



## **ASEAN at 40: Perception and Reality** by Tommy Koh

ASEAN is 40 years old this year. Although ASEAN has often been praised as the second most successful regional organization in the world, after the European Union, the truth is that policy makers in Washington and Brussels do not take it seriously and continue to disrespect the institution. Let me cite two recent examples. At the Williamsburg Conference, held in Mongolia in June 2007, I was distressed to hear a senior US official say: “the ASEAN way is no way.” At the ASEAN-US Symposium, held in October 2007 in Singapore, I was astonished to hear another senior U.S. official say that he had personally advised Secretary Rice, not once but twice, not to attend the annual ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). I suspect the same attitude prevails in Brussels. This could explain why ministerial meetings between ASEAN and the EU are often attended by full ministers on the ASEAN side, but not on the EU side. The tragedy is that the negative Western perception of ASEAN is sometimes echoed by our own researchers and scholars.

### **ASEAN’s Achievements**

ASEAN suffers from a serious perception problem and, as the saying goes, perception is sometimes more important than reality. Whenever I visited Washington DC, I found that American specialists on Asia, including those who specialize on Southeast Asia, held a negative view of ASEAN. I would therefore like to focus my essay on what I consider to be ASEAN’s most important achievements. I hope to persuade my skeptical friends in Washington and Brussels, as well as those in the ASEAN family, that their negative perception of ASEAN is mistaken.

#### *No. 1: Keeping the Region Peaceful*

ASEAN’s most important achievement is to keep Southeast Asia peaceful. This is similar to what I consider to be the EU’s most important achievement: to consolidate peace in Western Europe. When we compare Southeast Asia today with the region in 1967, we will then realize how dramatically the region has changed. In 1967, the region was in turmoil, with the flames of war in Vietnam threatening to engulf the whole region. Today, Southeast Asia is at peace with itself and with the world. To be sure, the region is not free of problems. Myanmar is a case in point and there are low-level insurgencies in both the southern Philippines and southern Thailand. But, even in the case of Myanmar, I would argue that ASEAN has played, and is playing, a constructive role in encouraging the government and the opposition to move towards dialogue and reconciliation and to move together on Myanmar’s own roadmap toward democracy. The Western preference to isolate Myanmar and to impose sanctions is counter-productive and will end up hurting the people the West wishes to help.

#### *No. 2: Maintaining Strategic Sealanes*

Some of the most important sealanes of the world pass through Southeast Asia. Fifty percent of world trade and one-third of the world’s oil supply pass through the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. These two straits are classified as “straits used for international navigation” under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Indonesia is an archipelagic state and hosts important archipelagic sealanes, such as Sunda and Lombok. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, like the rest of the ASEAN family, respect international law. They cooperate with one another, and with the International Maritime Organization (IMO), in keeping the straits used for international navigation and the archipelagic sealanes safe, secure, and clean. At an IMO meeting, held in Singapore in September 2007, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore became the first littoral states in the world to agree to implement Article 43 of the UN Convention. They agreed to establish a cooperative mechanism, open to user states and other stakeholders, to promote and maintain the safety of navigation in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore and to protect their marine environment from pollution by ships.

#### *No. 3: Creating a Single Market and Production Base*

When the West views Asia, their eyes are drawn to the two rising giant economies of China and India, and to Japan, which remains the second largest economy in the world. Western eyes seldom turn to Southeast Asia even though the region has a combined population of 550 million people. It is already the fifth largest trading partner of the United States, after Canada, China, Mexico, and Japan. By the year 2015, the 10 economies of ASEAN will become a single market and production base, with the free flow of goods, services, investment, business and professional people, skilled labor, talents, and the freer flow of capital. Not only will Southeast Asia become one integrated economy, it will also be linked – through free trade agreements and comprehensive economic partnership agreements – to the economies of China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand. At the same time, seven of the ASEAN countries are members of APEC. At Bogor, Indonesia, APEC leaders committed themselves to the vision of free trade and investment in the Pacific by two specific deadlines. The other good news is that while the Asian economies are integrating and producing new patterns of intra-Asian trade and production, they continue to be outward looking and are integrated into the global economy.

#### *No. 4: Paradigm of Multiculturalism*

ASEAN is, culturally, a microcosm of the world. Southeast Asia is the home of many ethnic and tribal groups, many languages and cultures, and all the great religions of the world. I suspect that most policy makers in Washington and Brussels do not know that there are more Muslims in

Southeast Asia than there are in the Middle East, or that the Islam practiced in this region has historically been moderate and tolerant. One of ASEAN's most impressive achievements is the success of its multiculturalism. We have been able to forge unity in diversity. In this troubled world where there are many conflicts and misunderstandings involving ethnicity, tribalism, languages, cultures and religions, ASEAN is a shining example of success. The world should pay more attention to ASEAN's paradigm of successful multiculturalism.

#### *No. 5: Convenor, Facilitator, and Regional Architect*

Asia and the world are in the midst of change, of a long transition from a bipolar world to a unipolar world and now to a multipolar world. When the Cold War ended, ASEAN took the initiative to launch the ARF, bringing all the regional and extra-regional powers with a stake in the security of the Asia-Pacific together. This inspiration is similar to the inspiration that led to the founding of the CSCE, which has now become the OSCE. It is true that progress in the ARF has been slow and it has been stuck in confidence-building for too long. It is, however, the only security forum of the Asia-Pacific, just as APEC is the only economic forum which links the two sides of the Pacific.

After the 1997 Asian financial crisis, when the fall of the Thai baht ricocheted to Northeast Asia and brought down the Korean won, it was clear to all Asians that Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia are interlinked. This was the rationale for launching the ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, South Korea) forum. With the rise of India and the growing connectivity between India, Australia and New Zealand, and Northeast and Southeast Asia, it was logical for ASEAN to launch the East Asia Summit (EAS) which brings together ASEAN+3+3 (Australia, New Zealand, and India). Apart from its economic logic, the EAS forum has great strategic significance because Asia's peace will depend on the ability of China, Japan, and India to live at peace with one another.

ASEAN, being neutral and acceptable to all, has therefore played the vital role of convenor, facilitator, and the architect of the evolving regional architecture. I suspect there is very little understanding in Washington and Brussels of this critical role. I also suspect that some people in those capitals continue to view ASEAN as a pawn rather than as a player.

#### *No. 6: ASEAN Charter*

In November 2007, at the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit in Singapore, ASEAN's leaders signed the ASEAN Charter, which has been two years in the making. This is a historic event. The Charter has the potential to transform ASEAN. What does the ASEAN Charter do for ASEAN? It will, inter alia:

- (i) transform ASEAN from a loose association into a rules-based organization;
- (ii) compel ASEAN to take its agreements and commitments seriously, with a procedure for monitoring compliance and a system of dispute settlement;
- (iii) establish an ASEAN human rights body;
- (iv) integrate ASEAN economically into a single market and

production base, as well as create an ASEAN security community and an ASEAN socio-cultural community;

- (v) commit to certain principles such as democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms, rule of law, good governance and constitutional government;
- (vi) empower the ASEAN secretary general and the ASEAN Secretariat;
- (vii) create new institutions, such as, the three Community Councils and the Committee of Permanent Representatives;
- (viii) streamline ASEAN's structure and decision-making process; and
- (ix) make ASEAN a more cohesive, efficient and effective organisation.

#### **Conclusion**

I believe that ASEAN has a record of achievements, over the past 40 years which the peoples and governments of ASEAN can be proud of. ASEAN has kept the peace in Southeast Asia. Our 10 economies are progressively being integrated into a single economy which will enable us to compete more effectively with China and India. At the same time, ASEAN is also evolving into a security community and a socio-cultural community. Through 40 years of frequent meetings, networking, consultations, negotiations, and working together, we have developed a high comfort level with one another and a culture of mutual respect and mutual accommodation in order to achieve consensus. We are creating a sense of ASEAN identity, of shared values, and a common vision. At the same time, ASEAN is helping to shape the evolving architecture of the region. With the adoption of the Charter, ASEAN is reinventing itself into a more rational, coherent, and dynamic organization.

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