEAN remain fit for purpose for the next fifty years? Will it rise to the challenges and embrace the opportunities in a way that solidifies its place among the premier organizations in the region, shaping and moulding the future not only of Southeast Asia but also beyond, of East Asia, the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific? Or, will its relevance

gradually dissipate such that it simply becomes an insignificant part of a complex and congested regional architecture?

## **Does ASEAN matter?**

The chapters that follow will expand on what I believe to have been ASEAN's three principal transformative contributions. First, in transforming the dynamics of relations among the countries of Southeast Asia. Second, in transforming the nature of ASEAN's collective engagement with the wider region. And third, in gradually enhancing the foci of its efforts, beyond the states to its peoples, the so-called people-centred and people-oriented ASEAN. To provide context, a brief chapter highlighting some of the transformational changes and contrasts between the world of 1967 and the one of today — particularly those deemed of consequence to the practice of diplomacy and statecraft — will precede the above three chapters.

I commenced this book with cautious optimism for ASEAN's future based on its past achievements and the resilience it has shown in the face of difficult challenges. However, experience has also taught me that ASEAN's past contributions have not come automatically — they have been the outcomes of concerted yet well-calibrated and well-thought-out policies. These achievements required a certain type of cooperative leadership and partnership in the region, and an unshakeable belief in the efficacy of diplomacy. Not least, ASEAN has been most successful when it has been transformative in its outlook, in constantly seeking to elevate the nature of its cooperation, as well as proactively shaping the region's architecture. At the book's conclusion, while generally remaining of a positive disposition, I have also become more acutely conscious of the challenges ahead if ASEAN is to remain relevant — to matter.

The book was written anchored in the conviction, based on some thirty years of direct personal experience in statecraft and diplomacy, that the attainment and consolidation of peace, security and prosperity are the outcomes of policy choices. Countries and regions are not forever condemned to a vicious cycle of tensions and conflict. Nor are they permanently endowed by a virtuous cycle of cooperation and peace. While the dynamics of power are ever present, the nature of

these dynamics are not a given. They are the outcome — not always as successful or as intended — of policy choices by individual policymakers.

As much of the book is based on my personal experience of ASEAN — not only while serving as foreign minister of Indonesia but also during nearly three decades of diplomatic service, much of it relating to ASEAN — no doubt it suffers from certain shortcomings. However, it is my hope that these will be adequately compensated by enhanced comprehension of the inner workings of ASEAN — the thoughts and rationale behind some of its major undertakings — at the very least, and simply, as seen from the perspective of one country, Indonesia.

All throughout I have been immensely fortunate in being able to work closely with my ASEAN foreign minister colleagues, its secretaries general and the wider ASEAN diplomatic corps. Without exception, they have represented their countries, and ASEAN, with honour and steadfast principles.

I believe that over the next fifty years ASEAN will face stark choices: To urgently consolidate ASEAN unity, aggressively wage peace, sustain and consolidate peace and prosperity, foster strategic trust, resolve territorial disputes, peacefully manage geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts, and orient itself to its peoples. Or, succumb to short-term interests, absent itself in contributing on issues that matter to the region and beyond, allow distrust — often shaped in millennia past — to deepen, and allow proxy geopolitical and geoeconomic interests to divide the region.

This book is aimed at identifying the choices ahead: between an ASEAN that matters and one that does not.

## Notes

1. At the inception in 1967, made up of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines.
2. In 2017 made up of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam.