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FROM THE TWO PS TO THE TWO CS: THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CHALLENGES OF ASEAN AT 50

Susumu Yamakage

- ASEAN's five original member states sought peace and prosperity (the two Ps). After the Cold War, CLMV joined ASEAN in pursuit of the two Ps. Hence, ASEAN was regarded as the cornerstone of the two Ps.
- ASEAN today is pursuing centrality and connectivity (the two Cs). Centrality aims to exert power and influence through various ASEAN-centered institutions. Connectivity aims to enhance regional integration and to ameliorate regional disparities.
- Japan has acknowledged ASEAN's centrality and has been helping ASEAN pursue connectivity. It could further promote improving connectivity in ASEAN's eastern maritime area.

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On August 8, 2017, ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) celebrated its 50th anniversary. There were various commemorative activities held throughout the region on or around that date. Without doubt, the organization deserves to be celebrated because it has managed to survive in a dangerous international arena for five decades.

What did the founding fathers, who represented Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, expect from the new institution fifty years ago? What made Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV) decide to join ASEAN some twenty years later? What did ASEAN seem to assure to them? My answers to all of those questions are the same: peace and prosperity (two Ps).

Within an unstable Southeast Asia in the mid-1960s, regional peace was difficult to achieve not only because of Cold War rivalries but also due to fragile and distrustful relations among neighbors. The leaders of those nations that established ASEAN recognized the problems among themselves as well as the interference by major powers outside the region. In order for them to concentrate on state building and national integration, regional peace – in terms of both good neighborhood relations and invulnerability against external powers – was crucial. ASEAN was expected to contribute to a two-faceted regional peace.

ASEAN soon turned out to be a useful vehicle for pursuing regional peace. In response to the surprising Sino-US rapprochement in 1971, ASEAN countries declared in that same year that they would make Southeast Asia a future Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). At the first ASEAN Summit Meeting in 1976, the leaders of five countries signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), in which a good neighborhood was defined as one characterized by a commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes. TAC was regarded as postulating the foundational norms of ASEAN.

Economic development was another goal that the ASEAN member states were pursuing, but there were two obstacles in front of them: economic handicaps vis-à-vis advanced countries and the lack of experience in mutual economic cooperation. In regard to the former obstacle, ASEAN established official dialogues with such important economic partners as the European Communities, Japan, Australia, and the United States in the mid-1970s.

Furthermore, ASEAN succeeded in institutionalizing the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conferences (PMC) in which the foreign ministers of those dialogue partners participated every year.

ASEAN also started mutual economic cooperation in the mid-1970s. However, this did not work out well due to conflicts of interests as each member state tried to pursue its own development plan. On the other hand, ASEAN provided its members with political stability, which laid the groundwork for the economic development of the 1980s. ASEAN countries enjoyed strong economic growth primarily thanks to foreign investment, especially that from Japan following the Plaza Accord in 1985.

The end of the Cold War threatened the economic prosperity of ASEAN countries because China and former socialist countries in Europe, which had adopted market economies and joined the global economic system, became rivals in attracting multi-national enterprises. In order to highlight the region's attractiveness, ASEAN countries decided to create the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992, the first attempt at economic integration in Asia.

While by and large ASEAN countries enjoyed peace and prosperity, neighboring countries (i.e., CLMV) suffered opposite experiences. They were either war-torn, economically isolated, or both; thus, they were far from peaceful or prosperous. When the Cold War ended, it became natural and rational for them to begin thinking that joining ASEAN would allow them to enjoy peace and prosperity. They acceded to TAC one after another, eventually joining ASEAN by 1999, and they consequently participated in the AFTA process. CLMV have thus shared peace and prosperity with older members.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a sea change took place in ASEAN. It decided to create the ASEAN Community in 2003, and it adopted the ASEAN Charter in 2007. Although such moves looked too ambitious, ASEAN's attempts turned out successful: the Charter came into effect the next year without any anticipated delay, and the Community came into being in 2015, five years earlier than originally agreed. These changes in ASEAN over recent years have been so profound and multi-faceted that it may well be said that ASEAN has transformed into "a new ASEAN."

This “new ASEAN” is now pursuing new aims: centrality and connectivity (two Cs). Neither centrality nor connectivity is a completely new concept. In fact, both are based on ASEAN's achievements and attempts.

The earliest institution aimed at centrality would have to be the above-mentioned PMC. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was established in 1994. More countries participated in ARF than PMC because China, Russia and others attended in order to discuss security issues in the Asia-Pacific. Since 1997, the leaders of China, Japan and Korea have been invited to the ASEAN Summit, which was institutionalized as the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit, and several APT ministerial meetings have followed.

In 2005, the East Asia Summit (EAS) was inaugurated. Although it does not include “ASEAN” in its name, it can be regarded as another ASEAN-centered institution because the accession (or the will to accede) to TAC is a necessary condition to participate in EAS, and its meetings are held back-to-back with the ASEAN Summit and the APT Summit. Furthermore, as the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) was set up, “ADMM Plus” was subsequently institutionalized.


Thus, there are a number of ASEAN-centered institutions that overlap with one another in complex ways. ASEAN centrality refers not only to these circumstances, but also to the ability of ASEAN member states to collectively deal with major powers outside the region on an equal footing. They realize how powerless they are, and they have learned, through their experiences, that the only realistic way for them to avoid being ignored or overlooked is to involve external powers in ASEAN-centered institutions.

As CLMV joined ASEAN, economic disparities became a serious problem in the region. In 2000, ASEAN decided to cope with those problems, and launched the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI), aiming to reduce disparities by enhancing regional economic integration. Since 1992, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) promoted the idea of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), consisting of CLMV, Thailand and China's Yunnan Province. Economic development in GMS would obviously help ASEAN's own idea of developing the region's continental areas. The term “ASEAN Connectivity” may have been

inspired by multi-directional economic corridors in the GMS projects implemented under the auspices of the ADB.

Amidst the calls for enhancing connectivity, there is one area that lags far behind. This does not mean that ASEAN has ignored it; on the contrary, it has tried to promote the East ASEAN Growth Area covering the territories of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (BIMP-EAGA). Compared with the Mekong area, however, the maritime eastern ASEAN area is characterized by a poor connectivity of sea-lanes and roads connecting numerous islands with one another. There exist in this area various threats to non-traditional security such as international terrorism, transnational crimes and armed robberies at sea. Enhancing and strengthening connectivity is needed to improve security not only in this area but also across the entire region.

Japan has been one of ASEAN's most important partners since the 1970s. Recognizing ASEAN's centrality, Japan now plays significant roles in ASEAN-centered institutions such as APT and EAS. Japan has also been helping ASEAN enhance connectivity throughout the region. Japan has especially promoted connectivity in the Mekong area, and could promote connectivity in ASEAN's eastern maritime area.

(This essay is based on two Japanese-language essays by the author respectively published in *Kokusai Mondai*, No. 646 (November 2015) and No. 665 (Forthcoming - October 2017).) 

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