

OVERVIEW OF ASEAN

The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), comprising Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore, was formed in Bangkok in 1967.

The original objectives of ASEAN were to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region, and to promote regional peace and stability. ASEAN's Foreign Ministers meet once a year to discuss a wide variety of issues dealing with political, economic, social, environmental and security matters. A major ASEAN accomplishment, over the years, has been to moderate the antagonisms between the countries of the region. ASEAN nations have been successful in overcoming the legacy of bitterness and hostility which had been manifest in regional disputes such as Indonesia's "Confrontation" with Malaysia, and the Philippines claim to the Malaysian state of Sabah.

In the late 1970s, ASEAN decided to open a "Dialogue" process with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Japan and the European Community. This year, the process has expanded to include the Republic of Korea. The Dialogue meeting is held immediately after the Association's annual Foreign Ministers' meeting.

It is in the area of political cooperation that ASEAN has had its most remarkable success. Despite considerable ethnic, religious, historical, linguistic, and cultural differences, it has achieved a high degree of intergovernmental solidarity and cohesion on critical political issues. ASEAN coordination now extends to activities in various international fora, such as the UN, the Non-Aligned Movement and the multilateral trade negotiations (MTN).

Additional impetus to maintain ASEAN unity has been provided through the Indo-chinese wars, Vietnam's continuing involvement in Cambodia and the search for peace in Cambodia, and geopolitical realignment in the region and elsewhere.

ASEAN social and political cooperation, however, is challenged by economic matters. The member economies still tend to be competitive rather than complementary. While intra-ASEAN trade represents a small but growing percentage of total trade for member states, competition for markets in Europe, North America and North Asia is fierce. This is the case not only in terms of traditional export commodities but increasingly in higher value-added manufactured goods and foreign investment.

