

ASEAN's mid-life crisis?

Written by Nick Bisley, Executive Director of La Trobe Asia and Professor of International Relations, La Trobe University



EPA/Francis R. Malasig

On August 8, 1967, foreign ministers from Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines signed the [Bangkok Declaration](#) to create the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN, as it now universally known.

Fifty years on the grouping includes all southeast Asian countries, with the exception of Timor Leste. Its longevity is striking, as has been its ability to develop a clear sense of identity and purpose among its members.

Yet the organisation is famous for its [love of process](#), with more than 1,000 meetings held every year – often with little to show for it. Critics also point out that even though its formally stated goal is to collaborate to make the region more peaceful and prosperous, its concrete action to advance those aims [has been limited](#).

More worryingly, as great power rivalry grows in Asia, ASEAN's ability to command the attention of its members and to influence the regional setting is at risk.

ASEAN's formation was a [product of its times](#). The group of poor and mostly newly independent countries needed to develop a much more positive approach to one another. Their immediate past had entailed cross-border contests, rivalry and insurgencies that had marked out their immediate past.

Just as importantly, they wanted to keep the Cold War at bay. In 1965, [Operation Rolling Thunder](#) had escalated American involvement in the Vietnam War. The risk of being dragged into similar proxy contests was very real.

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Following Suharto's seizure of power in Indonesia, all five were now headed by authoritarian anti-communist leaders who wanted to promote domestic economic development on a broadly capitalist model.

ASEAN thus provided a means to promote a sense of solidarity among these leaders as well as a way to wall themselves off from the Cold War. They were plainly supportive of the US side but equally wanted to avoid being caught up in that larger contest.

Since then, the organisation has become famous for its mode of operation, known as the ["ASEAN way"](#):

. Decisions are reached by consensus, which gives all members a veto and the group moves "at a speed with which all are comfortable". It also entails a very strict view about sovereignty. The organisation has no right to interfere or place obligations on any member without their express permission.

More broadly, the ASEAN way is also associated with a respectful, calm and deliberative approach to international affairs.

Brunei joined ASEAN in 1985 and then, with the Cold War over and the lesser developed countries of continental southeast Asia looking to integrate more with their neighbours, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar joined by the century's end. And with the expansion in numbers came a broadening out of ASEAN's ambitions in the region.

Driven by China's rise and economic globalisation, the membership recognised that the fate of southeast Asia's countries and peoples was going to be increasingly shaped by forces outside the sub-region. So, it rapidly established several groupings to extend its influence and to try to shape the larger region.

It created the [ASEAN Regional Forum](#) in 1994. It has 27 members from Asia as well as Europe and aims to discuss political and security concerns.

["ASEAN plus three"](#):

(China, South Korea and Japan) was formed in 1997 in response to the Asian financial crisis, and the

[East Asia Summit](#)

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was founded in 2005 as a 'leader-led' initiative to discuss broad issues of political, military and economic concern.

ASEAN also recognised that as southeast Asian countries were becoming more economically globalised, the organisation needed to do more to help them manage the opportunities and risks of economic integration. And it has set an ambitious target to create an ASEAN economic community including, for some, the eventual creation of a customs union and single currency.

The southeast Asian club has been extremely successful in achieving its ambition of "ASEAN centrality". This means not only that ASEAN aims to be at the centre of the region's international dealings, but also that it is at the centre of its members' foreign policy.

For the bulk of its existence this has been a great success. Equally, members have shown a great deal of solidarity with one another as well as with the organisation as a whole.

But that centrality and solidarity is at risk as it faces its sixth decade. ASEAN includes some of the world's richest countries in per-capita terms, Singapore and Brunei, and some of the world's poorest, Laos and Cambodia.

In 1967 the members had essentially the same political system – strongman autocracies – now there are liberal democracies, semi-democratic countries, illiberal regimes, one-party dictatorships, and, in Brunei, an absolutist monarchy.

This diversity and the very different mix of economic and political interests is opening cleavages up among members. The biggest gap is between the wealthier and more globalised economies and those that are poor and more closed.

Now some members are openly questioning the relative importance of ASEAN to their foreign policy.

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Indonesia, historically the most important player, is [debating ASEAN's utility](#) and regularly talks about a life beyond ASEAN. The Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte [is ambivalent](#) about the institution. Without the unity of the past, ASEAN will find life extremely difficult.

But the greatest challenge it faces relates to the resurgence of great power rivalry. The group was founded to manage the risks of Cold War great power politics. Chinese ambition is already [challenging ASEAN unity](#) in relation to the South China Sea dispute and Sino-American rivalry is buffeting the organisation considerably.

Contested Asia will be less conducive to the kind of regional role ASEAN has played in the past, and provide incentives for its members to give the institution a lower priority than in the past.

ASEAN was created to give a group of poor countries the space to develop and grow with newfound independence.

As great power rivalry returns, a divided ASEAN is finding its ability either to shape that rivalry or to carve out space for its members increasingly difficult. To do this it will need to have a much higher level of leadership than in the past to navigate a very difficult international environment. It will also need to be a great deal more adaptable and flexible than it has been in the past.

Unless it can deliver on shaping great power politics and playing a leadership role in the region, ASEAN will become less important both to its members and to Asia. This is an outcome that would make everyone in southeast Asia worse off.

Disclosure

Nick Bisley is Executive Director of La Trobe Asia, a member of the Australian Institute for International Affairs' National Executive and a Board member of China Matters. All of these entities receive funding from Australia's federal government.

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