



Former Singaporean foreign minister and 2007 ASEAN chairman George Yeo hugs Cambodian counterpart Hor Namhong at the summit, where Myanmar unexpectedly endorsed the statement on political shootings in Myanmar.

ASEAN's strategic diplomacy at 50

KISHORE MAHBUBANI

TRY imagining a world where the Middle East is at peace. The thought seems almost inconceivable. Imagine a world where Israel and Palestine, two nations splintered from one piece of territory, live harmoniously. Impossible? This is what Malaysia and Singapore accomplished. After an acrimonious divorce in 1965, they live together in peace.

Imagine a world where Egypt, the most populous Islamic country in the Middle East, emerges as a stable and

prosperous democracy. Impossible? Then ask yourself how it is that Indonesia, the most populous Islamic country in Southeast Asia—with more than four times as many people as Egypt—has emerged as a beacon of democracy. Egypt and Indonesia both suffered from corruption. And both experienced decades of military rule, under Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Suharto in Indonesia.

Yet Egypt remains under military rule while Indonesia has emerged as the leading democracy in the Islamic world. What explains the difference?

The one-word answer is ASEAN. ASEAN's success in practising strategic diplomacy over the past 50 years has been one of the most undersold stories of our time.

If one were looking around the world to find the most promising region for international cooperation, Southeast Asia would have been at the bottom of the list. Home to 240 million Muslims, 130 million Christians, 140 million Buddhists and 7 million Hindus, it is the most diverse region in the world. In the 1960s, when ASEAN was formed, the region had

garnered a reputation as ‘the Balkans of Asia’, due to its geopolitical rivalries and pervasive disputes.

It is remarkable that ASEAN emerged as the world’s most successful regional organisation after the EU from such unpromising beginnings. The rest of the world can learn many lessons in strategic diplomacy from ASEAN.

Today, ASEAN is more important than ever. It has become more than an important neutral zone for great-power engagement. Its success in forging unity in diversity is a beacon of hope for our troubled world.

What were the key factors that led to the creation of the culture of peace that ASEAN now enjoys?

The main impulse that drew together the five founding members of ASEAN was fear—fear that these countries would become falling ‘dominoes’ as Communism expanded.

Leadership, always critical in international affairs, was another factor. The ASEAN countries were blessed with relatively good leaders early on.

There was also an element of luck. ASEAN ended up on the winning side in the Cold War and benefited from other geopolitical accidents, such as the Sino–Soviet split of 1969.

The ASEAN countries successfully wove themselves into the thriving East Asian economic system at a time when world trade was expanding. They learned economic lessons from Japan and the ‘four tigers’, emulating the best practices of these successful East Asian countries in their national development policies. ASEAN’s decision to embrace free trade and open markets was not preordained. All the ASEAN countries were members of the Group of 77 in the UN, but they rejected the nationalist and protectionist policies that the

group advocated.

As the ASEAN dynamic gained momentum and the organisation moved towards creating hundreds of multilateral meetings a year, the Southeast Asian region became more closely connected. Webs of networks developed in different areas of cooperation, from trade to defence.

Were sceptics to attend and study ASEAN meetings, they would be surprised by the high levels of cooperation among officials. This ASEAN camaraderie has defused many potential crises in the region.

ONE shining example of the success of ASEAN’s strategic diplomacy occurred in 2007. In August that year, the world was shocked when monks in Yangon were shot during street protests after the unexpected removal of fuel subsidies led to a drastic overnight rise in commodity prices. Since ASEAN had admitted Myanmar as a member in 1997, there was a lot of pressure on ASEAN countries to make a statement criticising these shootings.

As an ASEAN member state, Myanmar had two options. It could have vetoed an ASEAN joint statement or disassociated itself from such a statement. Then there would have been a statement among the remaining nine countries criticising Myanmar. Many, including the nine other ASEAN foreign ministers, expected this to be the outcome.

At the time of the shootings, which began on 26 September 2007, the 10 ASEAN foreign ministers met in New York, alongside sessions of the UN General Assembly. Singapore was the ASEAN chair at the time. When the group drafted a strong statement criticising the shootings, George Yeo, then foreign minister of Singapore, who chaired these meetings,

suggested that the ASEAN statement should be made by the nine member countries excluding Myanmar. It was widely expected that Myanmar’s foreign minister, Nyan Win, would disassociate himself and his delegation from the statement.

To their surprise, Nyan Win agreed that all 10 countries, including Myanmar, should endorse the statement. This was a truly remarkable decision—the statement said that the ASEAN foreign ministers ‘were appalled to receive reports of automatic weapons being used and demanded that the Myanmar government immediately desist from the use of violence against demonstrators.’

Myanmar’s foreign minister had endorsed a statement criticising his own government. In assessing this surprising development, George Yeo said that, for Myanmar, ‘ASEAN was everything they had. ... They would be thick-skinned in receiving criticism, but they stuck it out, because we were their only hope. They didn’t want to be too close to China, even though they depended on China. India supported Aung San Suu Kyi initially and took an intermediate position, but was never close to them. The Western powers were pretty hostile.’

In short, even when there were sharp disagreements between Myanmar and its fellow ASEAN countries, Myanmar decided that sticking with ASEAN was preferable to opting out. Clearly the ASEAN policy of engaging the military regime in Myanmar with strategic diplomacy had succeeded. This story of engagement almost reads as a foil to the EU’s disastrous policy of isolating Syria.

ASEAN’s ability to foster peace extends outside its member states as well. In an era of growing geopolitical

pessimism, when many leading geopolitical thinkers predict rising competition and tension between great powers—especially between the United States and China—ASEAN has created an indispensable diplomatic platform that regularly brings all the great powers together. Within ASEAN, a culture of peace has evolved as a result of imbibing the Indonesian custom of *musyawarah* and *mufakat* (consultation and consensus).

Now ASEAN has begun to share this culture of peace with the larger Asia Pacific region. When tensions rise between China and Japan and their leaders find it difficult to speak to each other, ASEAN provides a face-saving platform and the right setting to restart the conversation. In particular, ASEAN has facilitated China's peaceful rise by generating a framework of peace that moderated

aggressive impulses. In short, ASEAN's strategic culture has infected the larger Asia Pacific region.

One of the miracles of the Asia Pacific is that significant great-power conflict has long been prevented, even though there have been enormous shifts of power among the great nations in the region. Of course, the reasons for this lack of conflict are complex. ASEAN's neutrality, which helps the organisation retain its centrality in the region, is one factor in keeping the region stable and peaceful.

This is why it is important that in the growing Sino-US geopolitical competition, both sides should treat ASEAN as a delicate Ming vase that could easily break. US and Chinese interests will both suffer if ASEAN is damaged or destroyed—delicacy in dealing with ASEAN is critical for both sides.

ASEAN is far from perfect—its many flaws have been well documented, especially in the Anglo-Saxon media. It never progresses in a linear fashion, often moving like a crab, taking two steps forward, one step backwards and one step sideways. Viewed over a short period, progress is hard to see. But despite its many imperfections, when one takes a longer view, ASEAN's forward progress has been tangible. In these interesting times, ASEAN's policies and practices of strategic diplomacy deserve greater study by the global community. **EAFQ**

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ASEAN leaders link hands at the opening of the 2017 summit in Manila. The grouping's success in forging unity in diversity is 'a beacon for our troubled world'.

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