

**“LEADERSHIP AND REGIONALISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA”
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I should like to begin by thanking the Griffith Asia Institute for inviting me to speak at its Asia Lecture on the theme of “Leadership and Regionalism in Southeast Asia”. I am keenly aware of the Institute’s thought-leadership on Asia and am deeply honoured for the privilege.

*Ladies and Gentlemen,
Friends,*

Southeast Asia matters.

A region with a population of some 640 million; predominantly youthful demography, with rapidly emerging consuming class;

Combined economies that would rank it 6th largest in the world today and variously projected to reach 4th by 2050 – only behind China, India and the United States;

A region that defines diversity: in the countries’ system of governance, economies, culture, religion, in their sizes;

And a region straddling continents and oceans, making Southeast Asia not only critical geographically, rather also geopolitically – ever contested battleground for major powers interests.

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The forging of regionalism amidst such conditions of immense diversity - how the region manages such reality through regionalism - have resonances far beyond.

Abundance of leadership needed.

Five decades of ASEAN epitomized this reality; in fundamentally transforming the dynamic in Southeast Asia.

Previous trust deficit among countries of Southeast Asia – innate tensions and deep animosities – largely replaced by strategic trust.

Although disputes remain – including unresolved territorial issues – these have been managed, if not outright fully resolved, and the use of force among Southeast Asian states to address such issues has become an increasingly distant prospect.

Further still, collectively through ASEAN, the countries of Southeast Asia have earned “centrality” role previously denied them in the region, and indeed, beyond.

Where once countries of Southeast Asia were largely objects in Cold War rivalries, until recently, ASEAN’s influence has been deeply felt in shaping the political-security and economic architectures of the region. Beyond obvious convening power, ASEAN was able to have an outsized influence in determining the norms and principles that guide relations among states in the region.

And not least, ASEAN has made possible the transformation of Southeast Asia’s economies. Building on the opportunities presented by decades of peace – *peace dividend* – countries of Southeast Asia embarked on economic integration efforts that has earned its reputation as one of the most successful regional organization in the world. Significantly still, in recognition of the view that a so-called “people-centred” ASEAN cannot simply rests on material gains, ASEAN has developed “capacities” on internal governance issues. Clearly, however, very much work in progress.

Such transformative impact by ASEAN - *the development of regionalism in Southeast Asia* - did not occur by chance.

Rather, it has required the exercise of particular forms of leadership – *cooperative* and *transformative* leadership.

Cooperative, since it recognizes the need to synergize the national and regional nexus – to attain an “equilibrium” between the demands of national priorities and the dynamic in the region. Essentially, that national interest and the region’s collective interests are not inherently in conflict. *Transformative*, as it recognizes the need for the countries of the region not only to react and respond to developments, rather also to positively shape and influence them.

Absent such traits, not least a sense of regional ownership of the process, attempts at regional cooperation in Southeast Asia prior to ASEAN have foundered. The 1954 Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO); the 1961 Association of Southeast Asia (ASA); and the 1963 MAPHLINDO were distinguished for their brevity of existence.

ASEAN’s very founding in 1967 – at a time when relations between countries of the region, including among those who were to become ASEAN five founding member states, were deeply strained – required tremendous demonstration of statesmanship and leadership. The leaders at the time were able to look *beyond* their countries’ immediate interests and chose instead to forge a new forward-looking path in the region.

Although it took another decade before ASEAN was to convene a summit level meeting in Bali, the resultant 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) was truly ground-breaking and dynamic-changing: commitment to the non-use of force in the resolution of disputes among its signatories. The TAC – subsequently acceded to by all the ten ASEAN member states and beyond – helped ingrained a culture of peace in Southeast Asia.

Without doubt, therefore, the exercise of leadership in 1967 and 1976 mattered.

However, in fast changing region – replete with complex dynamics where change is permanent feature – the mere preservation of the *status quo* would not have sufficed. To continue to matter, ASEAN needed to evolve, indeed, to transform.

Once again the leadership was needed.

Notwithstanding the deep and seemingly irreconcilable divide between the so-called ASEAN5 and the non-ASEAN Southeast Asian countries (CLMV), the vision of an ASEAN10 that encompasses all the countries of Southeast Asia was realized. Indeed, drawing painful lessons learnt from the consequence of a divided region in drawing-in extra-regional interests and proxy wars, *step-by-step*, ASEAN's membership expanded to include all the ten Southeast Asian states. Given the difficult past history and the divergence of systems, values and interests, this was a considerable achievement made possible by the exercise of the requisite leadership. Indeed, in recognition of the special circumstances of the newly joined member states, ASEAN adopted as one of its key goal the bridging of the economic development gap between the CLMV and the rest of ASEAN through the Initiative for ASEAN Integration.

Once more, the exercise of leadership mattered.

At the beginning of the new Millennium in 2002, ASEAN encountered another critical juncture. Essentially, in a rapidly changing *milieu* – manifests for instance in bold regional economic integration efforts in many parts of the world, the uncertain geopolitical dynamic post-Cold War, increasing convergence between internal and external domains, and, specific to Southeast Asia's immediate environment: of the rise of China and India as economic power houses - the question was asked whether it was sufficient for ASEAN to remain as an "Association", or whether it should deepen and widen the nature of its cooperation.

Yet again, ASEAN leaders were not found wanting; they exercised leadership.

The launch through the 2003 Bali Concord II of the process towards the three-pillar ASEAN Community – not simply Economic, rather also Political Security and Social Culture – gave fresh impetus to regionalism in Southeast Asia. It enabled the development of regional capacities, mechanisms and institutions in areas hitherto absent. It helped usher cooperation in areas previously deemed to be outside the domain of regional cooperation.

The forging of consensus on Community-building issues was, and continues to be, painstaking. Not surprising given the inherent divergences within Southeast Asia.

Once again, the presence of the requisite leadership mattered.

Leadership has mattered too in developing Southeast Asia's beyond-the-region outlook.

Notwithstanding the wide spectrum of foreign policy orientations amongst the countries of Southeast Asia – aligned to one of the major powers or non-aligned - in the past they have been able to develop collective ASEAN external outlook.

The promotion of “neutrality” in the then raging Cold War; the idea of “regional resilience”; and, more recently, to that catch all phrase, “ASEAN centrality”. The latter gave momentum to the initiation of complex network of diplomatic processes in the region: the “Plus one” and “Plus Three” with ASEAN's Dialogue Partners, to the ASEAN Regional Forum; the EAS and the impending RCEP. More than mere convening power, anchored on an inclusive cooperative outlook, ASEAN has been able to shape the norms and principles guiding the region beyond Southeast Asia itself. For instance through the accession to the TAC by non-ASEAN Member States, and the 2011 EAS Bali Principles that *inter alia* commit all the EAS participating states to the non-use of force in resolving issues among them.

Cooperative and transformative leadership made possible unity of outlook and action among ASEAN member states, amidst and despite their diversity. In contrast to recent tendencies, diversity in foreign policy orientation did not become sources of weakness and division, rather that of

assets as ASEAN was able to enjoy the “comfort level” or confidence of extra-regional countries with disparate background and interest. Southeast Asian states did not seek to impose their world-view on the other. Instead, anchored on mutual respect, began developing ASEAN’s collective contribution to the region’s norms and principles.

And not least, cooperative and transformative leadership made possible a more considered and nuanced synergy between the internal and external domains in Southeast Asia.

While better known for its strict application of the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, ever since the launch of the ASEAN Political and Security Community-building process in 2003 and until very recently, ASEAN began to sensitize itself to internal developments in its member states. More significant than the mere promulgation of agreements and the establishment of formal institutions, such as AICHR and the AHRD, was the deliberate dynamic-changing state practice pursued by key ASEAN member states to underscore the complementarity between the principle of non-interference and the protection and promotion of human rights.

*Ladies and gentlemen,
Friends,*

Clearly, Southeast Asia’s experience on regionalism over the past five decades attest that leadership matters.

Indeed, a cogent case could be made that sustained Indonesia’s leadership – persistent and yet patient and well-calibrated, alert to false accusation of being over bearing, constantly ensuring that ASEAN “provides for all”, essential for sense of common ownership in the ASEAN project – have been critical. ASEAN’s very founding and its subsequent expansion; the TAC; the ASEAN Community, in particular the Political Security Community; its external relations, including the EAS; all manifest Indonesia’s imprint. And not least, always striving to empower ASEAN in responding to the myriad challenges of the region, as reflected for instance in the 2011 Cambodia-Thailand border dispute, the reform process in Myanmar, and various transnational issues.

What, however, of the future?

How does regionalism in Southeast Asia fit in with the reality of the ever blurring of the local-national-regional-global distinctions? Of a reality that an issue can be all-of-the-above in their causes and their consequences, requiring responses that are simultaneously local, national, regional and global.

How can regionalism thrive in an age of identity politics that on the one hand appeals to a narrow national or even subnational preoccupation, and on the other establishes loyalties and sense of kinship that transcends the national boundaries, and indeed, the region as usually defined. Is geography relevant?

And how can regionalism remain as the relevant foci in an age of complex geopolitical shifts?

I am firmly of the view that regionalism in Southeast Asia can provide effective response to such complex dynamics.

The reality of the local-national-regional-global convergences has not eliminated the relevance of the regional approach. On the contrary, they have the potential to give new fillip to regionalism. On conflict resolution and mediation, for instance, given the nature of present day conflicts, the regional approach provides a critical link between the national and global dynamics. The same is the case in dealing with a host of transnational challenges that are not neatly confined within national boundaries – emergency response to health pandemics; the environment; natural disasters; people smuggling; refugees; terrorism and violent extremism, for instance. However, to translate potential to actual capacities, there cannot be business-as-usual mind set. Twentieth century regionalism will not suffice in addressing twenty first century problems. Southeast Asia's regionalism – ASEAN – must demonstrate leadership – thought leadership – in striking synergy or equilibrium between the local-national-regional-global nexus.

The dynamics towards inward-looking populism, manifests for instance in anti-globalization sentiments, demands a more people-centred regionalism in Southeast Asia. To ensure equitable benefits from regionalism. The relevance of regionalism in Southeast Asia will ultimately be determined by whether they bring forth real positive benefits to its populace.

The ever-challenging geopolitical shifts demand proactive and transformative contributions by regionalism in Southeast Asia to peacefully manage these dynamics. Absent such efforts – passivism – will ensure that negative-competitive dynamic to soon envelop not only Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia, rather also the Pacific and Indian oceans – the Indo-Pacific. Events over the recent weeks here in this region attest to that. ASEAN cannot afford to be passive bystander to these geopolitical shifts. The indivisibility of peace suggests that ultimately Southeast Asia too would be affected by dynamics and developments beyond its own region: of trust deficit, of absence of crisis management capacities, and of territorial disputes.

In world marked by leadership deficit – ASEAN must step up; to be a net contributor to the region's peace, stability and prosperity- to provide leadership plenty.

Thank you.
