

**A Sovereignty Success Story: ASEAN Remains a Reflection of its Member States**  
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# A SOVEREIGNTY SUCCESS STORY

## ASEAN Remains a Reflection of its Member States

DR. SHAUN NARINE

**F**ive countries founded the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei joined in 1984, followed by Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999. Timor-Leste, which has been an independent nation only since 2002 and is the remaining Southeast Asian state, is expected to join at some point. Since its creation, ASEAN has remained committed to a Westphalian notion of state sovereignty, wherein each state has exclusive sovereignty over its territory under the set of rules, norms and standards generally recognized as binding between nations.

ASEAN's major focus has centered on protecting and enhancing its members' sovereign powers. Over the decades, critics have questioned this effort and suggested reforms to give ASEAN more autonomy and influence over its members' domestic and foreign policies. Critics argue that for ASEAN to exercise real international influence, its members need to coordinate their political, economic, and social domestic and foreign policies in a way that allows the organization to credibly claim to be the voice of nearly 700 million people. However, it is unlikely that a radical change in how ASEAN approaches sovereignty is imminent. Even 55 years later, many of the political,





social and economic factors that shaped ASEAN's founding persist.

### Origins of its Commitment to Sovereignty

Understanding ASEAN's commitment to a maximalist form of state sovereignty requires understanding Southeast Asia's experience with colonialism. Western imperial powers colonized or dominated almost every Southeast Asian country. Spain colonized the Philippines for more than 300 years. In 1898, the Spanish lost their empire to the United States, which would not support Philippine independence for nearly 50 more years. The Dutch (and other European powers) colonized Indonesia for more than 300 years. The British colonized Malaya (which became Malaysia and Singapore), Myanmar and Brunei. France colonized Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Only Thailand avoided colonization by practicing a foreign policy of "bending with the wind" — that is, placating whatever power was regionally dominant at any time.

Japanese imperialism led to the end of European and U.S. control of Southeast Asia at the start of World War II, but also proved to be intolerable. After the Allied victory, the U.S. returned to the Philippines but granted it

independence in 1946. The British reasserted control over Brunei, Malaya and Myanmar. The French and the Dutch attempted to regain their former colonies. Such efforts to reimpose control met firm resistance. Indonesia expelled the Dutch; Vietnam defeated the French. The British gradually (and reluctantly) withdrew from their former colonies, granting Brunei independence from its status as a British protectorate in 1984.

In 1963, Indonesia, under then-President Sukarno, launched the policy of Konfrontasi (Confrontation) against the new state of Malaysia. Sukarno viewed Malaysia as a British colonial imposition on the region. Indonesia tried to destabilize Malaysia (and Singapore, a part of Malaysia until 1965) through military and economic coercion. The Philippines, which had territorial disputes with Malaysia, participated in the conflict. Konfrontasi ended in 1966, when the Indonesian military staged a coup against Sukarno and then sought to purge Indonesian society of alleged communists, killing, perhaps, more than 1 million people. The Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore were also concerned with the threat of communist insurgency. Fighting one another made them all more vulnerable to political destabilization. Thus, ASEAN was created as part of an agreement among its founding members that they would respect each other's sovereignty to allow all of them to concentrate on fighting domestic insurgents.

### State-Building Struggles

After decolonization, most Southeast Asian states faced the next major concern of many former colonies: how to create cohesive national identities out of many disparate ethnic, tribal, linguistic and religious identities.

**ASEAN leaders pose with U.S. President Joe Biden outside the White House in Washington, D.C., in May 2022. From left: Then-Secretary-General of ASEAN Dato' Lim Jock Hoi from Brunei, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, then-Thailand Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, Sultan of Brunei Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, President Biden, Indonesian President Joko Widodo, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Laos Prime Minister Phankham Viphavanh, Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Sri Ismail Sabri Yaakob and then-Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr.** THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Southeast Asia is probably the world's most diverse region. Not surprisingly, this diversity of identity and the accompanying struggles over control of geographical regions and economic and political resources has led to considerable strife.

In the 1960s, beyond the terrible violence in Indonesia and insurgencies in the other ASEAN states, Vietnam was wracked by a civil war. Myanmar, then known as Burma, came under military dictatorship. In the 1970s, Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime committed genocide against the nation's people, and Vietnam encouraged the outflow of hundreds of thousands of refugees, many of them ethnic Chinese. The Philippines continued a long-

**ASEAN's 10 member states hold two key Summit Meetings each year hosted by the nation holding the ASEAN chairmanship for that year,** which will be Indonesia in 2023. The ASEAN Charter calls for ASEAN to develop friendly relations and mutually beneficial dialogue cooperation and partnerships with countries, subregional, regional, and international organizations and institutions. ASEAN has 10 dialogue partners, including Australia, Canada, the European Union, India, Japan, New Zealand, the People's Republic of China, Russia, South Korea and the United States, with which it holds high level exchanges, including additional ministerial meetings and summit meetings.

The U.S.-ASEAN Strategic Partnership, for example, is built on shared principles, as outlined in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, including ASEAN centrality, respect for sovereignty and rule of law, good governance, transparency, inclusivity, rules-based frameworks and openness. During U.S.-ASEAN special summits, participating countries work together to strengthen public health systems for the future, build connectivity through human capital development, advance partnerships in economic cooperation, and promote maritime cooperation for a secure Indo-Pacific.

South Korea's Park Jin attends the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in August 2022. REUTERS

**South Korea's Park Jin attends the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in August 2022.** REUTERS



running conflict with Muslim separatists in Mindanao. The list of domestic conflicts goes on.

Many Southeast Asian governments subscribe to the theory that creating functional and sustainable states out of many complex identities may be a long and often violent process that requires the protection of state sovereignty. While much of the violence within Southeast Asian states has been mitigated by the economic successes of the past 35 years, most regional states remain potentially unstable actors.

### **Sustaining Relations**

Despite the great regional upheavals during its decades of existence, ASEAN can claim that no two member states have gone to war with each other. There has been limited interstate violence, however, and it remains debatable how much credit ASEAN deserves for mitigating regional tensions. Economic self-interest in stability has also played a role. Still, it is probable that the social and political connections ASEAN has built among leaders and officials in Southeast Asia has smoothed relations. The hundreds of meetings that ASEAN's various agencies hold every year put the organization at the center of a network of relationships.

The expansion of multilateralism in Southeast Asia is unique to the region and does not necessarily follow traditional Western models. However, there are indications that Southeast Asian nations have tried to move toward a more cohesive form of regional arrangement that would require member states to pool their sovereignty, or at least create that impression. ASEAN's members understand that their individual influence on the international stage is greatly enhanced when they can speak with one regional voice. Maintaining ASEAN's credibility is a major foreign policy concern.

However, events have challenged ASEAN's international image and influence. In the late 1990s, ASEAN lacked the ability to address such challenges as the devastation caused by a regional economic crisis due in large part to inflated asset values and the collapse of currency rates; the environmental catastrophe of the regional haze from forest fires in Indonesia; and Indonesia's aggression toward Timor-Leste. Afterward, the ASEAN states implemented reforms to restore the organization's credibility. In 2003, ASEAN proposed creating the Economic Community, the Socio-Cultural Community and the Political-Security Community. These are the three pillars of the ASEAN Community, which was established in December 2015. In 2008, the ASEAN Charter became enforceable. In 2012, ASEAN introduced its Human Rights Declaration and its Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR).

### **Symbolic Power**

Nonetheless, ASEAN's moves toward creating a more cohesive and institutionalized structure cannot compete with the political and economic realities of the ASEAN



**Thai Public Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, right, and U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra meet during the 15th ASEAN Health Ministers meeting in Bali, Indonesia, in May 2022.** THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



**Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh participates in a summit commemorating 45 years of U.S.-ASEAN relations in Washington, D.C., in May 2022.** THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



**Indonesian President Joko Widodo attends the U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit in May 2022.** REUTERS

states. On careful analysis, the ASEAN Community and its various elements are more symbolic than they are binding. ASEAN is still not designed to challenge the sovereignty of its individual members. For example, the ASEAN Charter calls on member states to support democracy and human rights even as it recognizes ASEAN's guiding principles of sovereignty and noninterference. However, the Charter privileges the latter principles by stating them first and reemphasizing them multiple times. ASEAN has no mechanism by which to eject or punish recalcitrant members and the AICHR is extremely limited in what it can address.

Today, the most obvious problem facing ASEAN is the crisis in Myanmar. After shifting toward democracy in 2012, Myanmar was the victim of a military coup in 2021, and the junta remained in power as of late 2022. Even before the coup, widespread prejudices against the Rohingya Muslim people, generally instigated by the military, resulted in ethnic cleansing and genocide. How to deal with Myanmar has led to divisions within ASEAN and greatly complicated its relations with its Western partners. Some members, such as Vietnam, insist that ASEAN continue to adhere to its strict Westphalian approach to state sovereignty. Other members want to sanction Myanmar and are concerned with how condemnation from the West is affecting ASEAN's international reputation and, therefore, its international influence.

### Defining Sovereignty

A maximalist understanding of state sovereignty will remain the norm in ASEAN for the foreseeable future. The pressure for ASEAN to alter this norm is likely to decrease with time. Largely driving this push is the desire to fit into the norms of a system defined by the Western

world. However, the gradual decline of Western power, combined with the corresponding rise of China and its support for a traditional definition of sovereignty adds further weight to the status quo.

However, the rise of China also creates more of a reason for ASEAN states to speak with one diplomatic and political voice.

ASEAN remains a reflection of its member states. Southeast Asian countries have made considerable political, economic and technological advancement over the past 50 years. However, their political gains are quite fragile. As a result, their relationships with ASEAN are complicated. It benefits ASEAN members to have the world see ASEAN as representative of the governments and people of Southeast Asia. At the same time, it is also imperative for many of them to prevent the organization from becoming an autonomous entity that can put political pressure on them. ASEAN's seemingly ambivalent and sometimes contradictory response to the concept of sovereignty captures this tension. Nonetheless, the form of sovereignty that will remain paramount for the region for some time is the traditional Westphalian version. The need to project ASEAN as unified and effective will produce the impression of an organization that is more united than it actually is. Even so, ASEAN remains important to its members and to the region's relations with the world. The fact that ASEAN was founded by middle powers rather than more powerful external states allows it to bring together the many forces contending for regional influence. It has created networks of interaction that enable diplomatic contact. It has helped nurture the conditions that allow for economic development. ASEAN's contributions to Southeast Asia may be less deliberate than they seem, but they are still consequential. □