

ASEAN and the Gulf States, or is it Gulf-Asia?

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN's) foundation came about as a result of a reconciliation peace process between Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, which had been brokered by Thailand. In fact, it was the Thai Foreign



Minister, Thanat Khoman, who first proposed the idea for the association on the back of that peace agreement, first discussing it informally with the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Adam Malik.

The ASEAN Declaration (also known as the Bangkok Declaration) marked the official beginning on 8 August 1967, when it was signed in the Thai capital. The Foreign Ministers of five countries from Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand were later to be affectionately referred to as the founding fathers.

The original concept for ASEAN was to be the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) plus Indonesia. However, having heard about the plans, Singapore also asked to be involved, and history was made. That said, many Western observers at the time considered it nothing more than 'a gentleman's club for Asian ministers', meant to make them look like they were doing something useful.

Yet, this thinking was clearly flawed and missed the drive and determination behind those involved. The purpose of its creation was, in large part, designed to defend against what they described as 'outside forces' and thus prevent the threat of intra-regional conflicts and the balkanisation of Southeast Asia. It should be noted that this was happening against the backdrop of the Vietnam war, which was effectively raging on their doorstep.

The Association was based on very simple principles. Simple they might have been, yet these had taken time to thrash out between five countries with very different views on a number of fundamental issues. It had a rocky start.

Disputes even came about shortly after its formation and there are disputes even today, but the structure built within ASEAN is such that disputes are given air to be resolved while not being allowed to get in the way of the main goals, which are to provide stability, prosperity and peace.

One such example of how the structure works when conflicts arise can be seen in ASEAN's response to Myanmar, since the military coup in 2021 has represented a thorn in the side of regional stability so carefully crafted by the other member states. The military Junta leaders have found themselves 'suspended' from any and all ASEAN meetings. The military leaders said quickly that elections were going to be held. However, ASEAN's response was to make it clear that, as a group, they are only interested in stopping the violence. The members were not trying to gain further leverage against Myanmar, merely maintaining the Association's agreed stance.

Fundamental to its goal of dealing with problematic member states is its 'non-interventionist' approach. It is designed to let member states deal with their own problems –a better, smoother and faster way of reaching resolution than sending an external military into the chaos. However, if not concluded to all members satisfaction, the leaders of that country are essentially shamed and excluded. This might well appear to outside Western observers as a 'turning of a blind eye' or doing nothing. However, 'Face' in Asia is an extremely important cultural difference that must not be underestimated as a political tool in this part of the world.

Far from being the assumed 'gentleman's club for Asian ministers', today, ASEAN has become the most successful inter-governmental organisation in the developing world and, if the forward moving trajectory is anything to go by, growth will continue rapidly, while its member States are shielded by agreements with other powerful nations protecting the region from some of geopolitical chaos.

Gulf Co-operation Council

With all that in mind, it is necessary to look at another regional bloc that has taken a real interest in Southeast Asia. The Gulf States' Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) was founded in 1981 and comprises today of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). While communications began with ASEAN in 1990, this was just at the informal '*getting to know you*' level. Real substantive summit-level talks began in June 2010 with the second ASEAN-GCC ministerial meeting in Singapore, which focused on education and agriculture development. Since then, things have developed apace with discussions comprising political and security dialogue, free trade and investment, electronics, machinery, food, minerals and tourism.

Despite the blocs combined representing 6% of the world's GDP (US\$6 trillion), trade between them only constitutes US\$110 billion, and both wish to see far deeper co-operation and increased trade. With the US potentially stepping back from both regions, ASEAN and the GCC are seeing synergistic benefits they can offer each other and are looking to build on the progress achieved so far. The GCC can clearly benefit from ASEAN's energetic economies and ASEAN (while it does have oil and gas producers within it) would surely benefit from the far greater quantity and value of strong uninterrupted supply, free of some external geopolitical waves. Clearly, the blocs are happy with progress having penned a 2024-2028 co-operation framework, which aims at integrating further their regional markets.

Much of the recent tailwind at the sails of progress for ASEAN-GCC has been attributed to Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim of Malaysia. While he had long expressed the importance of ASEAN working with the Gulf States, he really began in earnest last year in preparation for Malaysia's return to the ASEAN chairmanship this year. Malaysia last held the position in 2015 while under the rule of former Prime Minister, Najib Razak, who was convicted over the embezzlement of Malaysian taxpayers' money through the so-called sovereign wealth fund, 1MDB. Naturally, 2015 was a period where Malaysia's input regarding foreign affairs appeared to be of little importance where ASEAN was concerned. Anwar, actually imprisoned under false charges by Razak, is therefore extremely eager to make up for lost time and show that he can use Malaysia's natural influence to make a positive difference for relations between two blocs, especially as he does take a strong interest in foreign affairs.

Conclusion

Excepting the necessary caution required during such a geopolitically 'busy' period, it does appear that the Gulf-Asia bond is developing nicely. There will, of course, be difficulties and disagreements, nonetheless there is a solid foundation from which the two blocs are working and a sufficient drive to keep the momentum in play. The Western powers should be taking notes on how real trade relations are to be built.

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