

ASEAN in the wake of Vietnam: the road to Bali and beyond

By Robert E. Bedeski

As power relations have shifted dramatically since the end of the war in Vietnam, the nations of Southeast Asia have sought to adjust accordingly. A major vehicle of this adjustment has been the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, commonly known as ASEAN. Its five members (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) have struggled for nearly a decade to create consensus on regional co-operation, and may now be facing their most serious challenge as Vietnam emerges as a united power.

In addition to questions of diplomacy and security, the ASEAN countries also face problems of development, poverty and instability. Recently, the prime ministers of the five nations met in Bali with the intention of producing greater unity and co-operation in the region. However, their future depends at least as much on developments and events beyond their control as on their own collective will and plans.

Since its inauguration in Bangkok in August 1967, ASEAN has been saddled with a burden of diplomatic and economic tasks that have threatened to destroy it. The hostilities between Singapore and Indonesia, territorial disputes between Malaysia and the Philippines, and increasing involvement of Thailand in the American war in Vietnam seemed to portend certain failure in an area that had been Balkanized by centuries of colonial rule, ethnic diversity and great-power rivalries. Cynics dismissed ASEAN as a "stewpot of diverse nationalisms".

Economically, the region was rich in certain natural resources, including oil, rubber and tin, but industrialization was still restricted. The peasant economy dominated most the ASEAN mem-

bers' agriculture, and Singapore's dynamic mercantile economy seemed something of a threat to the more under-developed societies.

In the late 1960s, the countries of Southeast Asia suffered from no lack of organizations to join if they sought a framework for international co-operation. Several were primarily designed for defence, and included the Asian and Pacific Council (ASPAC), of which Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand were members, and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Other organizations were more concerned with economic and social development, and included the Colombo Plan and the Asian Development Bank.

Limited flexibility

The defence alliances were creatures of the Cold War, and were based on the expectation of Communist aggression. As such, ASPAC and SEATO severely limited the diplomatic flexibility of its members, and excluded neutrality and nonalignment as possible orientations. The economic organizations were simply too large and diffuse to serve as frameworks for specific regional needs in Southeast Asia. The Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), consisting of Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, was established in 1961 and merged with ASEAN in August 1967. Finally, Maphilindo (short for Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia), created in Manila in 1963, had failed to become a serviceable framework for implementing regional unity. Thus, the idea of Southeast Asian co-operation was fed from several sources, but only with the 1967 Bangkok Declaration did it appear that a longer-term regional identity — one that could co-exist with parochial nationalisms and even reduce them — was evolving.

The beginning of ASEAN was low-key, and regional unity was a distant objective. The Philippine-Malaysian dispute over Sabah threatened the shaky consensus, but their diplomatic relations were nor-

The problems of development instability and poverty

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