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## Administering the Regional Dynamics: The Success Story of Indonesia and ASEAN

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### Introduction

Back in early 1960s, it was unthinkable for Southeast Asia to have one single regional 'home' as diversity among countries within the area are just too wide. The political systems they adhere, the dominant religions they believe, the languages they speak, the economic situation they experience, the geographical characters they are endowed are just a few examples. These countries at that time were also relatively new in practicing their respective sovereignty. Advancing imaginations about

regionalism was definitely the least thing on their shopping list bearing in mind the state of domestic dynamics during their formative years. But, now the situation has turned for one hundred and eighty degrees. Right on Thursday 8 August 2019, the ten Southeast Asian states—Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam— just celebrated the inauguration of a new secretariat building for the Association of Southeast Asian

Nations (ASEAN) which also remarked the 52nd anniversary of this organization. This remarkable story undeniably could not be detached from Indonesia's longstanding efforts in ASEAN. Therefore, throughout the following paragraphs, this article aims to briefly discuss three issues - the origins of ASEAN, Jakarta's contribution to regional dynamics, and ASEAN achievements with regard to the great powers.

### **The Fade of Soekarno's Leadership and the Birth of ASEAN**

International memory is still vivid when describing the late period of Soekarno's leadership in 1965-67. After having a good reputation as an initiator of 'Asian-African' wave of independence a decade beforehand, Indonesia abruptly surprised many parties by taking extreme measures such as implemented a confrontation policy against its neighbors in Malayan Peninsula and even became the first one of its kind to withdraw from the New York-based world largest international organization. Instead of carrying a free-and-active foreign policy, Indonesia tended to lean more on the 'East' bloc as might be proven by the 1960 Sino-Indonesian Dual Nationality Treaty and the overwhelming Soviet supplies of aircrafts and vessels which fed Indonesia's position as Asia's most powerful military force at that time. Taking into account the mentioned aggressive behavior and the offensive modalities that Indonesia

had, it raised concerns over survivability and stability among regional countries.

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It was not until the 1965 domestic coup which significantly paved the way for the regime change and consequently led to a dramatic shift in Indonesia's approach to regional dynamics. Under Soeharto's initial reign, Indonesia focused on recovering its worrying socio-economic situation due to the large amount of foreign debts and imprudent national political decisions. Jakarta then realized that it was impossible to fix the existing situation without maintaining its domestic stability and favorable environment in the region. Creating a regional organization with collaborative leadership might be the one and only viable option learning from the past experiences. President Soeharto therefore decided to establish the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on 8 August 1967 along with four other founding states —Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines. Moreover, Indonesia also humbled down its profile by agreeing on the so-called '*primus inter pares*' leadership and

the 'consensus' format in decision making. The former means that there would be no permanent head of ASEAN and instead it would be a rotating chair every year to boost a sense-of-belonging among its members. However, the organization maintained the procedures according to which no substantial decisions could be taken without agreement from all ASEAN states.

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The 1967 Bangkok Declaration, which marked the birth of ASEAN, provided a crystal clear context regarding the situation of member countries at that time. First, ASEAN did not want to be continuously entrapped in the proxy war between great powers as it would disadvantage the members who mostly were just small and medium ones. This explained the prohibition on all permanent foreign bases without any exception as stated in the preamble of Bangkok Declaration. Second, the establishment of ASEAN was driven predominantly by economic aspirations from its members. Out of seven aims and purposes mentioned, five of them concerned efforts to present prosperity and economic stability surrounding the region. In line with that, security and defense-related cooperation were not really touched since

suspensions even intra-ASEAN were still high in those days.

### **Growing ASEAN Internal Solidarity**

Nourishing internal solidarity is definitely not as easy as turning palms. For ASEAN, it took almost ten years from its formation to the display of synergy at the summit in 1976. During this Bali-hosted high-level meeting, ASEAN agreed to have a secretariat in Jakarta and a Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) to regulate the conduct or relationship between members and external parties. As expected, they were also determined in organizing a regular meeting of economic ministers to discuss necessary measures in advancing internal trades and industrial cooperation. These all agreements were naturally quite fast to be concluded at least due to two factors. First, because 'the democracy' variable had not played a huge role in the relations, therefore any decision even unprecedented ones barely needed to pass through the complex bureaucratic process. Second, the members were still limited to five founding countries which happened to also be strengthened by the personal collegiality—intimacy among their leaders.

ASEAN began to consider welcoming a new member more than a decade after its successful inaugural summit. It was Brunei's admission in 1984 which initially shaped the founding members' perception on the necessity of adding

new members. Although not yet formulated specifically at that time, its eligibility depended on the socio-cultural and historical ties with some founding members, degree of interaction with them, formal expression of interest to join ASEAN, and economic status which do not burden the whole grouping. These criteria somehow slightly transformed a decade later when Vietnam was accepted as the seventh member in 1995. Back then, Hanoi still carried adjustments in facing the end of the Cold War and also the Cambodian conflict where Vietnam acted offensively. Its acceptance was therefore relatively against all odds due to ASEAN's interest to have a greater voice as one Southeast Asia in dealing with other parties and ASEAN's willingness to have an impactful 'monitoring' power over peace and stability in the region. Following Hanoi, Lao and Myanmar passed the membership selection in 1997, and Cambodia two years later which apparently served as a wake-up call to temporarily suspend another enlargement.

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Although having many members on board carts positive effects, negative consequences are still inevitable particularly in achieving the internal cohesion vis-à-vis the consensus-type of decision making. Confidence-building measures at the sub-regional and regional level then were picked as a viable option to address gravity of the situation. With regards to the former, one should take note of the establishment of Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippine East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) in 1994, and the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) in 2003 among Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. These mini-regionalisms are undoubtedly needed to serve as a complementary means to reduce the complexity of carrying practical cooperation at the ASEAN level, taking into account that not all issues become the interests of all members and no member actually has unlimited resources.

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Meanwhile, Southeast Asian countries also introduced the ASEAN Community Vision in 2003 with three main pillars —ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community, and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) - to intensify intra-ASEAN cooperation and coordination. Whereas the AEC was likely to be self-formed seeing the original purpose of this regional organization, the APSC was proposed by Indonesia and the ASCC was initiated by the Philippines. In addition to the community, ASEAN also has had its own charter since 2007 which has fully come into force one year afterwards. Indonesia once again played significant role in inserting 'promotion of human rights-related clauses' within the charter. Earlier during the negotiation process, regional countries debated the term of 'protection vs promotion'. The later was finally championed due to the absence of possible interventions when countries fail to uphold it, in which this provides a comfortable position for ASEAN members.

### **ASEAN Ways to Manage Elephants in the Room**

As mentioned before in this article, an undeniable fact about ASEAN is that it consists of small-to-medium countries. It would be highly unlikely for them to have an equal say as great powers if the relations are merely based on their material powers. Therefore,

ASEAN addresses regional dynamics by not taking sides at any strategic rivalry as well as persistently providing convenient platforms for parties to interact. This sort of behavior, which is also commonly understood as 'independent-and-active', has been boosting ASEAN credentials to perform as a central driving force for few decades. The first strategy exhibiting the behavior was the 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). It basically aimed to strengthen the intra-ASEAN connection against any possible interference by powers outside of the region. Three years later, the perception of external actors were more positive. ASEAN decided to pick Australia as its first official dialogue partner, followed by New Zealand as its second one in the next year. This format gradually institutionalized in 1976 where ASEAN decided on obligatory principles that would promote non-interference, mutual respects for sovereignty, and settlement of differences by peaceful means in the region.

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Consequentially, ASEAN welcomed more dialogue partners for initial intensification of



economic cooperation. Besides Canberra and Wellington, other five entities were allowed to engage in the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC) as of 1977, including Canada, the European Union, Japan, the UNDP, and the United States. But, it was the end of the Cold War that finally forced these developments and the socio-economic focus to be adjusted. For ASEAN it was necessary to team up on security-related matters with all remaining relevant middle-to-great powers, including South Korea in 1991, India in 1995, China and Russia in 1996. All aforementioned countries were given one new cooperative security framework — the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Since then, both the participants and the interactions continuously thrived. For example, the ARF now has at least 28 countries across the world, and it is no longer the only mechanism to facilitate security cooperation between ASEAN and external parties. Right now, ASEAN also has the East Asian Summit (EAS) since 2005, the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting-plus (ADMM+) since 2010, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) since 2012. Several similarities between three aforementioned extended ASEAN mechanisms lie at: the continuation of ASEAN centrality, confidence building measures as a purpose and the main dialogue partners acting as its members —the United States, China, Russia, South Korea, Japan, Australia, New

Zealand and India. Each of these major partners is also assigned with one ASEAN member, as its ASEAN country coordinator rotated once in every three-year.

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Unfortunately, the presence of great powers is not perpetually beneficial. There are at least two cases where ASEAN internal cohesion was at stake. One was in 2012 when ASEAN for the first time failed to adopt a joint communique due to disagreement over the existence of ‘South China Sea-related’ clauses. Many believed that Cambodia, the chairperson at that time, was deeply influenced by China. But, Indonesia successfully carried out a shuttle diplomacy as a panacea and resulted into six-principles on the issue. The other one was the recent adoption of ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific. It also almost failed because some members were afraid that the term was seen as too pro-US and against China, therefore they feared it might endanger their relations with Beijing. However,

once again Indonesia succeeded in convincing regional countries through their initiatives such as the High-Level Panel on Indo-Pacific in March 2019.

## Conclusion

Administering regional dynamics where great powers always play around, in an environment of existing distrusts among members, are not that easy. ASEAN took a lot of trials and errors at least not to irritate all parties, if not being able to satisfy them. An Indonesian example shows its conception of leadership where leading does not always equal 'to solitarily be the greatest under the spotlight'. Jakarta perceives leadership more as empowering others from behind, giving equal opportunities to speak and to be heard. Meanwhile, what could be inferred

from ASEAN is the way it balances its relations with existing great powers using its indigenous rule of the game and also sustainably engages with them on multiple platforms. ASEAN members are bonded to each other with a commitment to protect their respective path to be developed countries in the future.

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