

New Imperatives for ASEAN

Ambassador Ong Keng Yong

Director, Institute of Policy Studies,
Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

Remarks

Dunman High ASEAN Plus Summit 2009
Dunman High School, Singapore, 3 June 2009

The most important thing which happened to ASEAN since the inaugural Dunman High ASEAN Plus Summit last year is the coming into force of the ASEAN Charter on 15 December 2008.

The ASEAN Charter provides the legal and institutional framework to support a rules-based and effective organization to help realize the ASEAN Community. For the people of ASEAN, the Charter will strengthen regional identity, good governance, economic development and social justice. The promotion of a people-oriented ASEAN means better quality of life and security. There will be sustainability of development for the benefit of both present and future generations. The next step is to implement the provisions of the ASEAN Charter.

The second most important thing which happened in the past year is the decision of ASEAN Leaders to continue building the ASEAN Community based on the three pillars of political-security cooperation, economic integration and socio-cultural cooperation, and to have the ASEAN Community in place by 2015. The global economic crisis could have derailed this plan but ASEAN is going ahead with the following:

- **ASEAN Political-Security Community**

To ensure that countries in the region live in peace with one another and with the world in a just, democratic and harmonious environment. In other words, we seek to preserve peace.

- **ASEAN Economic Community**

To create a single market and production base with free flow of goods, services, investment, capital, and greater mobility of professionals, talents and skilled labour. This means we sustain prosperity.

- **ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community**

To promote a community of caring societies and to foster a regional identity. This means more people-oriented programmes and helping to reduce poverty and to improve the standard of living.

Much will depend on the actions taken at the national level, by the respective government agencies and official bodies. ASEAN, as a regional institution, must also continue to evolve. The ASEAN Secretariat has been mandated to do more coordination, more monitoring and reporting of the progress in ASEAN Community building, and more outreach activities to strengthen the ASEAN identity.

ASEAN's past successes had been in forging growth, stability and peace. Today, there are three big challenges. The first challenge is ASEAN's internal consolidation and cohesiveness. One key area is the narrowing of the development gaps among ASEAN Member States. Secondly, managing the broader issues confronting the East Asian region, especially how to evolve the regional architecture to maintain peace and stability. This requires ASEAN to enhance its relevance in regional and international affairs and to enrich the relationships with its Dialogue Partners for mutual benefit. The third challenge is to cope with the current global economic crisis and to steer ASEAN out of the turmoil. The important thing is to prevent protectionist tendency which will adversely affect global trade.

Fortunately, there are positive factors which will help ASEAN deal with these challenges. The FTA strategy of ASEAN is a well-developed initiative. ASEAN has signed FTAs with China, Japan, Korea, Australia and New Zealand. India is next on the list. Through such opening of markets and liberalizing of trade, ASEAN's own economic integration is gaining momentum. ASEAN Member States are also opening up their respective political systems and the democratization process has salutary effects on the way national and regional problems are handled and resolved although the situation in Myanmar is contentious. ASEAN Leaders have

demonstrated their readiness to work together and political will can be mustered to overcome the difficulties and differences.

The substantive relations between ASEAN and all its Dialogue Partners provide a strong basis for ASEAN to remain the key driver in the development of the regional architecture which comprises of the ASEAN Plus One, ASEAN Plus Three, East Asia Summit, and ASEAN Regional Forum. These processes contribute to promoting regional peace and stability under which Asia-Pacific countries can grow and prosper. The indications are that ASEAN will continue to play a central role in shaping the evolving regional architecture. ASEAN must therefore enhance its relevance and effectiveness to stay in the driver's seat.

In conclusion, ASEAN has come a long way since its birth on 8 August 1967. It is the most successful regional organization. It may be seen as an imperfect grouping with insufficient region-wide institutions. Yet, its potential has not been fully realized. There is room for optimism as the political will to grow ASEAN into a better organization has strengthened with the ASEAN Charter. ASEAN Member States must now work systematically to take the grouping to the next level. ASEAN must be serious about this endeavour and in turn, the rest of the international community will take ASEAN seriously.

