

A UNITED REGION: THE ASEAN COMMUNITY 2015

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Bangkok, Thailand hosted on 8 August 1967 the Heads of State/Government of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, who established ASEAN through the ASEAN (Bangkok) Declaration. For these five Southeast Asian Leaders, the creation of ASEAN was the institutionalization of the ties that bound these nation-states. The five countries, aside from sharing geography, share the ties of history, culture and mutual interests, and similar challenges and problems. Given all of these, the Leaders (as heads of states/governments are called in ASEAN) found it fitting to coalesce and share in the responsibility of strengthening the economic and social stability of the region, hence the decision to institutionalize cooperation through the creation of a regional organization.

Later on, the founding members of ASEAN were joined by Brunei Darussalam on 7 January 1984, Vietnam on 28 July 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia on 30 April 1999. These ten member-states now comprise today's ASEAN. Timor Leste has indicated its willingness to join the regional association but current members are still holding discussions on this.

In the early years of ASEAN, there was skepticism regarding its lifespan, more so if it would be able to achieve its aims and purposes spelled out in the Bangkok Declaration. Despite the challenges that faced the organization and the region as a whole, ASEAN, for all its flaws and limitations, remains as the sole regional organization in Southeast Asia that embodies the interests of the ten member-states. In 2007, the Association adopted a charter that codified regional norms and commitments made by the member-states. The commitment of the organization to keep its relevance, assert its centrality, and remain as the driver is clearly manifested by ASEAN's continuing effort to integrate the region through the creation of a regional community by 2015.

This Community, as embodied in the document Bali Concord II, is comprised of three pillars: Political-Security Community, Economic Community, and Socio-cultural Community. These three pillars are not mutually exclusive of each other; rather they are closely linked and are mutually reinforcing to ensure a durable, peaceful, stable and prosperous Southeast Asian region, at least according to the governments of each member-state. Each of these pillars is guided by a Blueprint which serves as one of the roadmaps in the realization of an ASEAN Community.

The ASEAN Community was originally envisioned by the Leaders to commence in 2020. However, during the 12th ASEAN Summit held in January 2007 in Cebu, Philippines, the Leaders decided to accelerate the regional integration to 2015. One of the primary reasons for the decision to fast track regional integration was to reinforce ASEAN's centrality and to ensure that ASEAN remains as the driving force in drawing the continuously evolving regional architecture.

ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC)

The ASEAN Political-Security Community is committed to ensuring an ASEAN Community living in a peaceful, democratic, and harmonious environment. Guided by the APSC Blueprint, the APSC designed ASEAN to be a rules-based Community of shared norms and values. In addition, it binds the member-states to share in the responsibility for comprehensive security in the realization of a cohesive and stable region in light of the continued dynamism of the world at large. The commitment to the APSC is in no way detrimental to each member state's sovereign right to pursue an independent foreign policy and defense arrangement and, more importantly, the right to non-interference in each of the member-state's internal affairs.

Since the creation of ASEAN in 1967, supporters of ASEAN have always boasted one major feat: that no war has erupted in this part of the world. This is not to say, however, that differences did not arise between and among the member-states on political-security issues, for there were differences and there are existing tensions within ASEAN regarding certain issues, but the member-states are intent and committed to solving any disputes through peaceful means. The body is also cognizant of the fact that the security of one member-state is linked to one another, hence the need to promote peace and security not only within ASEAN but to the larger stage in general. Thus, the existence of regional security dialogue fora such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting (ADMM), among others, are clear manifestations that the body gives importance to dialogue to ensure peace. While critics say that these remain to be talk shops, these different platform afford the member-states the avenue to talk to one another and build trust and confidence with each other.

ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)

The end-goal of ASEAN economic integration is the full realization of an ASEAN Economic Community, wherein the region will be transformed “into a single market and production base, a highly competitive region, a region of equitable economic development, and a region fully integrated into the global economy.” The AEC has always been compared to that of the EU Single Market but it should be understood that AEC is not a customs union or a full common market. In the Philippines, it is the AEC that is almost always referenced in discussions regarding regional integration.

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The decision to create the AEC was part of ASEAN’s strong commitment to deepen and broaden economic integration which requires liberalization and cooperation among the ten member-states. But even before AEC, as early as 1977, ASEAN had already laid down the groundwork for deeper integration. And in 1992, ASEAN created the Common Effective Preferential Tariff for the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). Through the creation of AFTA, ASEAN member-states are geared towards the attainment of a common goal: that of reducing, eliminating tariffs on trade, with few exemptions, to better facilitate trade. Cutting down the cost of doing business effectively translates into a more competitive and efficient ASEAN.

The AEC can bank on ASEAN’s strengths such as the region’s strategic location, its vibrant population which is estimated at 600 million, abundant natural resources, young work force, among others. However, much work still needs to be done especially in closing the development gap between and among the member-states, i.e. ASEAN-6 and CLMV. ASEAN also needs to address the region’s poor state of infrastructure which hinders investment and the slow implementation of AEC commitments, to name a few.

ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC)

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community gives ASEAN its human face as ASCC is committed to creating an ASEAN that is people-oriented and socially responsible. As ASEAN puts it, it is a “caring and sharing society” because at the end of the day, all actions undertaken by ASEAN are meant to uplift the lives of its peoples and for the betterment of the whole Community in general.

The ASCC will work to ensure that it is the people of ASEAN who will benefit from all of these integration initiatives. ASEAN member-states are expected to invest heavily on its people’s education, training, science and technology development, job generation, and social protection. If ASEAN is able to provide these to the people, cross-cutting issues such as poverty elimination, closing the development divide, equitable economic growth, among others, will be addressed as well.

The ASCC is expected to bring into the people’s consciousness the acceptance of a regional identity and graduate from being boxed in having a domestic identity. To be able to successfully do this, the people, should first and foremost, have national consciousness to be able to promote a regional one and a shared identity. For its part, ASEAN has heavily

encouraged closer people-to-people contact by making travel easier through visa-free arrangements, educational exchanges, incorporating ASEAN studies in education curricula, among others. The initiative to create a regional identity, however, cannot be a purely governmental affair but should also start from the grassroots to gain better traction.

ASEAN Community in 2015

The year 2015 is a big year for ASEAN for the envisioned regional Community will finally materialize. But what will an ASEAN Community look like?

With regard to political-security, ASEAN will continue to be a rules-based Community especially with an ASEAN Charter in place. The member-states, as is the case right now, have promised to work more closely with one another in solving non-traditional security issues like maritime piracy, disaster management, transnational crimes, and the like. However, when it comes to traditional security issues, member-states may be hesitant to discuss some issues especially when these will impinge on their sovereignty and territorial integrity. ASEAN member-states highly value a peculiar brand of diplomacy – the ASEAN Way, hence, anything perceived to alter the status quo may not bode well for the bloc.

Integration may have birth pains in the beginning but at the end of the day, there are many opportunities that each member-state can take advantage of that will benefit the people of ASEAN.

It is in the economic pillar where ASEAN cooperation has been widely touted to be successful. The Member-States find it easier to cooperate with one another vis-à-vis the two other pillars. As such, when the AEC commences in 2015, it can be expected that the economies will aggressively open up given that barriers to trade – both tariff and non-tariff will be eliminated. Economies will be liberalized to achieve the goal of ASEAN becoming a single market and production base.

On the socio-cultural front, we should hope for an ASEAN that is more in touch with its people. Initiative towards greater people engagement should happen and we should hope that the peoples of ASEAN will have vigorous contact with one another. The road to achieving a regional identity may be hard but only in investing heavily on people-to-people initiatives will this become a reality. Continuous contact will help the peoples of ASEAN understand one another and learn the peculiarities of each and everyone's culture.

The creation of an ASEAN Community in 2015 is definitely one thing to look forward to. Integration may have birth pains in the beginning but at the end of the day, there are many opportunities that each member-state can take advantage of that will benefit the people of ASEAN. 🌿

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