

Asean: The way forward

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The regional bloc's achievements mask significant challenges, argue scholars Kishore Mahbubani and Rhoda Severino, in the first of a two-part article to be concluded tomorrow

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) has dramatically raised living standards of the more than 600 million people residing within its 10 member countries and brought a host of indirect benefits to billions of others in neighbouring states. And yet Asean has won relatively little recognition for those achievements. Beyond Southeast Asia, few have heard of Asean, and even within the region, the organisation's role and contributions are poorly understood. This article seeks to highlight three of Asean's greatest achievements and identify three key risks to its continued success.

Asean was formed in 1967, at the height of the Cold War, with five members: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. The nations of Indochina were entangled in geopolitical competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. The failure of two previous attempts at a Southeast Asian regional organisation augured poorly for Asean's prospects. Thanat Khoman, the former Thai foreign minister and one of Asean's founding fathers, lists four primary motivations behind the establishment of Asean. The first was to prevent external powers from exploiting the power vacuum left after rapid decolonisation of the region. Second, the founders of Asean saw an opportunity to foster cooperation among countries with common interests in the same geographic region. Third, the founders were convinced that the countries of Southeast Asia would have a stronger voice in addressing major global powers if they could speak together. Finally, Asean's founders believed "cooperation and ultimately integration serve the interests of all - something that individual efforts can never achieve."

In our view, Asean's three greatest contributions are peace, prosperity, and geopolitical stability for Southeast Asia. Each of these accomplishments is remarkable; considered in aggregate, they are astonishing.

In a region as diverse as Southeast Asia, peace is hardly a given. Although relatively small in geographic terms (Asean covers a land area of 4.46 million kilometres, less than half the size of the United States), the group's members encompass a bewildering kaleidoscope of languages, religions and traditions. Asean includes 240 million Muslims, 125 million Christians, 150 million Buddhists, 7 million Hindus, and 50 million followers of folk religions. Asean's political

systems, too, span a wide spectrum, from competitive democracies to one-party states and monarchies. The region's cultures are even more diverse. Consider the Acehnese and the Javanese; both are categorised as Muslim in Indonesia, but culturally they could not be more different. Acehnese keen to assert their separate identity waged a bitter war of secession in Indonesia. Today Aceh is the only province in Indonesia under Sharia and recently expanded Sharia to apply to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

As Ruth McVey, an American scholar and expert in Southeast Asian history, has observed: "The question to be posed is not so much of why there is armed separatism in Southeast Asia as why there is not more of it." Southeast Asia has been aptly described as "the Balkans of Asia". When the Cold War ended in 1989, most observers expected conflict to erupt there while peace prevailed in the Balkans of Europe. What happened, instead, was the reverse.

Asean contributed to this unexpected outbreak of peace in at least three important ways. First, it cultivated a culture of "musyawarah and mufakat" ("consultation and consensus" in Indonesian). This ethos is now hailed by many as the "Asean way" and has helped nations such as Myanmar achieve a peaceful transition from decades of harsh military rule, while nations in similar situations in other regions - Syria, for example - were riven by conflict. Scholar Amitav Acharya associates the Asean way with "a high degree of discreteness, informality, pragmatism, expediency, consensus building, and non-confrontational bargaining styles, which are often contrasted with the adversarial posturing and legalistic decision-making procedures in Western multilateral negotiations". This approach has facilitated the persistent economic and political engagement of regimes like Myanmar's military junta, preventing isolation from hardening their positions.

Second, Asean now organises more than 1,000 meetings a year that touch on virtually every topic, from trade to tourism and from health to the environment. As a result, thousands of invisible formal networks have evolved in the region. When Kishore was permanent secretary of the Singapore Foreign Ministry, many a deal was sealed on the golf course.

Third, Asean embraced a policy of non-intervention. The West frowned on this and encouraged Asean states to criticise one another when their human-rights records slipped. Yet Asean countries wisely ignored this advice and assiduously avoided meddling in one another's domestic affairs. The result has been peace. While there have been minor skirmishes between neighbouring countries since they have joined Asean, those disputes have fizzled out quickly, reflecting Asean's facility for conflict management and quiet diplomacy. This low-key approach doesn't generate newspaper headlines in the way that economic sanctions or harsh rhetoric might, but it has been highly effective in defusing potentially explosive situations such as the Thai-Cambodia border dispute and the dispute over Sabah between Malaysia and the Philippines.

The strong foundation of peace paved the way for Asean's second-biggest contribution: prosperity and poverty reduction. When Kishore was growing up in Singapore in the 1960s, Southeast Asia was seen as a region of little hope. Kishore spent his childhood in a one-bedroom house with five other members of his family and was on a special food- assistance programme in school because he was underweight. And yet, over the five decades that followed, Singapore - and indeed the entire Southeast Asian region - experienced extraordinary economic growth. From 2001 to 2013 alone, Asean's combined GDP rose threefold, reaching \$2.4 trillion. If the Asean bloc were a country, its growth rate during those years would rank second to China as the highest in Asia. Between 2004 and 2011, Asean member states' trade volumes, among one another and with the rest of the world, more than doubled. Foreign companies express optimism about the continued growth of Asean markets. The overwhelming majority of the US Chamber of Commerce's member companies in Southeast Asia predict larger profits and increased investment in Asean countries over the next few years.

Growth and expanding trade have brought tangible benefits for Southeast Asia's people. In 2012, Asean's GDP per capita reached \$3,748, (Bt121,800), more than double the 2000 figure of \$1,172.5 Over the last 10 years, poverty levels across the region have plummeted. In Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, the proportion of the population living on less than \$1.25 a day fell to 16 per cent in 2010, from 45 per cent in 2000. In the rest of Asean over the same period, the numbers living below the poverty line declined to 15 per cent, from 29 per cent.

Asean's third major contribution is promoting geopolitical collaboration among major powers - not just in Southeast Asia but throughout the Asia-Pacific region. East Asia has experienced major shifts of power in the 21st century. The United States and China have moved from close collaboration in the Cold War years to a new pattern of competition and collaboration. The Sino-Japanese relationship has been a tempestuous one.

Asean has played an important role in reducing geopolitical tension and rivalries by providing an annual platform for all the great powers to meet and resolve outstanding issues. For example, in 2010, when Sino-Japanese relations took a downturn over disputed islands in the East China Sea, Chinese premier Wen Jiabao and Japanese prime minister Naoto Kan met on the sidelines of an Asean meeting in Hanoi.

In addition, each year the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) plays host to 27 different countries to discuss security issues in the region. Many major powers attend, including the United States, the European Union, China, India, Japan, Russia, and South and North Korea. This institutionalises interactions among them, even during diplomatically tense periods. Sensitive topics that have been discussed on the sidelines of the ARF include North Korea's nuclear programmed and maritime disputes in the South China and the East China Seas. Few other international venues bring together so many different stakeholders for frank discussions on delicate security and strategic issues.

In view of these monumental contributions - peace, prosperity, and geopolitical collaboration - we think Asean should be considered for a Nobel Peace Prize. Yet such accolades remain an unlikely prospect, not because Asean is undeserving but because the world remains largely ignorant of Asean's constructive role. Many other regions could benefit by studying in depth the Asean way.

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