ASEAN has come a long way since the five foreign ministers from Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand came together in Bangkok in August 1967 to establish an organization that would promote economic and social cooperation. Since then, ASEAN has evolved from a loose and informal association into a Community of ten states encompassing political-security, economic, and socio-cultural pillars, and sharing an ASEAN identity. It has also weathered several challenges – the Third Indochina War in the 1970s, the Asian financial crisis in 1997-1998, and the outbreak of SARS in 2003, among others. ASEAN has demonstrated adaptability and longevity, and as it commemorates its 50th founding anniversary in 2017, it is high time to reflect on its past achievements and its continuously evolving role in the world.

ASEAN’s key accomplishments

The first key success of ASEAN is the general absence of an armed conflict among the Member States. Many scholars believed this has been ASEAN’s biggest contribution to the region and the world despite the diversity of its political systems and cultures and the existence of bilateral tensions arising from historical enmities and unresolved territorial and maritime disputes. ASEAN has maintained peace by socializing its Member States into principles and norms such non-interference in internal affairs, respect for sovereignty, and renunciation of threat and use of force – all enshrined in the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). These principles have been upheld through consultations, non-confrontation, and consensus-building, or what is known as the “ASEAN Way.”

While the persistence of bilateral tensions and the reluctance of Member States to avail of formal and informal dispute settlement mechanisms, such as the High Council and the ASEAN Troika, have been pointed out as evidence of ASEAN’s ineffectiveness, it can be argued that the regional organization has succeeded in defusing conflicts by urging restraint. ASEAN Member States have become concerned about jeopardizing their standing in the region, and thus have opted for restraint even when pursuing national objectives. Thus, despite not taking a mediating role, ASEAN has contributed to managing tensions through informal and non-legalistic means.

The absence of an armed conflict in Southeast Asia has led to the second key success of ASEAN which is its role in promoting national and regional economic development. ASEAN has contributed to “a regional and international political order that has promoted a climate for economic assistance, trade, and FDI supporting national development programs.” Its expansion of membership to include Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam has facilitated their greater integration into the regional economy and has allowed their respective economies to catch up. The establishment of an ASEAN Economic Community with its commitment to a free flow of goods, services, and mobility of people has also made the regional bloc more competitive and resilient amid a slowdown in the global economy and trade.

The third achievement of ASEAN has been its role in facilitating regional dialogue and cooperation in the broader Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN, as a group of small and middle-sized states, has engaged all major powers and has sought to
become a driving force – or the concept of ASEAN Centrality – toward an inclusive and rules-based regional architecture. It has initiated different bilateral and multilateral mechanisms including the Dialogue Partnerships, the ASEAN Plus Three, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus). These platforms cover issues ranging from traditional security, economy and trade, and functional areas, mainly through confidence-building and dialogue.

ASEAN has also encouraged external powers to abide by the same principles and norms in the TAC as the foundation for inter-state relations in the region; accession to the TAC is, in fact, a requirement for a country to become an ASEAN Dialogue Partner. While ASEAN in its early years had declared neutrality and attempted to isolate itself from major power competition, it has come to acknowledge that engagement with and cooperation by major powers are critical to the maintenance of regional security.¹

Challenges ahead

While ASEAN has successfully adapted to regional developments over the past decades, there are current challenges that may necessitate an even more proactive and responsive Association.

The first challenge is the changing regional security environment and the emerging competition between the United States and China. Unlike the Cold War rivalry where ideological divides were clear and ASEAN was able to claim neutrality, the current contest may be more complex given how the region has become more interdependent, and how countries have become reliant on one power for security and to another power for economy. This power competition runs the risk of dividing the ASEAN Member States and sidelining the Association in driving the regional agenda.

The impact of great power competition on ASEAN manifests in the South China Sea disputes. ASEAN has been cautious about crafting a proactive approach due to the differences in views among claimants and non-claimants, as well as the different prioritization among Member States in terms of their respective relationships with China as a big neighbor and a major trading partner. A substantive Code of Conduct remains elusive; and as ASEAN marks its 50th year, significant progress in this regard would be a demonstration of its commitment to and leadership in managing the longstanding disputes.

The second challenge to ASEAN is responding to non-traditional and transnational security concerns ranging from disasters, climate change, violent extremism, maritime piracy, trade in illegal drugs, public health emergencies, and refugee flows. While ASEAN over the years has set up mechanisms and sectoral bodies to coordinate policies and promote cooperation, responses have been either belated or limited due to the emphasis on non-interference and consensus-based decision making. Efforts also vary from one ASEAN Member State to another as manifested by the gaps between regional commitments and complementing national policies.² Compounding this shortcoming is the lack of a regional mechanism to enforce the implementation of regional commitments at the national level. As the impact of these security concerns crosses national borders, it becomes imperative that the ASEAN Member States become more proactive in assisting each other to deal with these challenges. This includes reassessing approaches that may have been successful in preserving ASEAN in the past but have been less effective in dealing with new security challenges.³

The third challenge to ASEAN relates to the unresolved tensions between and among the Member States. While ASEAN has kept its members together by not bringing up sensitive issues, it has been incapacitated or even rendered irrelevant whenever a diplomatic crisis or a skirmish breaks out. As ASEAN consolidates its community-building process and fosters a regional identity, Member States should seek progress in addressing bilateral tensions to deepen mutual trust and confidence. While many of these problems cannot be easily overcome, Member States should actively explore diplomatic, rules-based, and lasting solutions to these, including through means provided for by the TAC, the ASEAN Charter, and international law.

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Looking ahead to the next 50 years

Despite its criticisms and inadequacies, ASEAN has established itself as an important contributor to regional and international peace and stability in the past half century. ASEAN is a product of its own history and circumstances, and as it has demonstrated several times, it can evolve and adapt when the time calls for it. However, this does not mean that ASEAN should remain passive and reactive, and instead should challenge itself to grow. In the words of former Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan, ASEAN “should not rest on its laurels” and should “adjust and keep up with the global trend.”

In the ASEAN Vision 2025, ASEAN envisages itself as “an outward-looking region” that is “cohesive, responsive and relevant in addressing challenges to regional peace and security” and with “a central role in shaping the regional architecture.” Realizing this vision entails a dual task of ensuring ASEAN unity and credibility as a regional and global player and promoting the continued development of each Member State toward resilience. ASEAN is only as strong as its weakest member, and therefore each Member State should strive for both collective and individual resilience. The succeeding 50 years will be measured not by the number of new declarations, vision statements, and blueprints, but by how ASEAN has thrived in responding to regional and global developments.

Endnotes

2 Ibid, 148.