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Unity in Diversity

Defining ASEAN's Role in a Multipolar World

Southeast Asia's location in the Indo-Pacific region puts the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN in a geopolitical spotlight and in the centre of the growing conflict between China and the United States. Moreover, the world today observes the rise of other countries like India, South Africa, Brazil, or the United Arab Emirates, and that is drawing a picture of multipolar world. Multinational blocs like the European Union and BRICS also play their role as important global actors. What role can ASEAN play in this new dynamics of global powers?

The Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur was decorated with flying flags. The airport, streets, and public places spotted the colours of the ten countries belonging to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN as the annual summit was taking place from 26 to 27 May. There was also the blue flag with the red and yellow symbol showing a bundle of ten rice stalks. It represents the ASEAN member states bound together in harmony and prosperity. Although the entire world is experiencing unpredictable changes accompanied by fragmentation, aggression and conflict, the forty-sixth ASEAN summit was held in solidarity.

Subsequently, the member states achieved consensus by adopting a joint declaration titled "ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future". This joint vision is a

political roadmap that outlines the region's strategic development amidst global challenges in the coming two decades. The keywords used by the ASEAN leaders are resilient, innovative, dynamic and people-centred to develop a strategic plan to strengthen the political security in the region, the economy, social-cultural ties, and connectivity between the member states. The news therefore reflects ASEAN's significant growth and increasing global importance compared to its early days.

Development and Stability

Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand announced on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok the establishment of ASEAN, a new intergovernmental organization in an

attempt to promote stability from turmoil in the divided Southeast Asia region. The 1960s were marked by discord. Indonesia, controlled by British's effort to prolong colonial influence, waged a three-year armed conflict against Malaysia and Singapore during the formation of Malaysia. Singapore executed two Indonesian spies, accusing them of a bomb attack. The Philippines had claims to Sabah Island from Malaysia based on their own historical and legal grounds.

Besides making peace, the five founding members also expected to use ASEAN as a bulwark against Soviet influence at the peak of Vietnam War at the end of the 1960s as well as revolutionary influence spreading within and from the former French colonies in Indochina. Manoeuvring through various challenges and influenced by the end of the Cold War in Europe, ASEAN was able to expand to ten states. Brunei joined in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999.

Today, ASEAN unites nearly 700 million people of diverse ethnics, religions, languages, and economic situations living in a geographic area of 4.46 million square kilometres. The ASEAN group of states is also an economic powerhouse with a combined GDP of to 3.38 trillion euro, which is the fifth-largest in the world. The annual average growth is even more impressive and the third-highest globally, with 5.6 percent per year. However, the political systems are diverse, ranging from multi-party systems to one-party systems and even an absolute monarchy. This has been challenging, but the interests of all members do more or less unanimously focus on economic development and domestic political stability. Moreover, there is an incisive perception that differences between the ASEAN states must be resolved in a non-aggressive

approach in order to promote unity in diversity.

Rivalries and Complexities

Southeast Asia's location in the Indo-Pacific region puts the ASEAN states in a geopolitical spotlight and in the centre of the growing conflict between China and the United States. Within the region between the Indian and the Pacific Ocean there are other powers competing for influence such as Australia, India, and Japan. Therefore, in continuous efforts to adapt to the rivalries and complexities in Indo-Pacific and to enhance peace, ASEAN has established its own network of security-political cooperation over the past 30 years, namely the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) founded in 1994 and the East Asian Summit (EAS) founded in 2005. ASEAN also upgraded its relations with India and Japan into comprehensive strategic partnership in 2021 and 2023 respectively.

These mechanisms and structures aim for consensus in decision-making process and involve important global players. They also actively propose dialogue and discussions as alternatives to armed conflicts and war. Looking at the persistent mutual distrust between major powers like China and the US, ASEAN promotes itself as a reliable political partner striving for peace in the region. These developments are indeed historic, starting with division and tension and evolving into unity and consensus within the ASEAN group of states.

Furthermore, the development and consolidation of ASEAN in the recent decades also reflects the changing world order. After the end of the Second World War, there was a long Cold-War stage between the Communist East led by the Soviet Union and the capitalist West led by the United States, which only ended in 1991. After the

Soviet Union's dissolution, the world turned unipolar under the self-declared and dominant US-leadership. However, this single super power's reign could not last long with China emerging prominently in economic and geopolitical influences.

Moreover, the world today observes the rise of other countries like India, South Africa, Brazil, or the United Arab Emirates, and that is drawing a picture of multipolar world. Multinational blocs like the European Union and BRICS also play their role as important global actors. They become active in international networking as the basis for development and self-defence. Although their intention is to maintain peace and promote cooperation, the multipolar world is undergoing an intense period with growing political tensions and an increased military spending that may lead to a new arms race with the possibility of devastating consequences.

Pushing and Pulling

The rivalry between China and the United States is escalating in many fields — and they compete for influence in the ASEAN region given its strategic location in the Indo-Pacific and development potential. Right after China upgraded relations with ASEAN to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2021, and the US made a similar chess-move in 2022. The two big players push and pull the different ASEAN members at the same time. Since President Xi Jinping came to power, China has stepped up its often-aggressive foreign policy approach also called “wolf-warrior diplomacy” towards its neighbours and in the region.

On one hand, China affirms extensive claims over the South China Sea involving areas also claimed by ASEAN country members like the Philippines and Vietnam. It also imposes more pressure by building military bases

at sea and increasing provocations towards fishing and naval vessels in the disputed waters. On the other hand, China enhances its currency diplomacy, encouraging ASEAN states to trade with China using the Chinese yuan in order to boost investment and to get involved in the economies of the ASEAN member states. At the same time, US President Donald Trump increases the US military presence in the Indo-Pacific and reinforces maritime security cooperation with states like Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines. Meanwhile, China has tried to pull Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Malaysia onto their side.

Trump's confrontational policy towards China in Southeast Asia has put ASEAN in a dilemma of how to balance the rivalry between the great powers in order to maintain security and stability. In such a situation, ASEAN must unite for strength to retain its strategic autonomy. To enhance its central role, ASEAN needs to promote a policy that Vietnam used to term “bamboo diplomacy”. This means to remain flexible while maintaining a firm and neutral position, always looking for peaceful solutions in which dialogue is an important implement. By reaffirming that the bloc is not a military alliance, ASEAN can prove its crucial role as a mediator for peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region and globally.

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