



ASEAN 10 Meeting the Challenges

by **H.R.H. Norodom Sirivudh**

ASEAN-10 was born on the day Cambodia was officially admitted as a full member of this regional grouping. Therefore, April 30, 1999 should be remembered as a historic day for ASEAN. It took almost 32 years to complete the ASEAN-10. The road has not always been smooth, nor has it been without challenges. But those were the challenges of the past. Today we must focus on the challenges, and opportunities, of the future.

Facing the Challenges

ASEAN has been well known for its ability to manage its problems constructively and for tackling key issues. However, in the past few years, ASEAN's image and credibility have been questioned due to the financial crisis, membership expansion, and leadership changes. In this context, the following are some of the key issues that confront the ASEAN-10:

First is the question of leadership. Since the departure of President Suharto and the impact of the Asian financial crisis on ASEAN member countries, ASEAN does not seem to be able to get its leadership in place. At the same time, there have been some new faces. With the enlargement of membership, the new members of ASEAN have begun to explore their role and responsibility.

There are several approaches to the leadership question. The first approach is perhaps for one senior ASEAN leader to play a leadership role in helping to guide the direction of ASEAN. This leadership role could be rotated. The second approach is for a group of several leaders to work together. The third approach is for all ASEAN leaders – meaning leaders from all ASEAN member countries – to contribute their leadership inputs into ASEAN as a whole. No one should be more senior or should be able to voice his/her leadership role more than the rest. Ultimately, the leader or leaders of each country should play their part accordingly. But the important consideration is that ASEAN must be seen to be able to project some kind of positive leadership role. This is the reality that ASEAN must collectively tackle, because the organization cannot continue to be leaderless.

The second challenge is the decision-making process. With an ASEAN-10, the decision-making process is becoming increasingly complex; it becomes more difficult to reach consensus on key issues. For example, the admission of Cambodia into ASEAN following July 1997 has been a prime example of where ASEAN did not have consensus. ASEAN will need to find constructive ways to ensure that the decision-making

process is working effectively within the enlarged ASEAN membership so that progress can be measured and evaluated.

Another challenge is that ASEAN needs to stay relevant. To do that, ASEAN needs to be able to reach out to more people outside of the governmental framework. ASEAN has been viewed by many as an elitist organization. It would be interesting to see how people will react to a more participatory approach. ASEAN cannot afford to remain static. ASEAN should reflect not only the position of the governments but also the common interests and needs of the ASEAN people.

The fourth challenge is the future direction of ASEAN. This is why ASEAN Vision 2020 is so critical. ASEAN 2020 helps to set the strategic direction of ASEAN. The visions, strategies, and plans of action should work congruently in pushing ASEAN to a higher level in the international arena of politics, economics, and security. At the same time, ASEAN should help promote some sense of direction for each member country, and vice versa. Surely, without some guiding principles and direction, ASEAN cannot sail across the ocean of uncertainties and globalization where turbulence and undercurrents abound.

Another key challenge is that ASEAN needs to institutionalize the way it operates. The ASEAN Secretariat should be strengthened and its role should be enhanced to ensure that it will be able to cope with new challenges. The Secretariat should play a more proactive role (rather than a reactive one) in dealing with regional issues as well as national challenges with regional implications.

Regional economies represent another real challenge. Since the Asian financial crisis in July 1997, ASEAN member states have been trying to recover from wide effects that have gone beyond the economic sphere to the social, political, and environmental areas. Some member countries have been able to make positive gains by focusing on strengthening economic fundamentals and undertaking major reforms. The challenge now is to sustain the recovery and to learn the hard lessons from this recent financial crisis so as to avoid future problems. The new members of ASEAN, however, were not immune. In fact, the transitional economies – Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia – have been facing serious economic challenges, which include depletion of investment, drops in tourism, and a rise in unemployment. If these trends continue, it is highly likely that the situation will further deteriorate and it may take longer to recover. In these circumstances, the best thing to do is to engage in introspection to see where things should be improved and what lessons are to be learned.

With the enlargement of membership, ASEAN needs to strategically manage increasing diversity of views and differences within the regional grouping so that they will not pose greater threats to unity and solidarity. The management of diversity of views, ideas, and problems is one of ASEAN's best-known

formulas for both conflict resolution as well as conflict avoidance. Talks and dialogues are important in the ASEAN context. But talks should not overshadow actions. ASEAN will need to focus more on the dynamics of actions and results. The inability to produce substantive results could lead to a reduction of confidence in ASEAN.

Another challenge is ASEAN's relations with its dialogue partners, especially with Western countries (United States, Canada and the European Union). The challenge is how to reconcile the different views and perceptions of what constitutes the issues and problems for ASEAN collectively and individually. Both sides – ASEAN and the dialogue partners – should be more realistic in the way they deal with one another. Both sides should engage one another constructively in order to satisfy the desires, needs, and interests of each other.

Another real challenge is the economic gap between the new and old member of ASEAN. New members should seriously attempt to catch up. At the same time, the old members should try to help with development experience and lessons, as well a technology and training. The levels of economic development between the old and new members is quite different and it may take some time for the new members to move out of their current transitional economies.

Conclusion

The future of the ASEAN-10 will depend on the contribution of each member state. ASEAN needs to reinvigorate itself through new ideas and new driving forces. With 32 years of experience and achievements thus far, ASEAN has reached maturity and will be in a position to cope with the various issues and problems with determination and unity. One cannot imagine, in the absence of ASEAN, the past, present, or future of Southeast Asia.

To meet the challenges of the future, ASEAN-10 needs to sustain its optimism, relevance, and unity in the deepening processes of globalization and interdependence. As it steps into the next millennium, ASEAN will have to work harder in its consensus-building approach to ensure that it will be able to manage the emerging issues and challenges of the 21st century.

H.R.H. Norodom Sirivudh is Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace. These comments are drawn from a paper presented at the 13th Asia Pacific Roundtable in Kuala Lumpur.