Idealism and *Realpolitik*—Building the ASEAN Community

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ASEAN is an organisation propelled by a mixture of idealism and hot air. Idealism is what drove the conclusion of the ASEAN Charter in 2007. That was the fortieth anniversary of ASEAN. The idea was to provide the constitutional framework for an ASEAN Community comprising three pillars—the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). The target date is 2015.

Since the coming into force of the Charter in December 2008, the hot air has predominated. There will be a grand declaration that the ASEAN Community has come into being when the ASEAN Summit meets at the end of this year. The reality is that there is a long way to go, even in the realm of economic integration, which is now the driving force of ASEAN.

In my short remarks today I will attempt to address the reason for the gap between rhetoric and reality. This may be summed up in one word: *realpolitik*. ASEAN member states are not driven by some utopian vision of political perfection. They have no desire as some do to create a community that will have power and influence in the world. Their commitment to the ASEAN community is based on national self-interest. In this, ASEAN states are no different from the vast majority of countries.

It should be clearly understood that self-interest is not the same thing as selfishness. Countries may recognise that their long-term interests require that they cooperate with others rather than bludgeon them into line by armed force or economic pressure. Large powerful countries may have to practise self-restraint in order to foster trust. For many years, Indonesia led ASEAN in this way. If Indonesia had turned out to be a regional bully, ASEAN would have died in the cradle.

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1 The history of the development of the Charter is traced in this author’s *The ASEAN Charter: A Commentary* (NUS Press, forthcoming) and *Towards a Rules-Based Community: An ASEAN Legal Service* (co-written with Jean-Claude Piris; 2014).
First, a couple of words about what ASEAN is not. Firstly, it is not a supra-national organisation. Ignorant commentators often judge ASEAN according to their views of what an ideal international organisation should be. ASEAN does not want to be a federal state. There is no desire to create an enormous expensive bureaucracy like the European Commission or foster an ever-closer union. ASEAN was and remains an inter-governmental organisation. There is no push for shared sovereignty.

Secondly, ASEAN is not a security organisation. It is not a bloc whose role is to defend itself against anyone. From the start, ASEAN was a confidence-building measure in an area of the world that was plagued by war. The aim was to prevent ASEAN from becoming the cock-pit where big powers fought their proxy wars.

ASEAN’s many detractors forget that in 1967 Southeast Asia was in turmoil. Indonesia had just fought and lost an undeclared war against Malaysia, euphemistically called “Konfrontasi,” from the Dutch word for confrontation. Singapore had been ejected from the Malaysian federation, fortunately without bloodshed. The Philippines had a claim to the Malaysian state of Sabah. Elements of the defeated Communist Malayan Peoples’ Liberation Army lurked in the jungle border between Malaysia and Thailand. And right next door to Thailand, the Cold War had turned hot in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

For the many commentators who like to compare ASEAN to the European Community, recall that with the EEC was formed in 1957 Europe had been at peace for 12 years. Soviet aggression was deterred by the existence of NATO. If you want a proper comparison, imagine how the EEC would have fared if it had been formed in 1947 instead of 1957, given the level of trust among Germany, France, Italy and the Benelux at the time.

ASEAN’s great achievement has been to create the stable environment for the economic progress in the decades that followed 1967. This is now taken for granted and its importance minimized by a generation that has known nothing but peace and economic growth. But the impetus for this was not idealism; it was realpolitik. The fear of Communist expansion drove the non-Communist states of Southeast Asia together to found ASEAN. It is no coincidence that the first ASEAN Summit—the first meeting of the ASEAN leaders—took place in 1976, the year after the Communist victories in Indochina.

2 The original founding members were Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.
3 It was held in Bali, Indonesia in February 1976. Present were the Presidents of Indonesia and the Philippines and the Prime Ministers of Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.