

ASEAN: From Model of Regional Development to Indo-Pacific Soft Power Projection

Ambassador (p) Gheorghe SAVUICA *

I. THE HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES AT THE MOMENT OF FOUNDING THE ASEAN

The Southeast Asian countries back into 1967, more exactly on the 8th of August of that year, when they were confronted with Cold War and the necessity to consolidate their newly gained independence and the formation as emerging forces needed a framework of regional cooperation. It goes to the merit of well-known and illustrious leaders of the five founding countries - Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, who opted in favor of an economic organization and not a military bloc.

In its first stage, ASEAN was quoted in different ways. In the Cold War context, ASEAN's largely pro-United States regimes came to be seen as bulwark against the Indochinese communist states. But politically, the ASEAN vision has been to secure peace and stability for the region, and as free as possible from the Cold War political power play.

Romania has recognized from the very beginning its status of an exclusive economic regional organization and not a substitute to SEATO as some other countries considered ASEAN to be.

II. ESSENTIAL PRESENTATION OF THE ASEAN JOURNEY

ASEAN has so far passed through three important steps: exclusive economic regional organization; primarily economic regional organization with added political, security and social-cultural dimensions; and regional organization in full process of political, security, economic and social-cultural integration, which led in 2015 to **ASEAN COMMUNITY** based on three pillars: the Political-Security Community, Economic Community and Socio-Cultural Community.

ASEAN COMMUNITY is developing without hesitations or second thoughts towards the target of „**one vision, one identity, and one community**”.

The ASEAN COMMUNITY, which so far is **the top level** in the process of ASEAN's being in existence, **transformed South East Asia into an emerging region in the global community of nations.**

By fully implementing the ASEAN Community a new phenomenon will be consolidated in this region, in a certain way similar but not identical to the one existing in Europe, **i.e. an emerging institutionalized economic power at regional level.**

This positive development signifies an important step forward for South East Asia **to be able to promote with a greater added value its interests in the global community of nations.**

From the legal point of view, the top development in ASEAN is the signing of the ASEAN Charter. It took a very long time to get such important achievement (40 years).

Through its Charter, ASEAN was conferred a legal personality of an Inter-Governmental Organization, while the Member States articulated their long-term goals for ASEAN,

In the same very important document, ASEAN has “adopted” the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia as an ASEAN legal instrument – although the 1976 Treaty was designed as a stand-alone regional agreement independent of ASEAN.

Also the Charter “adopted” as an ASEAN legal instrument is the Treaty on Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ). States Parties entered into the 1995 Treaty as States in Southeast Asia, but not as Member States of ASEAN.

ASEAN currently has a much stronger international representation in UN and other international organizations and developed a diplomatic status by accrediting Ambassadors to ASEAN from its members, as well as from friendly countries, such as Romania.

ASEAN has quite rapidly managed to capture the attention and interest of world and regional powers; later it formed a unique architecture of an institutionalized dialogue with all important actors in the context of world and regional politics. All its dialogue partners accept and support ASEAN targets. Even more, all of them are involved directly or indirectly in the developments of the Association and in integration process in South East Asia. One may speak about a real competition in the development of an advanced and most advantageous relationship with ASEAN in order to assure their presence in the new Asian brand in political, economic, strategic and socio-cultural fields, as is the case of ASEAN Community.

The fruitful historical bilateral dialogue and cooperation between Europe and Asia as well as the EU- ASEAN partnership have recently developed into a continent to continent approach. This tendency was shaped into a more or less institutionalized form by creating the Asia Europe Meeting – ASEM. In spite of difficulties, differences and sometime disappointments, this reality will stand and consolidate, being a good example of coexistence under an ever more globalized climate, with interdependent markets and globalized industries.

Romania is a serious supporter and has a robust contribution in promoting friendly relations and cooperation between EU and ASEAN. This positive mutual approach and attitude and the very good traditional bilateral relations with each single member state of ASEAN could serve as a solid ground for Romania to diversify and grant new added value to the links with the Association by initiating direct projects of cooperation in the ambit of Romania-ASEAN relations. It is higher time!

III. ARGUMENTS TO DEFINE ASEAN AS A SOFT POWER

In my opinion, the soft power is exercised by such a diplomacy which is based on the respect by all means of the sacred principles inscribed in the UN Charter, the most important being non interference into internal affairs, observance the independence, non violation of the national sovereignty and territorial integrity and, is pursued in good spirit of understanding, flexibility, respect of the other side by maintaining the diplomatic language, refraining using a strong approach and superior attitude. Soft power or soft diplomacy should not be interpreted as a

week signal, thus it has to be pursued clearly and firmly.

Once one crosses these lines, he will find himself in the paradigm of the hard power.

One of ASEAN's greatest achievements is its soft regional and international diplomacy, which is recognized and respected in the whole world. **ASEAN has achieved a status as the most successful regional grouping among the developing countries and as the second most successful one, after the European Union, at the global level.**

Starting from the day of its foundation, reaching the moment of signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and adopting of its Charter, there is no instance to situate ASEAN in the position of breaching the UN Charter's principles or of its own principles. On the contrary, the UN principles became the foundation of the Bangkok Declaration, the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Treaty, The Bali Concord and, the Treaty of Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone.

Two principles underlined what has now been popularly called the "ASEAN Way": One is the consensus-based decision making mechanism, and the other is the non-interference principle. A lesser important norm which is a consequence of these two principles is that all of ASEAN decisions are supposed to be non-binding.

This informality was the only way for the five original founding members – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – to come together and overcome the mutual suspicions that prevailed across the region at the time of ASEAN's founding.

ASEAN has been legally bound by its Charter:

a) to maintain and enhance peace, security and stability and further strengthen peace-oriented values in the region;

b) to enhance regional resilience by promoting greater political, security, economic and socio-cultural cooperation;

c) to preserve Southeast Asia as a Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone and free of all other weapons of mass destruction;

d) to strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and the rule of law, and to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, with due regard to the rights and responsibilities of the Member States of ASEAN.

IV. IS ASEAN AN INDO-PACIFIC POWER?

A geostrategic analysis of the current developments in Southeast Asia, and not only, is leading to the conclusion that we are witnessing positive developments, as well as moments of tension between the big and regional powers concurrently with an active and open diplomatic actions to gain regional support for their interests.

ASEAN is found in the centre of this political game alongside with a combined exercise of multilateral and bilateral approaches.

In all political and strategic statements of representatives of the stakeholders with high and highest rank it is **highlighted the Centrality of ASEAN** or in other words the position of the driving force in the regional architecture, including Indo-Pacific area.

It is so obvious that ASEAN is practically recognized as an Indo-Pacific soft power.

*The ASEAN Charter clearly stipulates that the Association is determined to maintain the **centrality** and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent and inclusive and, similarly share the commitment and collective responsibility in enhancing regional peace, security and prosperity. It speaks by itself that ASEAN, on its turn, is in favour of gaining the status of the Indo-Pacific Soft Power. The content of ASEAN policy and role on Indo-Pacific area is provided in the **ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, 2019**.*

*The most important space to exercise the soft power is the **ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)**, which to date is still the only forum in Asia that addresses regional as well as international political and security issues. **The development of ARF was in fact initiated by ASEAN and the organisation revolves around ASEAN.***

At the same time, ARF is the single venue that is able to include all the relevant parties at Indo-Pacific level: local Indo-Pacific actors, ASEAN members as part of the Indo-Pacific, China, EU, US, Russia, Canada, etc.

ARF's role in the Indo-Pacific can be strengthened by increasing mutual confidence through consultations and dialogue and stress the advantages of consensus, perhaps firstly on political aspects while eventually expanding them in the field of security.

We are witnessing an enhanced sense of regional security vis-a-vis extra-regional threats. Although ASEAN was not established as a security organisation, and there is no ASEAN-wide multilateral security cooperation, the maintenance of regional peace and security has in fact been the primary objective of ASEAN by creating a set of rules of conduct to protect the region from external interference. These include ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace Freedom and Neutrality) in South East region.

*The achievements of ASEAN, its principles and targets to abstain from participation in any policy or activity, including the use of its territory, pursued by any ASEAN Member State or non-ASEAN State or any non-State actor, which threatens the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political and economic stability of ASEAN Member States, as it is underlined in the ASEAN Charter, **consolidate my conviction that ASEAN will not take sides in favour of any individual big or regional powers as well as any partnership being in flagrant contradiction of its principles.***

It shows therefore the necessity of an increased responsibility of ASEAN to maintain a dynamic balance of power in the region

V. CHALLENGES FACED BY ASEAN

It will be a great success if ASEAN could finally reach the moment of signing the CODE OF CONDUCT with China in the South China Sea.

Diversity in foreign policy, economic policy, and security policy among the Member States similarly represents a challenge for the regional organisation.

Perhaps to an event greater extent, the fragmented state of democratic development, i.e. the region's different political values in regards to governance systems, may pose certain challenges for ASEAN.

The expansion into 10 members puts the ASEAN Way to a severe test. Previously, obtaining consensus from six

like-minded members was relatively easy. However, reaching consensus among an expanded group of 10 members, with newcomers having different ideologies and different priorities, may render the ASEAN way of doing things significantly more cumbersome and slow.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

ASEAN is a well-functioning and indispensable reality in the region and far beyond the region.

ASEAN is the driving force in the regional multilateral architecture.

ASEAN is the pillar of stability in East and South East Asia and one of the foundations of maintaining regional balance.

*The consensus at ASEAN meetings played a vital role in the growing up process of the Association. Nowadays **there is a shift from full consensus to coalition of willing, but still without imposing any decisions.** Mediation and conciliation remain the essential ways to solve the entire spectrum of integration and conflict resolution in the region as well as at universal level.*

ASEAN countries have not given up their classic diplomacy, but they adapted it to the new environment.

Still, one should take into consideration that ASEAN needs a lot more efforts to cope with the additional very serious and even dangerous issues on the regional agenda as a result of international and regional power competition.

My optimistic view on achieving all these important targets by ASEAN is based on my personal experience of being an active observer of ASEAN permanent developments from the year it was born, which coincides with my joining, in the same year of 1967, of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania as well as by representing Romania in **Three ASEAN countries, Indonesia (twice), Malaysia and the Philippines, which granted me the chance to be present at several ASEAN meetings.**

* The author is:

MGIMO (Moscow State Institute for International Relations) attested Specialist on Southeast Asia, speaking Bahasa Indonesia, Russian and English languages.

Career diplomat with 40 years of activity.

Former Ambassador to Indonesia and Pakistan, Head of Mission, with Cabinet Letter, to Malaysia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Cyprus, Finland and Estonia.

Former Director General in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania for Asia and Pacific, Middle East, Africa and Latin America Department.

Founder as President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Romania - Malaysia.

Founder and President of the Romanian Institute for Europe- Asia Studies – IRSEA.