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Community Building in ASEAN: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead



one vision
one identity
one community

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ASEAN: A Community of Opportunities for All

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Community Building in ASEAN: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead

**The ASEAN Secretariat
Jakarta**

FOREWORD

The year 2021 marks the commencement of an exercise towards the development of the ASEAN Post-2025 Vision. This follows from the adoption by the 37th ASEAN Summit of the *Ha Noi Declaration on the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision*. To kick start the process, a Terms of Reference of the High Level Task Force on the ASEAN Community Post-2025 Vision, prepared by Brunei Darussalam as the current Chair of ASEAN with the support of the ASEAN Secretariat, is being finalised. As mandated by the ASEAN Leaders, the High Level Task Force will undertake the visioning exercise for the ASEAN Post-2025 Vision through an inclusive and participatory approach.



It is within this context that this issue of the APSC Outlook features a collection of essays by the Secretary-General of ASEAN on the ASEAN Community's onward journey, opportunities and challenges post-2025. One essay was contained in a book entitled *25 Years of Vietnam in ASEAN: Views from the Inside*. Another has been adapted from his remarks at an International Symposium on "*Vietnam-ASEAN: 25-Year Journey and the Way Forward*". Another piece is adapted from his keynote remarks at a High-level Roundtable on "*A Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN Community: 2020 Reflections for Bolder Joint Actions*".

These three essays provide the reader with thoughts of the Secretary-General of ASEAN relative to how ASEAN could move forward post-2025, the challenges that the ASEAN Community could face beyond 2025 and how ASEAN could and should position itself in the foreseeable future, including in its external engagements. Before venturing on what the future, specifically post-2025, holds for ASEAN, it is equally important to take stock of how ASEAN has evolved thus far as a Community. It is in this context where this issue of the APSC Outlook likewise includes a piece adapted from the Secretary-General of ASEAN's remarks delivered at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in January 2020.

It is hoped that this compendium of essays would provide readers with snapshots of ASEAN's journey as well as a glimpse of what post-2025 could be for the ASEAN Community.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Tene', written in a cursive style.

ROBERT MATHEUS MICHAEL TENE
Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN
for ASEAN Political-Security Community

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Community Building and Cooperation with the UN*

Dato Lim Jock Hoi

Introduction

The year 2020 marked a rare opportunity for ASEAN to have two of its Member States – Indonesia and Viet Nam – sit in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It was also notable that Viet Nam’s election to the UNSC coincided with the country’s chairmanship of ASEAN. The opportunity given for ASEAN to share views with the Council is an acknowledgement of the recognition accorded to the important role regional organisations such as ASEAN play in promoting regional peace, stability and prosperity. Indeed, it is often said that with their knowledge and familiarity of their respective region’s nuances, regional organisations are in a good position to complement the work of the United Nations.

Towards a Peaceful and Stable Region

As it is widely recognised, the global community today is fraught with many issues and challenges, from the strategic level to the aspect of individual peoples, from the physical to the digital domain. The bottom line is how peace and stability is maintained as it is peace and stability that underpins economic prosperity. Without peace and stability, there could be no economic prosperity. But without economic prosperity, peace and stability would be difficult to achieve, much less to maintain.

It is on this premise that ASEAN, since it was founded in 1967, has worked hard so that there would be peace and stability in this part of the world, amidst diversity in political systems, and different levels of economic and social developments. By promoting economic cooperation and serving as a confidence-building platform, ASEAN has successfully enabled the Southeast Asian region to evolve, away from being previously described as the Balkans of the region, to a Community that provides opportunities to all. Indeed, the ASEAN Charter underscores the principle of comprehensive security, to respond effectively to all forms of threats, transnational crimes and transboundary challenges.

* Adapted from remarks on the theme “Cooperation between the United Nations and Regional and Sub-regional Organisations in Maintaining Peace and Security: The Role of ASEAN” delivered at the United Nations Security Council, UN Headquarters, New York on 30 January 2020.

Having gone through difficult times in history when Southeast Asia was deeply affected by wars and conflicts, the Member States of ASEAN hold high the values of peace that has been clearly stated in the ASEAN Charter as the very first purpose of ASEAN: ‘to maintain and enhance peace, security and stability and further strengthen peace-oriented values in the region’.

By signing unto the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), the Member States of ASEAN have committed themselves towards a peaceful relationship with each other guided by the principles of mutual respect, non-interference in the internal affairs of one another and peaceful settlement of disputes, among others. To date, many external partners of ASEAN have likewise acceded to the TAC, including several members of the UNSC, and other states have also manifested interest to accede to the Treaty.

But beyond the political commitment to pursue and promote a cooperative relationship is the evolution of ASEAN regionalism anchored on dialogues and consultations towards consensus. The primacy accorded to dialogues and consultations with the aim of arriving at consensus has enabled ASEAN Member States to address issues confronting the region, arrive at approaches acceptable to all as well as manage differences, enabling them to move forward, notwithstanding their diversity. It is called the ASEAN Way, a unique manner of dealing with issues, which to some observers, is something difficult to comprehend but is well understood in ASEAN. In other words, the ASEAN Way, specifically dialogues and consultations towards consensus, has become a way of life in ASEAN.

ASEAN regionalism is anchored on dialogues and consultations towards consensus

Another unique contribution of ASEAN to nurturing a conducive environment for peace and stability is the ability to initiate and be the driving force in regional mechanisms and frameworks for promoting dialogue, cooperation and confidence-building, bringing together not only ASEAN Member States but also external partners, including key players in the region and major powers of the world. These fora with ASEAN at the core, such as the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) have long become important frameworks where the culture of peace as well as the habit of dialogue and cooperation are nurtured by ASEAN, thereby helping prevent disputes and conflicts from arising.

ASEAN's achievements thus far in shaping and promoting norms that govern inter-state relations and behavior in the region have also been duly recognised. ASEAN has been able to incorporate external powers into its established rules and norms, including through their accession to the TAC, respect for the ASEAN Way and ASEAN Centrality, abiding by ASEAN's rules in participation at ASEAN-led mechanisms. ASEAN has also actively engaged in efforts to formulate norms, codes of conduct that help complement international law in ensuring that states behave in amicable ways and uphold the rule of law in managing differences, maintaining peace, security and stability.

For Economic Prosperity and Development

Keeping the region peaceful and stable has enabled ASEAN to reap the peace dividend, so to speak. With a combined GDP of USD 3 trillion in 2018, ASEAN is the fifth largest economy in the world, accounting for 3.5% of the global economy in nominal terms, and as high as 6.5% in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms. For almost two decades, ASEAN has been growing at an average annual rate of 5.3%, consistently above the global average.

ASEAN is a global trade powerhouse being the fourth largest trader in the world, accounting for more than 7% of global trade. ASEAN's total trade reached USD 2.8 trillion in 2018, more than 90% of its GDP. ASEAN's economic growth has directly translated in alleviating poverty within the region. Measured in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), the number of the ASEAN population living below the USD 1.25 PPP per day has declined from 47% in 1990 to 14% in 2015.

With almost 650 people and a growing middle, ASEAN is a very attractive market.

With a population of almost 650 million people, a rapidly growing middle class and more than half of its population under the age of 35, ASEAN is a very attractive market. With such dynamism and immense potential, ASEAN has become the world's top investment destination. In 2018, ASEAN received USD 154.7 billion of FDI flows, the highest in its history and accounts for almost 12% of global flows. ASEAN's effort in economic integration has also paid off with intra-ASEAN accounting for the highest shares in trade and investment at 23.0% and 15.9%, respectively. A major part of ASEAN integration is skilled labor mobility that is being facilitated through various mutual recognition arrangements among skilled professionals within ASEAN.

It could therefore be rightfully claimed that the vision of ASEAN's founding fathers to promote economic prosperity has today become a reality. But this positive performance should not be taken for granted. It is important for ASEAN to keep its market open and forge ahead with its reform and economic integration agenda.

It is likewise essential to narrow or close the development gap as this would contribute in ensuring the sustainability of the peace dividend ASEAN currently enjoys. It is for this reason that ASEAN puts premium on sustainable and equitable development to make sure every part of the Community including the Mekong areas are well on track with the common development path of ASEAN. It is also for this reason that sub-regional initiatives such as the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines-East Asia Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), among others, serve as building blocks for ASEAN wide integration and development.

It is also in this sense that developing human capital, including women, children and the youth has been high on ASEAN's agenda. The ASEAN Leaders in 2019 Summit noted the completion of the review regarding the implementation of the *Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plan III (2016-2020)*. They tasked the IAI Task Force to follow up on the review's recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the Work Plan and sustain work on narrowing the development divide that may exist.

ASEAN puts premium on sustainable and equitable development.

Complementing this are the poverty alleviation programmes being undertaken across ASEAN. The ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Rural Development and Poverty Eradication continues to work in "addressing challenges brought about by poverty and strengthening resilience at the community level". In 2019, they issued the *ASEAN Ministerial Statement on Adopting a Community Driven Development*. Development must be sustainable, something that been enshrined in ASEAN's agenda as the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 adopted in 2015 underlines the complementarity of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with ASEAN Community building efforts to uplift the standard of living of its peoples.

It is also worth noting that the sense among ASEAN peoples as belonging to ASEAN as a regional community has deepened. To demonstrate ASEAN's efforts as a people-oriented, people-centred Community and enhance ASEAN's abilities to provide assistance to its nationals, ASEAN has operationalised the *Guidelines on Consular Assistance by ASEAN Member States Missions in Third Countries to Nationals of Other ASEAN Member States*.

As ASEAN moves forward towards its goal of building an ASEAN Community, challenges abound. Like other regions in the world, there are a number of issues that could potentially make the Southeast Asian region unstable. And with such issues, ASEAN has taken pragmatic steps to deal with these issues and prevent them from making the region volatile, in full cognizance of the complexities of these issues. While outside observers often times view ASEAN as not doing enough, ASEAN's success or failure in dealing with these issues should be judged by whether or not ASEAN has averted conflict from arising or spreading further.

ASEAN-UN Partnership

ASEAN's Community building efforts are complemented and supported by its robust external partnerships, including the United Nations. Beyond being accorded the status of an observer at the UN General Assembly, there are established modalities for ASEAN-UN relations at various levels based on mutual benefit, from Secretariat-to-Secretariat (S2S) interaction between the two organisations and the ASEAN-UN Ministerial Meeting all the way to the ASEAN-UN Summit where ASEAN Leaders and the UN Secretary General engage in strategic dialogue. This aims at strengthening the ASEAN-UN cooperation in line with the Joint Declaration in the sphere of political-security, economic and socio-cultural cooperation.

ASEAN hopes to contribute to
the attainment of
UN Sustainable Development.

Adopted was the Complementarities Roadmap (2020-2025) to promote synergy between ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the most recent ASEAN-UN Summit in Bangkok, Thailand last November 2019. Through this Roadmap, ASEAN hopes to ensure that its own Vision 2025 contributes to the attainment of and supports the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Likewise, it is meant to ensure that the goals set forth in the sustainable development agenda are factored in as ASEAN pursues its Community building vision. The Complementarities vision is highlighted in a series of symposia on Sustainable Development Goals which ASEAN have been undertaken in partnership with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) since 2016 as well as the annual High-Level Brainstorming Dialogue on the Complementarities Initiative which ASEAN has co-organised with the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) since 2017.

Meanwhile, since the five-year Plan of Action to Implement the Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Partnership between ASEAN and the UN was put in place in 2016, tangible results have been achieved with 93% or 96 out of the 103 action lines contained in the plan, having been implemented thus far. This is a testament to the commitment of the two organisations in substantiating their Comprehensive Partnership.

Areas of Collaboration

Among the areas where ASEAN and the UN have pursued cooperation are, to name just a few, transnational issues, humanitarian assistance and disaster response, prevention and control of infectious diseases, counter-terrorism and prevention of violent extremism, preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention, peacekeeping operations and peacebuilding, nuclear disarmament, capacity building such as on the role of women in promoting peace and security, and addressing the global existential threat of climate change, including natural hazards, haze pollution, and changes in global weather patterns that have created disturbances previously unseen in scale and magnitude.

As fluctuating temperatures and weather disturbances afflicting places previously unaffected by calamities are witnessed, disaster risk reduction and management as well as resilience must remain priorities for ASEAN-UN cooperation. Appreciated therefore is the UN's continuing role in enhancing the capacity of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) through its capacity building programmes. ASEAN is also making efforts to better prepare the ASEAN Community to face existing and forthcoming challenges such as natural disasters by diversifying sources of funding.

Resilience underpins cooperation
between ASEAN and the UN.

Terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation are among the major security challenges that the global community has and continues to face. ASEAN itself has not been spared from the terror attacks perpetuated by extremists and radical groups and individuals and is therefore taking pragmatic steps to address this issue. ASEAN has adopted an *Action Plan to Prevent and Counter the Rise of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (2018-2025)* and the Work Plan of the ASEAN Plan of Action to Prevent and Counter the Rise of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (2019-2025) or the Bali Work Plan.

ASEAN sees the importance of comprehensive approaches to countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism, something which dovetails with the UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism. By adopting the *ASEAN Declaration on Culture of Prevention for a Peaceful, Inclusive, Resilient, Healthy and Harmonious Society* in 2017, ASEAN is taking steps to promote the culture of prevention by focusing on understanding the root cause and consequences of violent extremism, with an emphasis on the importance of moderation to counter violent extremism, including radicalisation. Complementing these are efforts of ASEAN and the UN which includes a range of capacity building activities in addressing the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters and terrorism financing.

Given the possibility of extremists and radicalised individuals developing their improvised explosive devices, it is equally important that ASEAN develop its capacity to ensure the various chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear elements (CBRNE), which are primarily lodged under the medical and science sectors of the individual ASEAN Member States, are protected and secured, thereby preventing individuals and groups from using these elements and materials for illicit and criminal activities.

Preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution is one shared area of cooperation between ASEAN and the UN.

As ASEAN deepens its Community building process and its borders become more seamless, ASEAN expects to see an increasing flow of people, whether for tourism or job opportunities, across ASEAN

Member States. Increased people flow brings with it attendant social, political, economic and even security risks, which need to be mitigated. ASEAN is therefore working on effective border management, which would contribute in ensuring the security of ASEAN peoples against transnational crimes and other cross-border challenges.

Preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention are two examples of shared areas of interest between the UN and ASEAN. It is said that ASEAN is a living testament to the importance of preventive diplomacy with preventing conflict being one of its reason for existence. Throughout ASEAN's evolution as a regional organisation, preventing disputes from arising, preventing them from turning into conflict, and preventing the spread of conflict – the three elements of preventive diplomacy, have been ASEAN's key objectives. Cooperation with the UN in further enhancing capacity to undertake preventive diplomacy measures, such as for example, through the workshops organised by the UN in conjunction with the ARF, which has preventive diplomacy as one of its set key milestones, are beneficial.

Capacity building activities such as the ASEAN-UN Workshop - Regional Dialogue on Political Security Cooperation (AURED), a flagship programme, since 2012, of the ASEAN-UN Comprehensive Partnership has been useful for ASEAN. These workshops have focused on a range of issues close to the heart of ASEAN: preventive diplomacy (in 2014), conflict prevention, preventive diplomacy and prevention of violent extremism (in 2016), the role of women in the prevention of violent extremism (in 2018), and more recently in December 2020 in enhancing the capacity of the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation. ASEAN is also looking at co-organising with the UN, the 2nd ASEAN-UN Electoral Observation Workshop to promote good governance, human rights and democracy in the region through training and sharing of best practices.

ASEAN and the UN Agenda

Beyond putting its own house in order so to speak, ASEAN through its Member States is also making a tangible contribution to the work of the UN by participating and contributing to UN Peacekeeping Missions. To date, ASEAN Member States contribute around 5,000 peacekeepers in various missions of the UN including peacekeeping missions in Lebanon and South Sudan. All ten ASEAN Member States have endorsed the UN Secretary-General's initiative on Action for Peacekeeping (A4P), renewing its collective engagement with UN peacekeeping.

Within ASEAN, steps are being undertaken to further develop PKO-related competencies and capacities through the ASEAN Peacekeeping Centres Network (APCN) and through a dedicated Experts' Working Group on peacekeeping operations under the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM-Plus). ASEAN appreciates the ADMM-Plus partners' continued participation and support to the said Experts' Working Group and its practical activities.

Peacebuilding has always been one of ASEAN's foremost agenda.

In addition to maintaining the peace through peacekeeping operations and enforcing it through peace enforcement mechanisms, building peace is equally, if not more, important. Peacebuilding has always been one of ASEAN's foremost agenda, where the participation of all sectors, including women, plays a key role. This is something which the ASEAN Leaders themselves affirmed in 2017 when they adopted the *Joint Statement on Promoting Women, Peace and Security in ASEAN*.

The establishment of the ASEAN Women for Peace Registry (AWPR) is a step towards the goal of having women play a greater role in building peace. This is an area where ASEAN and the UN could further enhance collaboration. It is also encouraging

that there is now momentum for strengthening ASEAN-UN cooperation in support of enhanced ASEAN women’s role in areas such as peacekeeping operations, mediation and reconciliation.

ASEAN shares similar goals and vision with the UN in the efforts to pursue the elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, through the signing of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty in 1995. While the Treaty and its Plan of Action are already under implementation, the signing of the Treaty’s Protocol by the P-5 remains inconclusive.

In light of this, it is hoped that the UN could support the ongoing efforts of the States Parties to the Treaty and Nuclear Weapons States to resolve all outstanding issues, in accordance with the objectives and principles of the SEANWFZ Treaty. Also to be highlighted is that ASEAN and the International Atomic Energy Agency have signed the Practical Arrangements, which sets out a framework of cooperation in the areas of nuclear science, technology and applications, nuclear safety, security and safeguards, for a period of five years.

Unexploded ordnance or remnants of war continue to pose risk to ASEAN peoples.

Meanwhile, dealing with the so-called remnants of war particularly unexploded ordnance, given the security risk they pose to ASEAN peoples, remains to be one of the priorities, with the Regional Mine Action Center having been established. Likewise, an Experts’ Working Group on humanitarian mine action has been set up under the ADMM-Plus. This is therefore one area where the UN and ASEAN could work further.

The advent of the digital age and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, present many opportunities. As early as 2017, the digital economy has already accounted for 7% of ASEAN’s GDP. The potential is massive. If fully utilised, digital integration could uplift the region’s GDP by USD 1 trillion by 2025, which is a third of the region’s GDP in 2019. This is the context where ASEAN Leaders in 2019 issued the *ASEAN Declaration on Industry Transformation to Industry 4.0* and reaffirmed ASEAN’s commitment to develop a consolidated strategy on the 4IR. ASEAN’s digital penetration is high with cellular/mobile phone density pegged at 128 per 100 persons, indicating that each person actually owns more than one mobile phone. Internet subscription is at 50 per 100 individuals.

In this context, the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) is a promising initiative that promotes interoperability, enables cities to share best practices on addressing urbanisation, and deepens ASEAN’s integration as a single digital market. As such,

welcomed is the partnerships that various UN agencies such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) have developed to support the implementation of smart cities in the region.

But the Fourth Industrial Revolution also poses challenges for ASEAN, particularly amidst the ongoing rapid urbanisation in the region. Thus, ASEAN needs to enhance its capacity to deal with the attendant risks of technological and scientific development, particularly in view of the growing sophistication and transboundary nature of cyber threats.

Capacity to deal with the transnational nature of cyber threats need to be enhanced.

At the 35th ASEAN Summit in November 2020, the ASEAN Leaders emphasised the need to enhance regional cybersecurity cooperation through a feasible cross-pillar cybersecurity cooperation mechanism, strengthening a rules-based cyberspace, as well as supporting the cybersecurity activities and training programmes of the ASEAN-Singapore Cybersecurity Centre of Excellence (ASCCE) in Singapore and ASEAN-Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre (AJCCBC) in Bangkok. The UN’s support in these efforts are welcome. ASEAN looks forward to collaborating with the UN Group of Governmental Experts and Open-Ended Working Group on the issue of security in the use of information and communications technology. The engagement with these UN bodies would be useful for ASEAN.

Conclusion

The areas sketched above are just few of the areas where ASEAN and the UN collaborate. ASEAN and the UN are collaborating in many other areas. ASEAN looks forward to commencing work on crafting the next Plan of Action of the ASEAN-UN Comprehensive Partnership for the period 2021-2025 to sustain the momentum of cooperation.

The UN can count on ASEAN’s efforts and commitment to upholding the UN Charter. Indeed, ASEAN is committed to multilateralism and its processes of which the UN remains at the very center. The UN continues to be the most important platform in pursuing international cooperation and dialogue, as well as in resolving many of the world's most pressing problems.

The 75th anniversary of the UN (UN75) in 2020 provided an opportune time for UN Member States including ASEAN countries to work closely together towards strengthening the UN for international peace, security and prosperity. Thus, ASEAN looks forward to participating and contributing to the UN75 global conversation towards shaping ‘the future we want’ and ‘the UN we need’.

The UN Security Council plays a critical role in keeping and maintaining global peace and stability. And worth commending are the efforts being undertaken within the Council to ensure that it remains responsive to the increasing demands of keeping the peace and maintaining a secure and stable world for all.

ASEAN hopes to learn through exchanges on best practices and capacity building initiatives as ASEAN likewise continues to evolve as an organisation so that it remains cohesive and responsive to the increasing demands and needs of the region and beyond. A strong, united and cohesive ASEAN is in the interest of the international community. ASEAN looks forward to the continued support from all its partners for peace and stability in the region and greater prosperity and development for the peoples of ASEAN.

Advancing Community Building in ASEAN*

Dato Lim Jock Hoi

Introduction

Community building in ASEAN, for some, may be a recent phenomenon, commencing only with the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2008 and reinforced in 2015 with the declaration of the establishment of the ASEAN Community anchored on the three pillars of Political-Security Community, Economic Community and Socio-Cultural Community. But community building for ASEAN had in fact commenced since as early as 1967, the year when ASEAN was founded. As stated in the Bangkok Declaration itself: “joint endeavours in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of South-East Asian Nations.” This idea of community building has been pursued since then.

The nearly five-and-a-half decade journey of the ASEAN Community has successfully brought economic growth, durable peace and longstanding stability in the region as ASEAN continues to reap peace dividends built over the years. The progress has benefited the peoples of ASEAN, thereby proving that community building in ASEAN is not merely among the governments of the Member States but more importantly for the peoples of ASEAN.

Notwithstanding these milestones, the process of transforming Southeast Asia into a stable, peaceful and prosperous region has been long and arduous, fraught with challenges and difficulties. But history has shown that ASEAN has always emerged stronger and more united in the face of these challenges, including the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and helping to rebuild Myanmar communities in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, among others.

At present, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is a concrete example of how regional resilience is needed now more than ever to respond promptly and effectively to unexpected or unprecedented challenges. It raises question as to whether the region’s current way of doing things can sufficiently facilitate the required whole-of-community response to stand up to a challenge of this scale. While COVID-19 started as a public health crisis, it has quickly become a multi-faceted one requiring

* This essay previously appeared as a chapter in the book *25 Years of Vietnam in ASEAN: Views from the Inside* (Hanoi, Viet Nam: National Political Publishing House, 2020), pp. 157-175.

cross-sectoral, multi-stakeholder responses to address not only the immediate as well as longer term implications.

As ASEAN reaches halfway in fulfilling the vision laid out in the *ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together*, examining how far it has come in building the ASEAN Community and starting to think through how best to move forward becomes a pressing concern, amidst contending forces that could undermine its being united as a community.

Revisiting Community Building in ASEAN

Community building in ASEAN gained momentum in 2003 through the Bali Concord II, when ASEAN Leaders declared that an “ASEAN Community shall be established comprising [of] three pillars: political and security cooperation, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural cooperation.” Twelve years later, ASEAN Leaders during the 25th ASEAN Summit held in November that year declared that the ASEAN Community shall be formally established by the end of 2015, five years ahead of the previous target year of 2020.



WHILE DIFFICULT TO MEASURE,
ASEAN HAS DEVELOPED A SENSE
OF BEING A COMMUNITY.

In that Summit, the *ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together* was adopted. It was composed of the “Kuala Lumpur Declaration on The Establishment of The ASEAN Community,” ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the three Community Blueprints. A year later, the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and the third Work Plan of the Initiative on ASEAN Integration were adopted as integral parts of the document. Together they provide the roadmap for ASEAN’s journey as a community from 2016 to 2025.

While it is difficult to measure the degree or extent of “political-security community-ness” within ASEAN, whether ASEAN has indeed developed a sense of being a political and security community, it is undeniable that the various sectors under ASEAN’s political and security pillar have become closer to each other through the years, brought about by their regular and close interaction with one another.

The numerous ASEAN platforms have enabled the political leadership (Leaders, Foreign Ministers, Senior Officials) and various sectors such as defence, law enforcement, and immigration, among others to develop a sense of community among themselves. It has now become very remote for ASEAN members as a whole or ASEAN sectors in particular to be in conflict with each other; this is the essence of being a political-security community. This has also enabled the sectors under the Political-

Security Community to address issues such as terrorism and violent extremism, trafficking in persons and of drugs, and cyber security challenges among others.

Guided by the principle of ASEAN Centrality, it is this sense of community among the ASEAN Member States that has enabled them to effectively engage other global and regional players through several ASEAN-centered platforms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus).

For the economic community, steady progress has been made, with the region having done very well globally, standing collectively as the fifth largest economy in the world with a combined GDP of USD 3.2 trillion in 2019, the world's fourth largest trading economy, both for merchandise and services trade; and the third largest investment destination after the EU and the United States. Although there remain disparities among the ASEAN Member States, the less-developed economies have been growing faster and participating more in intra-regional trade and investment.

While the intra-ASEAN market is the largest for both trade and investment, the share has been moderately declining for trade and fluctuating - though generally positive for investment. ASEAN has done well in eliminating tariffs and in putting in place various frameworks for economic integration and cooperation. However, more must be done to push the outstanding agenda items. These would range from addressing non-tariff measures, boosting services sector competitiveness, promoting and facilitating investment, enhancing sectoral cooperation, promoting good regulatory practice, enhancing business and regulatory environments, supporting entrepreneurship particularly for micro, small, and medium enterprises and women entrepreneurs, to pursuing more strategic external economic engagement. ASEAN must ensure that the commitments it has made are being followed through, while at the same time embrace the challenges and emerging issues faced by the region.



STEADY PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE WITH ASEAN HAVING DONE WELL IN GLOBAL ECONOMIC TERMS.

From a socio-cultural vantage point, the decades of peace, stability and economic prosperity that ASEAN helped broker, enabled the countries in this region to achieve significant social progress. The GDP per capita is close to USD 5,000, and the poverty rate is less than a third of its peak in 1990. Life expectancy stands at 71 years, resulting from investments in nutrition and healthcare, as well as access to safe water and sanitation. Literacy rates and secondary education completion rates are higher than ever before. Significant gains have also been won in pushing for gender equality and women's empowerment. Furthermore, the protection and promotion of rights and

well-being of vulnerable populations like children, older people, persons with disabilities, and migrant workers among others is getting more primacy.

However, the work is far from done. Extreme poverty still persists and inequality is on the rise. Vulnerabilities from natural and man-made disasters, pandemics and infectious diseases, impacts of climate change and degradation of the natural environment and biodiversity, pose threats to sustaining progress and may even reverse the gains achieved thus far. Furthermore, if Member States of ASEAN are unable to prepare for ageing of societies as well as adequately invest in human capital development, countries in this region may not be able to sustain their development.

Advancing Community Building

With five more years to go to 2025, as well as the need to start thinking about a vision beyond 2025, ASEAN needs not only to sustain the momentum of its community building efforts but to accelerate it further, leveraging on its successes but carefully taking into account, and learning lessons from, the challenges and limitations of its community building exercise for the past five decades.



**ASEAN MUST LEVERAGE ITS
SUCCESSSES WHILE LEARNING
LESSONS FROM CHALLENGES.**

The primary strength ASEAN could leverage is the political commitment of its member states to remain united amidst their diversity in their political, economic and social systems. This political commitment has underpinned the association’s ability to remain cohesive as well as responsive to issues that have emerged and challenged its resilience.

This political commitment is complemented by the unique manner by which ASEAN does things, the so-called ASEAN Way, underpinned by readiness to engage in dialogue and search for consensus as well as the respect for sacrosanct principles such as non-interference and non-intervention, openness, and transparency. The observance of these principles has enabled the ASEAN Member States to live peacefully with each other and united, notwithstanding the fact that there exist differences.

The fundamental challenge for ASEAN as it moves beyond 2025, however, is the need to accelerate its internal integration and move beyond it while doing so in global and regional context that will increasingly become fluid. The geostrategic environment is shifting, driven - among other things - by major powers’ rivalries. This phenomenon is compounded by the emergence of new economic powers, either allied with the traditional major powers or on their own, trying to assert themselves. Meanwhile,

ASEAN will have to continue being mindful of issues among and between its members which may have been effectively put on the sidelines, and ensure the upholding of the time-tested principles of ASEAN such as the primacy of consensus in finding resolution to those issues.

ASEAN, as an aggrupation of small- and medium-sized countries, must ensure that the journey towards its 2025 vision and beyond is not sidetracked by the interests of others, while at the same time playing a more active role in the global arena. The initiative and leadership that ASEAN played in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP) and in the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)* exemplify the region’s capacity to shape global and regional developments for the benefit of its peoples. And while ASEAN has done well in providing a platform for dialogue and cooperation with and for its external partners, equally important is for ASEAN to start seeing its engagement beyond simply being at the receiving end. ASEAN Member States will need to have a conversation as to how they see the role and positioning of ASEAN - collectively - in the multilateral agenda on issues such as economics, trade, and climate change, among others, and to optimise the use of ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the EAS, the ARF and the ADMM Plus and other regional and global platforms to help shape global discourse and governance.



ASEAN MUST OPTIMISE
THE USEFULNESS OF
ASEAN-LED MECHANISMS.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and digital transformation is another area that ASEAN needs to urgently and strategically address. ASEAN has taken cognizance of the digitalisation phenomenon, but not at the magnitude that it is currently presenting itself to the region. ASEAN Member States have differing levels of readiness for the 4IR, and this digital divide may become a bottleneck to the region’s integration efforts. Numerous sectoral initiatives have been introduced in response, but there is a need for a community-wide vision and regional strategy to clearly articulate ASEAN’s 4IR agenda and directions. This is important not only to coordinate work across sectors and mechanisms but also to frame external partnerships and build support in this regard.

The Consolidated Strategy on the 4IR for ASEAN that is currently being developed would serve that purpose, garnering a whole-of-community buy-in and support to ensure its effective implementation. The Consolidated Strategy alone, however, will not be a panacea, and concrete actions including domestic reforms will be needed in particular to address gaps in digital skills, infrastructure, rules and regulations. The Consolidated Strategy should leverage on existing initiatives and focus on embracing technologies as a mean to improve peoples’ wellbeing and not as an end in itself. To

this end, the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) is a good example of an ASEAN-led platform that focuses on utilising technologies to solve practical urbanisation issues.

On the economic front, ASEAN must fully optimise its intra-regional trade and investment to realise a single market and production base. The commitments and frameworks made under the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) should be fully followed through, translated into practical mechanisms, and closely complied with and monitored. The problem in ensuring implementation has to be tackled head on, which may necessarily take ASEAN out of its comfort zone. Institutional mechanisms may need to be strengthened at the national level, where implementation is expected to take place. While upholding the primacy of the spirit of consensus, in cases where disputes arise and where necessary, ASEAN Member States should consider utilising the ASEAN Protocol on Enhanced Dispute Settlement Mechanism as a ready, ASEAN-driven platform for dispute resolution under ASEAN economic agreements.



**THE ASEAN SMART CITIES NETWORK
UTILISES TECHNOLOGIES TO SOLVE
PRACTICAL URBANISATION ISSUES.**

Furthermore, by addressing behind-the-border issues, promoting good regulatory practices, and embracing digitalisation, regional value chains can be developed and expanded. Beyond the flow of goods, more efforts must also be exerted in facilitating the flows of services, peoples, capital, and investment. Business and regulatory environment should be modernised. More concrete and advanced cooperation and initiatives in the areas of competition policy, consumer protection, and intellectual property are also needed, working towards better coherence and alignment. A clearer vision for sectoral cooperation is also needed, moving away from activity-based approaches to more programmatic ones.

Similarly, ASEAN has to make sure that economic activities are pursued not in the name of profit alone, but also take into consideration the notion of resilience, sustainability, and inclusivity. ASEAN peoples from all walks of life must be able to feel the direct benefits of economic integration, and growth potentials must also be offered to workers of different background as well as micro enterprises. Governments cannot do this alone. To this end, industry players such as the private sector have to be embraced as partners. The interconnection between the AEC and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) could be better cultivated. For example, human capital in the broad sense is a key input to economic activities and a source of competitiveness.

Meanwhile, it is critically important to protect the gains in social development achieved over several decades and prevent more people from sliding into poverty. Stronger health care systems including universal health coverage, social safety nets

and disaster-responsive social protection, as well as adaptive yet inclusive/non-discriminatory education and labour policies among others, will be important areas of work and cooperation moving forward.

While ASEAN may still have to contend with poverty and other human security issues beyond 2025, it needs to double down on investments in human capital development and accelerate efforts on inclusive and sustainable development. Ensuring a healthy and educated population, equipped with the needed 21st century skills, will be key in the bid by the ASEAN Member States and the region to tap to opportunities of 4IR, increase competitiveness, and boost resilience of societies. At the same time, ASEAN will also have to deepen its cooperation and resolve to address longstanding issues with respect to environment and climate change, including biodiversity, marine debris pollution and trans-boundary haze.

It is worth noting that integral to ASEAN Community building is promoting connectivity, whether through physical, institutional or people-to-people linkages, something which the Master Plan for ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 hopes to promote.

To date, MPAC 2025 has made steady headway, particularly with the Initial Pipeline of ASEAN Infrastructure Projects and the ASEAN Sustainable Urbanisation Strategy, initiatives that have paved the way to forge greater partnerships within ASEAN and beyond.

Needless to say, efforts in all these areas, from political and security to economic and socio-cultural, must redound to tangible benefits for the people. ASEAN must enhance its effectiveness in engaging and communicating its work to the wider public in order to support and reinforce the sense of ASEAN identity that can only be achieved when people feel their value in the Community.

Strengthening Institution for a Stronger ASEAN Community

As the issues ASEAN faces become more complex, cutting across the current set-up of community pillars, namely the Political-Security Community, Economic Community and Socio-Cultural Community, the corresponding pillar-specific or pillar-centered approach may therefore need to be revisited.

Issues such as post-pandemic recovery, 4IR, climate change, or sustainable development are multi-disciplinary and cannot be responded to separately and independently by a specific sector or even community pillar. Similarly, even those that



IT IS IMPORTANT TO PROTECT THE
GAINS IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
ACHIEVED OVER THE DECADES.

at the outset appear as sector or pillar specific agendum, such as, gender, people with disabilities, or financial inclusion, will need collaboration with and mainstreaming into other work areas to be comprehensively addressed. To this end, both ASEAN mechanisms and institutions will need to be more agile and versatile so as to provide a more coordinated and holistic responses. ASEAN should also not shy away from addressing new or emerging issues pertinent to the region. While ASEAN's modus operandi of consensus should remain to given primary, ASEAN should likewise be ready to utilise more the practice of ASEAN Minus X or the pathfinder approach where appropriate.

A key factor in enabling ASEAN to further its internal consolidation while enhancing its role in global and regional affairs is inclusivity. Events the world over have shown that governments and institutions, including ASEAN, need to prove to their constituents that they are delivering benefits to all segments of society.



**A DYNAMIC CONVERSATION ON
NARROWING THE DEVELOPMENT GAP
WITHIN ASEAN IS CRITICAL.**

Relatedly, a more dynamic conversation on the narrowing of the development gap among and within ASEAN Member States is critical, as pressing challenges with impact on human security dimensions have the potential to destabilise and affect growth in the region.

Thus, the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) should be sustained. Launched in 2000, this initiative has been ASEAN's main instrument to guide the region's collective efforts to narrow the development gap.

Over the span of three IAI Work Plans, strategic priorities have evolved in keeping with ASEAN's overall vision or integration, and work is now underway to develop the fourth IAI Work Plan. Development gaps have been narrowed across ASEAN Member States, with significant improvement in development outcomes in the less-developed members. As ASEAN Member States develop, development gaps and challenges too will evolve; ASEAN needs to take this into consideration in devising mechanisms for narrowing the development gap.

ASEAN's integration and community building efforts must therefore be more inclusive and participatory, calling for enhanced stakeholder engagement and meaningful consultation processes, so as to move away from the notion of ASEAN being limited to an elite government-to-government interface and undertaking. The emergence of numerous groups, from academic and think tank groups to social organisations and cultural associations, should be further leveraged. Likewise, the region has to optimise the contribution of the private sector to ASEAN Community building agenda. ASEAN stakeholders must be ready to engage actively and effectively,

building their understanding of ASEAN approaches and processes, identifying ways to promote relevant recommendations, and providing feedback on the outcomes and impact of ASEAN integration on the ground.

Meanwhile, ASEAN's own eco-system has expanded with the emergence of ASEAN and ASEAN-centered mechanisms, which to date, enable ASEAN to pursue cooperation among its members and with external partners. As ASEAN Community building advances, these institutions would need to be revitalised and if necessary re-engineered, to ensure that they remain responsive and relevant to the changing times.

Moreover, how the ASEAN Secretariat is utilised may need to be revisited. Beyond providing the usual secretariat and support services for the work of ASEAN and the ASEAN Member States, it may be useful to leverage, first, the inherent nature of the ASEAN Secretariat as being the repository of ASEAN's memory as an institution and, second, the opportunity provided to the Secretariat to see issues beyond a national level perspective.

The ASEAN Secretariat, *de facto* being symbolic of ASEAN as a region, could complement the national secretariats, which are primarily meant to coordinate their country level follow-ups to ASEAN commitments. With all the functions of the ASEAN Secretariat centralised in one place, it is an important source of information and institutional resources. It is likewise well-placed to provide coordination, analytical, and advisory support, particularly in cross-sectoral, cross-pillar, and emerging issues.

The recent efforts by the ASEAN Member States to strengthen the ASEAN Secretariat's analytical and monitoring roles are a step in the right direction. If provided with the mandate and resources, the Secretariat will be in position to pursue greater and more strategic support to the member states. Needless to say, the Secretariat would need to be adequately resourced with both human and financial assets, if it were to effectively perform its envisioned role in the future.

Similar to the other institutional bodies within the ASEAN ecosystem, there may be a need, over the long term, to restructure the Secretariat to make it less constrained by internal procedures as a bureaucracy, promote internal coordination and facilitate sharing of information across its various units and thereby make it more effective and responsive, particularly in regard to cross-pillar issues.



ASEAN INSTITUTIONS NEED
TO BE REVITALISED
AND IF NECESSARY, RE-ENGINEERED.

Over the long term too, what could be likewise further leveraged is the role that the Office of the Secretary-General of ASEAN could play. To date, the Secretary-General has been provided with the mandate to “serve as ASEAN’s humanitarian assistance coordinator.” Beyond this role, the Secretary-General of ASEAN could likewise be provided the means by which to play a good offices role, which could complement the Troika, one of the key mechanisms in ASEAN for dealing with issues requiring immediate attention at the political level. With good offices being one of the primary mechanisms recognised as a preventive diplomacy tool, enabling the Secretary-General of ASEAN to play such a role would enable it to contribute in ASEAN’s ability to keep the peace and stability in Southeast Asia.

More than five decades of community building have brought ASEAN to where it is now. As 2025 approaches and thinking through how to further advance ASEAN Community building, ASEAN needs to leverage its inherent strengths as an organisation and a community while at the same being open and adaptive to an evolving context and agenda. This would enable ASEAN to become an even more effective community



THE ASEAN SECRETARIAT MUST BE
LEVERAGED IN PROMOTING COORDINATION
ON CROSS-PILLAR ISSUES.

and global player beyond 2025, in a global and regional context that is expected to become more fluid, and as political, security, economic and socio-cultural issues are anticipated to become more interconnected and challenging.

ASEAN has indeed been successful in realising the goals that were set forth when it was founded, and it has effectively pursued the thrust to build an ASEAN Community, made possible by the unwavering political commitments of its member states, subscription to the time-tested principles underpinning the ways things are done in ASEAN and through the various ASEAN-centred platforms. At the same time, in these times of rapid changes, business as usual may no longer be effective. It is therefore important that ASEAN be prepared to revisit and readjust its approaches, mechanisms and structure if necessary to enable them to become nimble and responsive to issues and avoid institutional inertia.

Ultimately, the Association should not lose sight of its *raison d’être* to accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development, in a peaceful and stable region, for the benefits of its peoples and for posterity.

Thinking through for an ASEAN Post-2025 Vision*

Dato Lim Jock Hoi

Introduction

Had ASEAN's founding fathers not risked to dream of creating a region of peace and prosperity 53 years ago, Southeast Asia cannot speak of a Community today. The ASEAN Community today and beyond 2025 is a testament of how much have been achieved in the past and how determined are the peoples of ASEAN to achieve more in the future. Indeed, ASEAN has gone far.

The establishment of ASEAN Community in 2015 - and of ASEAN many years ago - is definitely a culmination of the ASEAN Member States' proactive cooperation and engagement over the years. It signifies the region's sense of belonging. As a result, ASEAN has become not only a dynamic region, but also peaceful and stable.

ASEAN's Resilience

If one looks at ASEAN's experience in community building, the road to the ASEAN Community has not been easy. There were roadblocks and detours such as the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, natural and man-made disasters, as well as geopolitical tensions that had seriously tested its sense of community. But despite all these challenges, ASEAN has managed to stay on course. And this is because of its resilience.

Today, with five more years to go in realising the ASEAN Vision 2025, community building in ASEAN is being challenged again. The pandemic continues to threaten the stability of its economy and society. In addition, there are global headwinds that put the region at risk – as seen in intensifying major power rivalry, deteriorating climate change, and increasing inequalities. Thus, the coming years will be equally challenging and difficult.

While ASEAN has the resilience to weather these challenges, the future of ASEAN will also be very much determined by how much planning today about the community desired to be built. In other words, ASEAN Community of tomorrow and beyond 2025 depends so much on the collective action of ASEAN Member States. Going by business-as-usual is no longer adequate.

* Adapted from remarks delivered at the International Symposium on “Vietnam-ASEAN: 25-Year Journey and the Way Forward” held on 19 August 2020.

Moving Forward

The actions that need to be undertaken are clear. First, ASEAN needs to advance and accelerate its internal integration. This is important amidst the major geo-strategic shifts and major power rivalries that may undermine the region's future. Building ASEAN's internal strength through regional integration is definitely the way forward.

But to achieve this, ASEAN must be ready politically. It should continue being mindful of issues among and between its members and upholds its time-tested principles of ASEAN consensus to resolve issues. Its interest and priority should be at the core while being prepared to play a more active role in the global arena. ASEAN's leadership in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP) and in the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)* exemplify its capacity to shape global and regional developments. It is also important for ASEAN to be bolder in its engagement with external partners and optimise the use of ASEAN-led mechanisms to help shape global discourse and governance.

At the same time, ASEAN's economic dynamism must remain entrenched. The potential of intra-regional trade and investment must be fully optimised to realise a single market and production base. The commitments and frameworks made under the ASEAN Economic Community should be translated into practical implementation, and closely complied with and monitored. Institutional mechanisms may need to be strengthened at the national level, where implementation is expected to take place.

ASEAN-led mechanisms could help shape global discourse and governance.

A bold rethink on the approach of implementing economic integration is also needed. This may include optimising the use of pathfinder or ASEAN Minus X approach to advance agenda among ready members, while still observing the ASEAN principle of consensus. Where appropriate, ASEAN Member States should be prepared to use the enhanced dispute settlement mechanism.

The second course of action is for ASEAN to be prepared for megatrends that are going to shape the world in the years to come. Among the most urgent of which is the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). With differing levels of readiness for the 4IR, the region must ensure that digital divide does not become a bottleneck to regional integration agenda. The ongoing development of a consolidated strategy on the 4IR will contribute to that effort.

Another megatrend is climate change. Some of its impacts are already being seen and felt, but a far more catastrophic and irreversible damage looms unless all change the way they think, work, produce, and consume.

As ASEAN issues become more complex, it is also crucial for the region to adopt a cross-cutting and cross-pillar approach in its integration agenda. This is imperative if integration is to work. The current pandemic is a good example of how issues are now inter-related and why the regional response needs to be multi-dimensional as well. Similarly, issues such as gender equality and mainstreaming of people with disabilities are equally important in any community, and therefore needs to be comprehensively addressed. Thus, it is crucial that ASEAN mechanisms and institutions continue to be more agile and versatile for more coordinated and holistic responses.

ASEAN institutions must be agile and versatile for coordinated and holistic responses.

Third, ASEAN must ensure that sustainability in all dimensions should be incorporated in everything. This also includes careful considerations of resilience and inclusivity. ASEAN peoples from all walks of life, including workers and micro enterprises, must be able to feel the direct benefits of economic integration. Governments cannot do this alone. Industry players such as the private sector has to be embraced as partners.

Meanwhile, it is critically important to protect the gains in social development, prevent more people from sliding into poverty, and narrow or close the development gaps within and among member states. Issues on health care systems, education and labor policies, poverty and human capital development are same familiar issues that need to be prioritised – and with greater commitment and passion.


Looking at the current situation in this pandemic, the socio-economic impacts could have been more adverse if the region did not invest before in emergency health and pandemic preparedness. But more is still needed. That's why ASEAN's future community should be able to develop a comprehensive emergency response that takes into account health emergencies and pandemics as a whole-of-community approach involving the government, economy and people in all relevant sectors.

Finally, the future of ASEAN Community should be fully grounded on principles of good governance and strong institutional capacity. The ASEAN Community is not built by governments alone. What is needed is for all stakeholders including the private sector, academe and civil society to engage actively and effectively, identify concrete recommendations, and provide feedback on the outcomes of ASEAN integration on the ground.

Conclusion

ASEAN's unique institutions including its own eco-system and mechanisms would need to be revitalised. At the center of this all is the ASEAN Secretariat. Beyond providing the usual support services, it may be useful to leverage its inherent nature as being the repository of ASEAN's memory as institution and the capacity to see issues beyond a national level perspective. A well-functioning ASEAN Secretariat is one that it is well-placed to provide coordination, analytical and advisory support in all ASEAN matters. A Secretariat that is capable to develop knowledge and deliver development solutions to many issues confronting ASEAN.

Advancing ASEAN's community building beyond 2025 necessitates ASEAN's ability to leverage on its inherent strengths as an organisation and a community while at the same time being open and adaptive to an evolving context and agenda. This, in turn, will enable ASEAN to become an even more effective community and global player beyond 2025, particularly as it journeys through an increasingly interconnected and complex global economy.



It is useful to leverage
the ASEAN Secretariat as a repository of
ASEAN institutional memory.

Charting ASEAN's Path Beyond 2025*

Dato Lim Jock Hoi

Introduction

In 2020, conducted were the mid-term reviews of the ASEAN Community Blueprints. This was alongside charting the strategy for a comprehensive COVID-19 recovery, with no less than the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework being adopted by the ASEAN Leaders during the 37th ASEAN Summit. This momentum should be leveraged to further strengthen ASEAN's integration agenda including by giving renewed impetus to unimplemented measures and better incorporating new imperatives such as better social protection, digitalisation, and sustainability into ASEAN's Community building effort.

Towards a Post-2025 Vision

During the 37th ASEAN Summit, the *Ha Noi Declaration on The ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision* was issued. The details would definitely have to be threshed out along the way. As contained in the Declaration itself, it is fundamental that

the development of a Post-2025 Vision shall be pursued in a comprehensive, pragmatic, balanced, inclusive and coordinated manner; taking a whole-of-Community approach to synergize efforts across the ASEAN Community Pillars and among its sectoral bodies to address the increasing complexity of opportunities and challenges facing ASEAN.

The key and essential elements of this are the following:

First, the challenges facing ASEAN have become more complex. The COVID-19 pandemic manifested how various facets of peoples' lives intersect with each other: health, socio-economic, political, and security. While national efforts are necessary in addressing this challenge, they are not sufficient. Regional and global cooperation has become more important than ever, given the transboundary nature of this challenge and at a time where global leadership is absent.

* Adapted from keynote Remarks delivered at the High-level Roundtable on "A Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN Community: 2020 Reflections for Bolder Joint Actions" held on 17 December 2020.

Sadly, the pandemic is not the only and will not be the last complex issue that ASEAN will face. More are expected to come over the horizon, whether today or after 2025. Among the most certain of which is climate change, with the resulting extreme weather disturbances it brings.

Another would be an ageing ASEAN society, which impacts on the human resources driving economic progress and the need to ensure that ASEAN senior citizens are taken care of.

The increased digitalisation has brought forth opportunities but has also resulted in a widened gap among ASEAN peoples. ASEAN therefore must be ready, to anticipate them and have in place mechanisms to effectively and proactively deal with such, including continuously enhancing its institutional capacity.

A Community-wide approach is imperative with ASEAN's three community pillars working in synergy.

Second, a community-wide approach is imperative. Indeed, the complexity of the challenges that ASEAN faces requires efforts across the community pillars to be synergised. As issues and challenges are no longer unidimensional, the lines separating the issues falling within the purview of each of the ASEAN community pillars continue to become increasingly blurred.

ASEAN has the advantage of having recognised this necessity early on but much more needs to be done. Existing cross-pillar mechanisms need to be better utilised and strengthened, so they are cross-pillar not just in name but in substance.

ASEAN institutions will need to be strengthened, making them more agile and versatile so as to provide a more coordinated and holistic responses. Likewise, it is imperative to further enhance the capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat enabling it provide coordination, analytical, and advisory support, particularly in cross-sectoral, cross-pillar, and emerging issues.

More importantly, is the need to change mindsets. Issues should no longer be readily be placed into specific boxes, sectors, or community pillars without having a holistic consideration of their drivers and implications. For ASEAN to be truly a community, information and ideas must flow seamlessly, so that challenges can be anticipated and opportunities seized in the most efficient and effective manner, involving all relevant stakeholders.

Third, the post-2025 vision should be pursued in “comprehensive, pragmatic, balanced, inclusive and coordinated manner”. All relevant stakeholders must be consulted: governments, the academia, think tank community, civil society, the business sector and the ASEAN peoples themselves.

The post-2025 vision should be comprehensive to enable ASEAN to look beyond the immediate horizon but it should likewise be pragmatic enough to ensure that whatever ASEAN undertakes, the results are felt by the ASEAN peoples themselves.

The post-2025 Vision must look beyond the horizon while being equally pragmatic.

In addition to these points, another key element in thinking through the post-2025 vision is ASEAN Centrality. Not as a notion in itself; rather how to sustain this amidst global and regional landscape, characterised by an intensifying strategic competition among regional powers, particularly – but not only - between the US and China.

ASEAN is no stranger to great power rivalry. In fact, one fundamental reason for the establishment of the Association is to prevent Southeast Asia from becoming a playing field of great power rivalry in the 1960s.

But what makes today’s scenario and in the foreseeable future more complicated is the fact that ASEAN’s relations with these countries are becoming deeper and more interconnected, going beyond the political realm to also cover economic, social, and technological, among others. No-one will benefit from a decoupling world, at least not in the long run. If ASEAN is therefore not careful, it runs the risk of being pulled apart by these centrifugal forces.

ASEAN has managed to ensure the primary role it plays in regional affairs. To date, it is the driving force in ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), where it engages its external partners.

The signing of the Regional Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (RCEP) in November 2020 is the most recent testament to such centrality of ASEAN, at a time where multilateral trading system came under intense pressure.

ASEAN’s adoption of the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)* in 2019 was another manifestation of ASEAN’s ability to keep the central role it plays. There is need, however, to ensure that the AOIP is operationalised through concrete undertakings, in

the same manner that the signing of the RCEP should lead to tangible benefits. The sooner the agreement gets ratified, the sooner the benefits will redound to ASEAN peoples.

Conclusion

The year 2020 was a milestone year for ASEAN. Not only has ASEAN navigated this uncertain year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, discussions for a Post-2025 Vision has commenced.

The momentum shall not go to waste, and ASEAN must step up its game and be ahead in the race towards recovery. This would ensure that by the time it completes the second phase of implementation of the 2025 Blueprints, the region will be in an even stronger position to embark on its next phase of community building. This would also enable ASEAN to pursue closer economic integration allowing its Member States to work on certain areas closer together.

ASEAN must step up its game and be ahead in the race towards recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic.

ASEAN: A Community of Opportunities for All



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