

FIFTY-FIVE YEARS OF THE ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS (ASEAN) AND THE NEED FOR A FUTURE BLUEPRINT

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Abstract: Just like in the past, when in 2007, the ASEAN celebrated four decades of existence, it is now faced with the question of whether the organization needs to revisit its core fundamentals, particularly related to non-interference in internal matters of member countries and decision-making through consensus building. A few new questions have been raised related to the functioning of the ASEAN, given the fact that it is celebrating its five and a half decades of existence and it is seen as one of the examples where an organization that was built on ideological lines has transcended to become an all-encompassing regional organization. New countries such as Timor Leste are waiting for membership in the organization, and there is acknowledgement that this organization has the potential to resolve issues related to the region. There have been concerns raised with regard to the functioning of associate organizations of the ASEAN. These organizations need to revisit their agendas and mandates instead of duplicating efforts. These ASEAN-centered organizations germinated out of the sheer necessity to address specific challenges such as defense, maritime security, and preventive diplomacy. Over a period of time, new formal and informal institutions such as the East Asia Summit and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation have also dominated the strategic space. This paper highlights the core concerns related to the regional challenges and how the organization is looking for a future blueprint to stay relevant while accommodating intrinsic fault lines between old and new members.

Keywords: ASEAN Centrality, ASEAN Way, consensus, Communiqué, Summit, East Asia, APEC

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INTRODUCTION

The ASEAN as an organization, which started as an ideological front in 1967, is now looking for a future road map based on the three pillars, which include politico-security, economic, and socio-cultural aspects. The organization has been seen as one of the successful regional organizations which has brought about a regional identity and developed camaraderie based on consensus among the member countries. The ASEAN was a successor to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), formed in 1954, and the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), instituted in 1961, as an early initiative for regional dialogue. Subsequently, the ASEAN was created and was seen as a forum for the anti-communist bloc. More than three decades later, by the year 2000, it had brought about ten Southeast Asian nations together and also wiped the ideological fault lines that were the foundation for the initial genesis of this organization. The evolution of the ASEAN has been seen as an effort of regional unity, pooling of resources, consensus building, and “addressing issues related to security” (Buzan, 1988, pp. 15-16) with dialogue and discussion within a regional setup. Over a period of time, the ASEAN as an organization has also developed dialogue partnerships and engaged major powers for discussion related to economics, political aspects, and developing better synergies with the global community. In fact, it is interesting to note that the relationship among the ten Southeast Asian countries has also progressed under the flag of the ASEAN in the last two decades (Sixth Sapru House Lecture, 2013). The organization’s regular summit meetings, which are followed by a joint communiqué, have aided in the development of a better understanding of issues such as terrorism, trade and investment, connectivity, regional security mechanisms, and timelines for the realization of special economic projects such as growth triangles and investment areas. However, there are apprehensions with regard to the organization’s handling of critical challenges such as the return of military rule in Myanmar; the refugee crisis; China’s aggressive posture in the South China Sea (Pan, 2014, p. 153; Jha, 2013); problems in the river water sharing of the Mekong River (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2016); and developing regional economic synergies while protecting domestic industry. The aspects related to the development of regional value chains, the movement of skilled labor, and physical and digital connectivity are other aspects that the regional organizations need to address as a priority. It has been stated that the ASEAN needs to get over this consensus building method and work on deliverables rather than being branded as a “talk shop” in the future. There have also been issues related to the ASEAN centrality while addressing the core regional security architecture. The ASEAN also undertook community

building exercises to bring it closer to the European Union. The issue of ASEAN centrality has recently received a lot of attention because it was thought that a construct like the Indo-Pacific would subsume the Southeast Asian organization. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific was addressed to the international community to show that it is still a relevant organization despite many flaws. The ASEAN is undergoing a revamp, and it has acknowledged that there is a need for a political, economic, social, and cultural community, which will enhance the understanding between the member nations and also bring it closer to the regional community that the other stakeholders, such as dialogue partners and observers in this organization, need to fulfill.

THE THREE PILLARS OF THE ASEAN COMMUNITY BUILDING

The three core pillars of the ASEAN community building include a political security community that tries to address building synergies between various member states through political development, prevention of conflict and resolution of conflicts, peace-building, and establishing norms along with the implementation of various mechanisms. It has been stated that the development of the politico-security community will be the most challenging endeavor of this organization, given the fact that the political processes in different member countries are quite different. However, there is a willingness among the heads of states and governments that undertook this initiative in December 1997 under the aegis of the ASEAN. The core element of this thinking came from the idea of the “ASEAN consensus” and the “ASEAN way”, which clearly showed that these countries can develop synergies for political development and address processes that can bring about harmonization and understanding, reinforcing ASEAN centrality and thereby developing regional architecture. On a number of issues, the ASEAN has done relatively well, particularly with reference to legal matters and the treaty on mutual legal assistance, respect for human rights in accordance with the ASEAN Charter, addressing issues related to women, peace, and security, and developing a peaceful, secure, and stable region (ASEAN, 2022b). Although peace and security are seen as an enigma with major powers vying for strategic influence, in the non-traditional security domain it has been successful in developing national and regional capacities in countering arms smuggling, human trafficking, counter-terrorism, economic fraud and crime, money laundering, addressing border management issues, immigration and consular matters, illicit drugs, and cyber security. The institutional mechanisms that were created in accordance with the ASEAN Charter and the principles of international law show a growing trend of cooperation in the field of defense (Jha, 2008, p. 1089)

between the various member countries of the ASEAN and also the collaboration with the dialogue partners accordingly. However, ideas such as the ASEAN defense industry still need to enter the planning phase. While the political community has been seen as a major starting point, much of the work has been done with regard to the second pillar – the ASEAN Economic Community. Primarily, the majority of countries are export-oriented economies. Under the provisions of the ASEAN Economic Community, it is expected to emerge as a product-based single market that can fully integrate into the global value chains. In the initial stages, when the ASEAN Economic Community was in its nascent stages in 1992, the provision was primarily for developing the ASEAN Free Trade Area (Ken, 2003, p. 1). One of the trickle-down effects of this idea was the genesis of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a regional economic grouping of ten ASEAN nations and five dialogue partners, excluding India, the US (Hagel, 2014), and Russia. Under the Hanoi Plan of Action, which set out the blueprint for economic integration so as to realize the ASEAN Vision of 2020, the ASEAN Economic Community blueprint was adopted in 2007 (Ravenhill, 1998, p. 270). It was seen as the framework under which economic integration could progress. The ASEAN Vision 2020 has brought about better connectivity, unimpeded flow of goods and trade in services, promoting investments and developing capital and equitable economic development. A highly integrated and cohesive regional economy, capable of being internationally competitive, innovative, and adhering to a futuristic vision, served as the foundation for developing this region as one of the most integrated economic regions in the world (Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC) Phase I). The vision was also to create a global ASEAN framework which could bring about more trade and investment to the region and also provide greater inflows of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and outflows of investment from this region to the world.

The third pillar of the framework, known as the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), brings together ASEAN citizens under the rubric that was envisaged during the ASEAN summit held in Kuala Lumpur in 2015. The ASCC Plan 2025 has been adopted and basically aims to create a committed, participatory, and accountable community that can work together for the benefit of the people of the region. This inclusive community should enable optimal protection of human rights and respect for international legal principles and norms. In fact, the ASCC also addresses issues related to climate change, natural disasters, and new kinds of threats. The socio-cultural community also envisions a wide range of cooperation in areas such as youth, sports, poverty eradication, labor empowerment, training of civil servants, environmental health, human health issues, and humanitarian assistance. In all these security

communities and political and cultural communities, the involvement of the senior officials in meetings and various committees brings expertise, which is seen as a prerequisite for developing capacities and implementing cross-sectional provisions of these three pillars. A few of the changes that have been brought about within the ASEAN framework have been related to issues such as the ASEAN Charter on human rights and democratic fundamentals. The ASEAN Charter, which was adopted in December 2008, was the harbinger of political commitment, a new legal framework, an empowered role of the Secretary General of the ASEAN, and a work towards “one vision, one identity, and one community” (ASEAN, 2022a). The Charter also looked into the role the people of the region can play and has been very instrumental in promoting people-oriented organizations under which all sections of society are encouraged to participate and also bring about new thought processes for ASEAN integration and community building. The ASEAN Charter has also laid the groundwork with regard to the peaceful settlement of disputes through dialogue and consultations and promoting regional peace and identity. However, there have been apprehensions related to Chinese aggressive moves in the South China Sea (SCS), and it has been stated that consensus building is not enough to address core security concerns.

THE TREATY OF AMITY AND COOPERATION: NEED TO REVISIT CORE PROVISIONS

The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which has been signed by most of the dialogue partners, is one of the areas that brings about a sense of responsibility among the associated dialogue partners. The member countries are also committed to strictly adhering to the TAC, which talks about the renunciation of aggression (ASEAN, 2022c). It also addresses the core issue of aggression among the member states because, in the past, there have been certain skirmishes between Thailand and Cambodia and a few other countries of the ASEAN. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia under the rubric of the ASEAN was initiated in 1976, and it buttresses the universal principles of peaceful existence and cooperation among the member states of the organization. This legally binding code for intra-regional cooperation has been amended three times in the past and has provision for the accession of states outside Southeast Asia. Till January 2021, nearly 43 countries have accepted the TAC (ASEAN website, 2022) and have signed on the dotted lines. However, the TAC does have its flaws in terms of implementation and provisions for penalty if any of the signatories infringes on the core provisions of the TAC in Southeast Asia. There have been increasing instances where tensions

between China and the claimant states of the South China Sea have come to a military confrontation, and as per the provisions of the Treaty, it should be completely avoided. However, this did not happen and it was questioned whether the TAC had been unsuccessful in restraining the ASEAN members and signatories to control these intimidating and aggressive tactics. Under the Treaty, the core provisions have been related to mutual respect for sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and independence among all the member nations. It also provides for non-interference in internal affairs and the settlement of disputes by peaceful means. The core provision of Article IV which is being challenged increasingly is the renunciation of threats or use of force because of increased military manoeuvres by China which contravene the legal maritime territorial rights of many of the ASEAN member states. One of the areas where the regional organization has done a commendable job is related to the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism, which provides the framework for cooperation to counter, prevent, and suppress terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. This Convention on Counter Terrorism has strictly adhered to the UN Charter and made provisions for extradition treaties. Addressing transnational crime and joint action to counter terrorism following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US, the ASEAN declaration on joint action to counter terrorism (November 2001) has clearly articulated that the organization will be working on strengthening counterterrorism mechanisms across the region. The ASEAN asked all member countries to adhere to the universal instruments against religion which have been provisioned under Security Council Resolution number 1373 and work towards countering terrorism in a more coordinated fashion. From 2014 onwards, the organization has been working to address threats posed by foreign fighters and also conduct cooperative joint efforts against those people who have joined the Islamic State to fight in Iraq and Syria. In 2014, the ASEAN undertook serious deliberations to address the rise of radicalization and violent extremism. In order to address this comprehensive ecosystem of terrorism, radicalization, and extremism, the organization adopted the Manila Declaration, which is primarily aimed at addressing the root causes of terrorism. It established the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter Terrorism in Malaysia in 2002. The active instruments adopted by the ASEAN have brought about uniformity across the region to address issues such as transnational crime, counterterrorism, and violent extremism. It also adopted a comprehensive plan of action to counter terrorism under the UN Charter way back in 2017. In order to be more human in its approach, the ASEAN also adopted the human rights declaration in 2012, accepted the responsibility for developing regional human rights standards, and inserted an article under the ASEAN Charter which explains the role the ASEAN

Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights should play to protect illegal confinement and attention by the government authorities. Under the common institutional framework, the organization has been very instrumental in addressing challenges such as border management, arms smuggling, cyber security, defense cooperation, human rights, illicit drugs, and addressing challenges related to human trafficking, money laundering, and cooperation on legal matters, particularly related to judicial assistance and non-proliferation and disarmament, along with maritime security and cooperation within awesome on maritime issues (ASEAN, 2022, February 16). In fact, one of those challenges that the organization has faced is related to preventive diplomacy, and it is stated that the organization's lofty ideas have failed to meet the standards required, given the fact that there are a number of issues still lingering. This includes "localized disputes and conflicts between the ASEAN member nations, the maritime disputes related to the South China Sea and river water sharing related to the Mekong"(Goh, 2008, pp.17-18), and the peaceful settlement of disputes, particularly related to sovereignty on certain islands and islets.

ASSOCIATED INSTITUTIONS UNDER THE ASEAN

The ASEAN has over time created new institutions that work in various fields, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), the ASEAN Expanded Maritime Forum, and informal meetings such as the East Asia Summit. The ASEAN Plus meetings with dialogue partners were seen as a major achievement that brought the ASEAN member states and dialogue partners closer together. The ASEAN has evolved over time by holding meetings of senior officials and summit meetings to address key challenges in the region. However, the ASEAN has also come across a number of challenges related to issues such as the Rohingya refugee crisis, the coup in Myanmar (2021), intra-regional tensions and conflict resolution in critical areas such as the South China Sea. The ASEAN has also been chastised for being a talk shop, owing to the ineffectiveness of institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum in bringing together a large number of countries to address issues such as preventive diplomacy, crisis resolution, and conflict management. Invariably, the organization has tried to work on building communications through enhancing channels of information sharing, facilitating dialogue, and involving various members for dispute resolution. However, the non-binding principle and the consensus on diplomatic and political action have at times undermined any initiative undertaken by the ASEAN Regional Forum. A few other initiatives which have been undertaken under the flag of the ASEAN have been related to

the ASEAN summit meetings, which started in Indonesia in February 1976, and thereafter, each summit has led to the release of the Communiqué. But some of those summit meetings have exposed differences between nations, and the joint communiqué was not released, particularly in the context of the 2012 meeting, which was held in Cambodia, clearly exposing the weakness of the ASEAN. There were differences in criticizing China on the issue of the South China Sea, as the SCS claimant states such as Vietnam and the Philippines differed from the host country, Cambodia, as a result of which the Joint Communiqué was not released. Other instances when there were skirmishes between China and other ASEAN claimant states, particularly in reference to Vietnam and the Philippines, have also put pressure on the ASEAN formation and it was felt that ASEAN could not take effective actions against a formidable and strong dialogue partner. Because of this, the ASEAN Charter and agenda have been repeatedly challenged, leading to the perception that the consensus option is incompatible with future challenges. The ASEAN defense ministerial meetings under the ADMM have also brought the defense ministers of all the member states together to address core security concerns.

ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Many commentators and strategic analysts have pointed to the fact that many organizations working within the ambition of the ASEAN have been replicating efforts, and therefore there is no dearth of resolutions and outcomes. They have failed in terms of implementing those outcomes and incorporating them into the policy decisions. One of the primary concerns has been the fact that the ASEAN Regional Forum is increasingly being talked about as a talk shop with no tangible benefits coming in the form of resolutions or effective implementation of the decisions made in these meetings. When the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was established in 1994, its major purpose was to develop preventive diplomacy and work on maritime security. At the last ARF ministerial meeting, which was held in August 2021, the major agenda was to promote youth, peace, and security. The ARF has also released a statement related to enhancing cooperation for the prevention of infectious diseases and the rehabilitation of children recruited by several terrorist groups. The senior officials meeting within the ARF tried to discuss institutional aspects and share views on regional security. The ARF has also developed institutional affiliations across the spectrum, which includes the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), the Institute for Peace and Reconciliation, and institutes of Strategic and International Studies located in different ASEAN capitals. The ARF

is mentioned as a central pillar of the regional security architecture and reconciliation of differences to reduce threats in the Hanoi Plan of Action 2020-2025. The ARF follows the UN Charter for confidence building and preventive diplomacy so as to work towards peace, stability, and prosperity. One of the major flaws in the ARF process is that it talks about realizing and implementing processes at a leisurely pace and primarily on a voluntary basis. Related to the ASEAN Community Region 2025, the ARF also acknowledges that the evolving regional security architecture requires an action-oriented forum and also works in sync with other ASEAN-led mechanisms for greater concentration and effective implementation. The Hanoi Plan of Action acknowledges that in areas such as disaster relief, counterterrorism, transnational crime, maritime security, non-proliferation and disarmament, the ICT, defense cooperation, and peacekeeping operations have helped in developing dialogue, but then in terms of review and implementation, it is still lackluster. Within the ARF, a discussion has been held related to defense cooperation and maritime security. The question arises that if the forum was effective enough, then why was there a need for the ADMM plus and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum given the fact that both these aspects have been addressed in the ARF? During the last meeting, which was held on November 17, 2021, there were discussions with regard to the rule of law at sea, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the South China Sea, the blue economy, and protecting maritime resources. It also acknowledges the need to address marine plastic debris and other aspects related to maritime cooperation. Interestingly, more than a decade ago, in November 2011, Japan tried to propose a forum to discuss maritime issues among the East Asian Summit member countries. The East Asian Maritime Forum, which took place in October 2012, as well as the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum, have been trying to converge on issues of mutual interest. However, there is a need to acknowledge the fact that too many institutional mechanisms have made progress on critical security issues very slow as well as voluntary. The ADMM Plus Initiative undertaken by the ASEAN has brought together the member countries as well as its dialogue partners, including "China, Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States" (Sarma, 2017, p. 27). The ADMM Plus and the ASEAN defense ministers meeting are seen as the most concentrated and cooperative dialogue forums, which bring together multiple interests and concerns of the dialogue partner countries as well. Since the ADMM Plus's Inaugural Summit in Hanoi in October 2010, the ADMM Plus has recognized the need for building capacity for addressing security challenges and developing trust and confidence among member countries' defense establishments as well as dialogue partner nations. This was seen as a viable alternative and a contributor to the larger mechanism,

which is known as the ASEAN Security Community, and it aspires to build stability, democracy, and prosperity. One thing which is very challenging within Southeast Asia is that democracy and history have seen a number of coups and military dictatorships, which include Thailand and Myanmar. The ASEAN member countries, despite knowing the fact that a similar agenda has been discussed in the ASEAN Regional Forum, proposed that the seven areas of discussion and dialogue within the institution, namely counterterrorism, maritime security, HADR, peacekeeping operations, military medicine, cyber security, and humanitarian mine action, be discussed in other forums. However, in terms of bringing countries together through field training exercises and the HADR exercises, it has been successful as regular tabletop exercises and other field exercises have been held under its aegis. Many dialogue partner countries and their defense ministers have been attending these meetings to develop synergies and look at their respective roles in promoting maritime security and counterterrorism initiatives in this region. Interestingly, military medicine, which looks into biomedical areas, has also been listed in it while very much acknowledging the fact that military medicine is a sensitive area and not shared by many countries. Cyber security is another area where the countries can cooperate, but the dialogue partners, including China and the US, have been working against each other in infiltrating cyber security frameworks. As a result, many of the discussions within the ASEAN Defense Ministers Plus Meetings have been farcical and showcase that, in terms of actual groundwork, there is nothing more than speeches and regular rhetoric made by the defense ministers.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

The ASEAN has to make certain corrections given the fact that the Cold War fault lines are getting more prominent with the differences emerging between the founding members of the ASEAN and the new members. It has also been seen that in the case of the bilateral free trade agreements, major countries, namely Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, have dictated terms during negotiations and also reaped the dividends given their effective production facilities and better management of resources. This has been a major bone of contention within the ASEAN. There is no denying the fact that in terms of free trade agreements or regional trading agreements, the CLMV countries, given their underdeveloped and developing status, become ancillary industries to the major four countries. Importantly, in the early 1990s, there was more rhetoric with regard to the ASEAN way and consensus building as the major achievements of the ASEAN as an organization. Consequently, the ASEAN way did not find much resonance in the ASEAN deliberations. The member countries,

however, have adhered to the consensus-building processes but have different stances on a number of issues, such as the case of maritime boundary disputes between individual member countries or protecting their interests while negotiating with China in demarcating the South China Sea territories. The differences within the ASEAN have become more profound when China proposed bilateral negotiations with each of the claimant states in the South China Sea rather than entering into a multilateral negotiation process. The negotiation process, which was undertaken under the Code of Conduct, is still in the negotiation phase even though the voluminous initial draft has been accepted. Even though the ASEAN proclaims to be effective in resolving disputes, in the past, there have been skirmishes between Thailand and Cambodia on the boundary wall of the Preah Vihar Temple and also tensions between Malaysia and Indonesia on cultural issues, particularly with regard to certain dance forms and representation in their tourism leaflet. Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, given their limited capacities in terms of infrastructure, power, and capital, have not gained that much from the ASEAN organization purely in economic terms. However, one can clearly say that in the political processes and the negotiations between different member countries of Southeast Asia, the process has been very fruitful and beneficial for undertaking common objectives and agenda for the future. One of the ASEAN initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic (Press Release on Corona Virus Disease, 2019) has been to integrate health institutions as well as medical research institutions and look for common strategies so as to help the people of Southeast Asia. This initiative, which was undertaken in 2020, also saw the involvement of countries such as the US, India, China, Australia, and Japan, which came forward to provide medicine, vaccines, and necessary diagnostic materials to these countries under the ambit of the ASEAN plus one initiative. Regarding the ASEAN Investment Area, the ASEAN member countries have not been able to fulfill the requirements in terms of facilitating business, ease of access, migration of skilled labor, and making the region a major regional manufacturing hub. A few instances in this regard have been the development of the ASEAN defense industry and the core specialized areas, particularly in electronics and other high-end technology products. Within the ASEAN, there is a deficit in infrastructure, and connectivity is still picking up. One of the major reasons has been the limited capacity of the ASEAN member states to invest in infrastructure, and the other stakeholders have been quite wary of the fact that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has undertaken most of the projects related to highways, construction of ports, jetties, and trading ports. Even though the G-7 countries have also talked about Built Back Better World (B3W) and working on infrastructure projects in the region, given the challenges that they have faced, primarily with Chinese investment and Chinese

political interference in a few of the countries, foreign direct investment has receded, particularly in infrastructure projects. In Myanmar, which had a continuous influx of foreign direct investment after democratic changes in 2014, the subsequent military coup in 2021 and the military rule have restrained many of the foreign direct investment investors to develop townships, cities, and major ports in Myanmar. Even in the case of Thailand, which has seen oscillating democracy and military rule, many Western democratic countries have put certain criteria before investing in those areas because of a lack of consensus within the political establishment. The fact that the ASEAN has conducted more than 300 meetings drains the human resource capacity and slows down the implementation process. In fact, the ASEAN as an organization has to reduce this number of meetings while working on tangible results on the ground. There is no doubt that the ASEAN as an organization in the developing world has created milestones and achieved a number of initiatives and completed projects. However, the ASEAN 2.0 requires the organization to frame its future agenda and work toward achieving the objectives, particularly in the context of the political security community, economic community, and sociocultural community, within the time frame. The ASEAN has also given birth to new forums, and there are multiple spinoffs that have benefited the Southeast Asian countries. One of the major benefits has been the development of the Shangri-La Dialogue, which is an informal dialogue that brings together major stakeholders in the region to discuss the priority areas and work together to build a security community within this region. Also, the process of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership has found a foundation within the ASEAN negotiating process and is one of the biggest trading regions in the world. Even though it is still in the implementation phases, it will create a number of jobs and a free trade zone. However, there have been apprehensions that the RCEP, which is again competing with the Comprehensive and Progressive Transpacific Partnership (CPTPP), will decide on the ushering of the Chinese century or the multi-role that the ASEAN will play in the future along with other stakeholders. Several institutions which still need course corrections are the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum. They should also work on a better agenda, particularly related to security and defense matters under the ambit of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus.

CONCLUSIONS

The ASEAN as an institution has been instrumental in developing this region through integration of economic networks, developing political synergies, addressing core issues and raising concerns with regard to non-traditional

security issues. The five and a half decades of the organization have been instrumental in bringing together underdeveloped economies and promoting regional harmony through buzzwords such as the ASEAN way, the ASEAN consensus, and developing coherent ideas for future progress through intra-regional and interregional cooperation with other stakeholders. However, the organization has been marred by a number of hindrances given the limited capacities and capabilities in maintaining security and order, avoiding intra-regional conflicts, and addressing trans-border issues in a more cohesive and regional manner. Even so, the ASEAN has been instrumental in developing associated sub-regional concepts and bringing diverse issues together, such as preventive diplomacy, conflict resolution, maritime security, and developing consensus on issues related to regional development. All this rosy picture can be attributed to the efforts of the ASEAN under rotational chairmanship, but it has still failed to address core security concerns, which were the foundation for the making of this organization. Several organizations have also been criticized, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, which has even engaged countries such as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In terms of tangibles and deliverables, it has provided a foundation and a forum for dialogue, but beyond that, it has failed in many ways. Despite that, the ASEAN has tried to maintain its primacy in security issues while completely acknowledging the fact that it is beyond their means to control China. As a result, different treaties, such as the TAC, and maintaining resistance to any kind of use of force or threat of use of force, have been completely undermined. Consequently, the ASEAN should review its charter and accept the fact that in order to achieve better coherence, it will have to seek the help of dialogue partners to resolve inter-regional disputes such as the South China Sea dispute. In doing so, the ASEAN should explore opportunities to build ASEAN communities. One cannot deny the fact that for the ASEAN, maritime security and maintaining international order at sea is one of the most critical areas. However, given the limited size of the organization and the clout that it has, it cannot achieve much in terms of maintaining security. However, it can act as a buffer between contesting parties such as the US and China in strategic waters. Its biggest strength is bringing contesting powers together on one platform to exchange ideas and express concerns.

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