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After 50 years, is ASEAN retiring or just getting started?

4 August 2017

Author: John Blaxland, ANU

Fifty years ago, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines formed ASEAN. This association of primarily non-communist and relatively free-market capitalist countries grouped at a time when the Cold War was in full stride, and its end seemed to validate their confidence. The group expanded in the late 1980s and early 1990s to include Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and eventually also Myanmar (then Burma).

Since then, ASEAN has [driven cooperation](#) between these 10 countries. Given the diversity in their demography, histories, cultures, languages, religions, economies, political systems and economic bases, it is extraordinary that this association has held together at all.



In one sense, the aspirations of establishing the ASEAN economic, political and social communities have been realised. In the 50 years since its creation, ASEAN has facilitated a massive rise in intra- and extra-regional trade along with a commensurate rise in prosperity and security. ASEAN now stands with a GDP of US\$2.5 trillion. Intra-ASEAN trade stands at over US\$545 billion and extra-ASEAN trade at US\$1.76 trillion. [Australia–ASEAN](#) trade in 2014 amounted to over US\$100 billion, which is more than Australia's trade with Japan, the EU or the United States.

In spite of this success, critics of ASEAN abound. They argue that ASEAN is becoming increasingly irrelevant in the face of pressures from China and problems in Europe, with some even predicting its demise. Are [these conceptions](#) valid? And does the 'ASEAN way' of consensus-based policy choices remain relevant today?

ASEAN has long looked to the European Union as a source of inspiration. Until recently, the EU model seemed so promising for many within ASEAN who aspired to a greater level of centralisation, integration and commonality across economic, socio-political and security issues. Important distinctions include the lack of a common currency in ASEAN and the absence of a central EU-like federal bureaucracy or government. But after the fallout from the global financial crisis, the flight of refugees flooding Europe and the apparent unravelling of the EU model as exemplified by Brexit, Europe fails to inspire ASEAN's leaders the way it used to.

But before prematurely announcing the demise of ASEAN, it is important to think about what a world without ASEAN might look like. After all, ASEAN has enabled and continues to enable a remarkable amount of interaction between key government officials, ministers and business leaders on a range of security, economic, social, environmental and other matters that likely would not happen were it not for the existence of ASEAN and its associated forums.

To extrapolate a fatal disease within ASEAN from the decline in enthusiasm for greater centralisation is to conflate issues. Without question, China looms large for ASEAN. Its economic campaigns, of which the Belt and Road Initiative is a notable example, are hard to resist. Further, its security policies have been hard to counter, with its strategy of co-opting Laos and Cambodia to prevent ASEAN summits from issuing joint declarations critical of China's policy, particularly concerning the South China Sea.

Critics look at this apparent dominance and argue ASEAN has passed its prime and is at least partly in retreat. Observers attending the occasional ASEAN-related senior officials' meeting or workshop often express frustration at the glacial pace of progress. Yet few step back to appreciate the amount of progress that has been achieved. Given the inherent fragility of such a disparate grouping of nations, the issues that ASEAN has been able to address in the last two decades is extraordinary.

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Part of the reason for the enduring utility and centrality of ASEAN is because of what Indonesian President Joko Widodo described as the 'maritime fulcrum'. He was referring to Indonesia, but it is perhaps more apt as a description of ASEAN itself. Much of the world's trade transits through Southeast Asian waters, and the region is the key gateway between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Besides that, ASEAN continues to provide a useful platform for intra-regional cooperation on a wide range of issues. It also continues to serve as a medium through which extra-regional powers can continue to engage, discuss, negotiate and avoid undue escalation of tensions.

ASEAN member states appreciate the role ASEAN has played and continues to play in fostering regional security, stability and prosperity. ASEAN has never conformed with Western aspirations for it to act with great resolve, purpose and decisiveness. Perhaps this is the very essence of the strength and enduring utility of ASEAN. In the face of growing great power competition, this versatile platform should be fostered and not condemned.

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- *Kedar Neupane*

5th August, 2017, 5:45 pm

There is no reason why ASEAN should die early. This region is the fastest growing region in the world and the grouping have so far been pragmatic in its approach to economic and social areas. This may have rightly inspired by EC/EU but only as symbolism and initially to keep the Communist China influence away from the East Asia under the US guidance. China now has become the number one economic power house and ASEAN's trade with them is the second largest. If ASEAN enters into any major political conflict the region will suffer immensely. So far, ASEAN has with great caution remained on outside of politics which would hurt Chinese interests in the region and this could be the reason why ASEAN is still functioning pretty well, unlike SAARC which is a complete disaster and a dead unity. For ASEAN, EU serves only as symbolism but not for replicating ambitious political agenda (orchestrated to early by France and Germany) lead to the eventual BREXIT. Surely riding on a fast lane for too early for too much political union without creating economic synergies within member states was a monumental failure. Further again, jumping too fast to include East European nations (after the collapse of Berlin Wall in 1989) to keep them away from Russian influence under the influence of NATO/US has continuing and detrimental effects on the unity of EU nations. Lessons learned: this move to East Europe and handling of Southern European's debt/financial/ economic crisis coupled with migration and refugee issues have ruptured the unity and lead to a total disarray in Brussels. So far ASEAN has avoided this sort of actions even when China has flexed its muscles in South China Sea. The fact is that over 60% of China's trading ships sail through South China Sea as compared to only 14% of the USA. China would not like to see any other nation messing up in this vital economic lifeline. ASEAN and other regional grouping have a lot to learn from EU experience. Stay clear of politics – focus economics, citizens welfare and maximize benefits accrued from global economic liberalization. Perhaps this is the mantra of this decade for most developing nations while USA is not standing up for its leadership global role. May be, China will !!!

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- *John Blaxland*

7th August, 2017, 7:14 am

Thanks Kedar,
It's hard to argue with what you say here.
Sincerely
John

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