ASEAN @ 50: What if...And what next?

The year 2017 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or more widely known as ASEAN.

It will indeed be a time for reflection, on what ASEAN has achieved over the past five decades, and what it seeks to accomplish in the years ahead.

For some, there will be some sense of accomplishment, over what has been achieved over the past five decades. For some, there may be even a sense of disbelief, as to where ASEAN is today, as compared to what ASEAN’s Founding Fathers dreamed of when they signed the Bangkok Declaration launching ASEAN in 1967. Who would have thought that ASEAN would grow from a loose association of five in 1967 to a more integrated community of ten today?

For others, however, there will be questions on whether ASEAN has done enough, or perhaps even whether the ASEAN experiment has been worth it. After all, nations and peoples are questioning the very idea of integration and community-building in other regions.

The most common critique for ASEAN include:

“ASEAN appears to be merely a talk shop” (one of the most common comment made by students in ASEAN outreach programmes nationwide);

“ASEAN seems to be process-oriented rather than results-oriented” (observation by some in academia and some retired diplomats);

“ASEAN is slow in making decisions, and sometimes not able to make a decision because of lack of consensus” (one of the favorite critique by foreign media);

“ASEAN does not yet generate significant concrete and tangible benefits for people” (common commentary by some in civil society and the private sector)

Admittedly, sometimes, some of these comments are not without justifiable cause. There is certainly room for improvement, and this is recognized across the ASEAN Community.
The debate will continue, as it should, in this important year for reflection within ASEAN. But perhaps it would be useful to take a step back and, with a wave of the proverbial magic wand, create a region and a history where ASEAN did not exist.

What would such a region look like in this alternate history?

Without a sense of common future, one would perhaps see a Southeast Asia fragmented into groups of countries, aligned with one another, and against one another. The basis of such an alignment could be religion or ethnicity. It could be an alignment pitting mainland Southeast Asia versus maritime Southeast Asia. The combinations are endless and could be shifting constantly.

Without any regional codes of conduct governing peaceful relations amongst States, such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), defense budgets would be high as Southeast Asian countries prepare to defend their borders against perceived threats from within the region.

Any dispute may immediately involve countries from outside the region, as external powers work through the United Nations Security Council, bilaterally with a friendly Southeast Asian state, or unilaterally, to help maintain peace and stability in Southeast Asia for us.

After all, without ASEAN and ASEAN-led fora for dialogue, we in Southeast Asia would not be in a position to handle the situation collectively. And since we cannot do it, others would be tempted to handle it for us. Indeed, our region could be hosts to a number of UN peacekeeping missions or observer missions when conflicts arise.

Since neither the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) nor the East Asia Summit (EAS) exist, all discussions regarding the future of security in the region would take place in places like New York or in Europe. Indeed, decisions on the fate and future of Southeast Asia would more likely be made in capitals outside our region.

What about the challenge of transnational crime? Well without any ASEAN mechanisms, cooperation would be limited to bilateral ones, perhaps with assistance from more capable countries from outside the region. Each nation would have to rely on its own intelligence and early warning to prepare for the global and regional threats of illicit drugs, human trafficking and money laundering.
Without free trade, the single market and production base, and other important ASEAN economic agreements, each country will have to rely much more on its own economic policies to boost growth. Products that we take for granted, from durian to four wheel drive vehicles to the computer notebook, will be more expensive. There will be queues for visas for ASEAN nationals wishing to visit one another across national boundaries.

Many of the big name multinational companies that now operate in ASEAN may not even be here in this ASEAN-less Southeast Asia, since they cannot take advantage of the larger 600 million plus ASEAN market and since there are no plans to facilitate trade such as an ASEAN Single Window. Regional connectivity plans would not exist so costs of travelling between countries in Southeast Asia would be higher.

There would be less academic and cultural exchanges amongst Southeast countries, given the reduced comfort level amongst countries in the region as they would not benefit from the many contacts, dialogue and cooperation that exist within the ASEAN framework.

There would be no region-wide information exchange and early-warning cooperation to assist in dealing with natural disasters and pandemic outbreaks such as the ebola and zika virus.

Global players and regional powerhouses would be less inclined to talk seriously with the individual Southeast Asian countries, whether bilaterally or at the United Nations. And indeed why should they, given that there is no collective bargaining power that ASEAN would have provided.

Equally important is that there would be no regional identity. We would be known simply as Thais and other Southeast Asian nationals.

The above is a short description of a Southeast Asia without ASEAN, a somber picture of an alternate history for our region.

Less stable and predictable. More dangerous to live in. Less able to manage influence from outside. More expensive to conduct business in and with.

So against the backdrop of fifty years of patient and close cultivation of relations, cooperation and understanding amongst very diverse member states, what we have in 2017 -- a people-centered Community that seeks to leave no one behind -- may not be too bad as some would like to think.
Certainly, the alternative seems to be worse.

Be that as it may, ASEAN needs to do more and is committed to doing more.

Many of the transnational crime challenges need to be more effectively addressed. That is why there are ongoing discussions on how to enhance cooperation on border management. This will become increasingly important as ASEAN becomes more interconnected under the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025.

Piracy and other maritime challenges will need to be dealt with, if we are to enjoy seamless maritime connectivity throughout Southeast Asia and beyond. Cyber security threats need to be overcome through more intense ASEAN action, and hence the suggestion for some ASEAN centre for cybersecurity.

Building on lessons learnt from the Tsunami/earthquake in 2004 to even earlier threats of SARS and avian flu, more integrated early warning and response capabilities on an ASEAN-wide basis need to be developed to deal with future cross-border challenges ranging from natural disasters to pandemics.

We will certainly need to implement fully a number of key economic agreements and realize, as soon as possible, agreed goals such as the ASEAN Single Window.

We will need to accelerate the negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as it is likely to be the only viable regional FTA for our region in the near future, given the uncertainties surrounding the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

We will need to harmonize regulations and strengthen the legal foundations to make the ASEAN Community attractive to foreign investors and traders while protecting the interests of the region. At the same time, we will need to promote sustainable development in ASEAN, and help ensure that our community-building efforts and our efforts to attain the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are mutually reinforcing.

And we will certainly need to make the ASEAN Community more accessible to all sectors of society. Enhanced mutual understanding, respect for diversity and support for tolerance and moderation need to be translated into
concrete projects with results, especially in view of the challenges of extremism from outside our region.

Given the dual trends of a youthful population and an ageing society coexisting within the ASEAN region, we will need to better integrate our youth into our community-building process while ensure that facilities and policies promote active ageing in our societies.

More work need to be done to promote the ASEAN identity and strengthen grassroots support for the ASEAN Community. It would be nice if there could be ASEAN Associations in all ten ASEAN Member States.

Most importantly, ASEAN will need to continue to have unity and thereby ensure ASEAN centrality, vis-à-vis our relations with the outside world and especially in the regional architecture. This is the only way for ASEAN to retain its “diplomatic space” in face of rising competition amongst major powers in the Asia-Pacific and growing challenges to ASEAN-led platforms.

So the ASEAN story needs to continue and indeed must continue. Besides, the story of the ASEAN Community has just begun.

Because it is in our mutual interests to continue the ASEAN journey. Not just for Thais but for all other ASEAN nationals and peoples, and all others who depend on ASEAN providing that regional order so necessary for economic progress to continue.

So here’s looking forward to the continued contributions of the ASEAN Community to the peace and prosperity of our region, and beyond -- beyond Southeast Asia, beyond the expectations of ASEAN’s Founding Fathers, and certainly beyond 50 years.

Happy Golden Anniversary for ASEAN and Happy New Year ASEAN Community!

-----------------------

Suriya Chindawongse
Deputy Director-General
ASEAN-Thailand
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand