The Philippines takes over the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2017 coinciding with the organization's historic 50th anniversary. The Philippines only had the opportunity to chair ASEAN four times in five decades. This is understandable in an organization which started only to hold annual summits after almost three decades of existence.

It is hard to evaluate the success or failure of a member’s chairmanship on the basis of a rotating year-long chairmanship. A major decision or project usually requires multiyear consensus building. ASEAN operates on medium to long-term plans. We are reminded today that ASEAN has a 10-year ASEAN Community Vision 2025, which was adopted at Kuala Lumpur in 2015.

Having said this, I believe that developments in the region are influenced more by events or confluence of events rather than by formal planning.

For example, the end of the Cold War in the early 90s provided Southeast Asia peace dividends that saw the deepening of its agenda and broadening of its membership. The mood was so positive that it was possible to create an inclusive security forum for the Asia-Pacific involving many Asian states plus all the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council under the ASEAN Regional Forum.

It also paved the way for the membership of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Viet Nam (CLMV) countries into ASEAN fulfilling the vision of ASEAN 10. Even the decision to hold annual Summit came about only after the end of the Cold War.

On the economic front, the economic rise of China and India in the 1990s heightened economic competition in the region. At the initiative of Singapore, ASEAN commissioned McKinsey & Company to assess ASEAN's competitiveness and recommend the way forward. As a result, ASEAN established the High Level Task Force on ASEAN Economic Integration which recommended the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

Interestingly, an AEC was not even in the vocabulary of the ASEAN Vision 2020 when it was negotiated and then adopted at the 30th anniversary commemorative summit in December 1997. It was overtaken by the Asian financial crisis even before its adoption.

It would take another six years for the AEC to appear in the vocabulary of ASEAN under the Indonesian Chairmanship. Then, when the Philippines took the chairmanship in 2007, it helped build consensus to quicken the AEC timetable from 17 to 12 years.

Another example was the Indian Ocean earthquake, which devastated Banda Aceh on Christmas day of 2004 and jolted the unprepared ASEAN. Within seven months, ASEAN adopted the Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response.

This is not to say that planning and visioning have no value. They are important for building consensus and socialization. But they tend to drag until major challenges and opportunities present themselves.
Fortunately, member countries find ways to align and agree when they have to, despite initial differences in priorities, capabilities, and perceptions. The point is that ASEAN’s progress should be assessed both on the basis of its intentions and responses to the demands of the times. An effective ASEAN Chair should be both capable of building consensus and courageous in navigating even uncharted waters.

**Philippine priorities under its 2017 chairmanship**

The Philippine-chosen theme “Partnering for change and engaging the world” is both positive and alarming. It is positive because it is outward looking. It is alarming because ‘change’ in international relations could mean realignment. However, based on the presentation today and the speech of President Rodrigo Duterte on January 15, 2017 in Davao City, which called for renewed constructive engagement with ASEAN Dialogue Partners, I do not expect disruptive changes.

But ‘change’ in its ordinary meaning might in fact be needed by ASEAN once in a while. ASEAN would not reach its full potential without opening up its comfort zone to new challenges and opportunities. Sometimes the voice of challenge is the voice of the future.

In fact, engaging the world has been ASEAN’s hallmark with its dialogue partnership system established as early as the mid-70s and further enriched by the plus systems, such as the ASEAN Plus 1, 3 or 6. ASEAN’s linkages even go beyond the Dialogue Partners because ASEAN Third Country Committees, formal or informal, exist in their host countries worldwide. ASEAN just needs to energize and inspire them.

While there is nothing new in engaging the world, it is still important to reiterate such outlook, particularly at this time when inward-looking tendencies could bring fear, anxieties and even possible instability in some parts of the world.

On this point, I have two suggestions: The first is that the Philippines should accelerate if not make happen the membership of East Timor into ASEAN. It is the only country within Southeast Asian geographic footprint that is not part of the Association. It is a democratic country in transition. It deserves support of like-minded states.

The Filipino people were among those who demonstrated open solidarity with the East Timor independence movement, which even caused a ripple in our diplomatic relations with Indonesia at that time. The longer their membership is delayed, the more difficult it might be for East Timor to move up, if not catch up, with the rest of Southeast Asia. If this could be done or a fast track process is at least agreed, the Philippine Chairmanship would not just be remembered for it for a long time, but we would earn a grateful nation.

The second is that international dialogue on the West Philippines Sea should continue. President Duterte did not mention UNCLOS in his January 15 speech. But several times, he mentioned the need for the respect for the rule of law. Today, we also heard that the Philippines will pursue maritime security and cooperation.

The Philippines has no illusion that solutions to the overlapping territorial claims in the whole of the South China Sea are within reach. Far from it. Our immediate concern should be to prevent disputes from escalating into armed confrontation and that our medium term preoccupation should be to build mutual confidence, cooperation and a framework for the pacific settlement of disputes. The only cooperative dialogue could bring these about.

With or without the South China Sea issue, ASEAN and China will always be neighbors. We should hammer out a modus operandi that can withstand our differences and maintain regional stability. The SCS is, of course, an important test. But it could be considered an outlier because of its sovereignty and regime threatening elements. It is also an issue not just among the claimant states, but also the user states. So while it could serve as a confidence-building opportunity, it also needs confidence building in the broader strategic milieu, such as in the relations among the Major Powers.

To be specific, the Philippines should bring up confidence building measures and cooperative activities already agreed 25 years ago among ASEAN countries and 15 years ago between ASEAN and China. After all, the substantive content of these already established agreements and the illusive code of conduct in the South China Sea may not really be that fundamental. What matters now is sincerity and intention.
My take on the legally-binding Code of Conduct is that claimant states should negotiate and adopt it first before opening it to other countries. An instrument of accession should be opened to all concerned countries, particularly those using the South China Sea for commercial and patrolling purposes. It would be like the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation which has been acceded to by 22 countries, including all permanent members of UNSC. It need not be strictly an ASEAN-China document, but it could have differentiated rights and responsibilities between the claimants and non-claimant states.

ASEAN 50 years hence

In an insightful essay2 authored by the Dean of the LKY School of Government and our very own Rhoda Severino, they concluded that the greatest achievement of ASEAN has been the preservation of peace in our region. If we accept that, then we know our mission for the next 50 years – to preserve it and build on it.

Providing economic and social development for its people is a primary responsibility of each country. But it could only do so to its full potential in an environment of peace. Differences among nations will always be around. What’s important therefore is for countries to be predisposed to the pacific settlement of disputes.

How should we get there? Once in a while, we hear comments saying that CBMs and preventive diplomacy are solutions looking for problems. But that is, not in fact, the issue. The real tragedy happens when problems heat up and preventive diplomacy freezes.

It is time that we give life to the agreed mechanisms and processes to take cognizance of crisis situations, such as the ASEAN Troika, Friends of the ARF Chair; the High Council under the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation, and modalities for good offices, conciliation and mediation provided for under the ASEAN Charter.

The political community blueprint has committed to promoting democratic institutions in the region; a culture of peace including its inclusion in the academic curriculum; interfaith dialogue; humanitarian assistance in the event of conflict; and counter-terrorism cooperation, among others. We are not lacking in agenda, but we need more actions.

Before we forget, the ASEAN Charter gave a very important role for the ASEAN Chairman; that is to “ensure an effective and timely response to urgent issues or crisis situations affecting ASEAN.” ASEAN might want to put in place the ‘early warning system’ called for by the political community blueprint to support such important mandate of the ASEAN Chair.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the Philippines should remain and contribute to ASEAN because that is our regional home. A regional identity gives us wider and deeper anchor in international relations. For various reasons, we will not always find eager support for all our causes from among its members. But a stable and peaceful Southeast Asia gives us crucial space and time to grow and become a strong nation.

It is in our interest for Southeast Asia to have confidence in itself. We should continue to support its soft power (i.e., convening ARF 24 and EAS 16) and in encouraging the Major Powers to improve their relations for their own good and to eliminate or reduce the complications in the relationship between smaller and larger states in our neighborhood.

Any coalition of countries is only as strong as its weakest member. It is, therefore, important for every member of ASEAN to be resilient. This was the reason why ASEAN decided to consolidate the ASEAN 10 on its 30th anniversary despite the newer members’ different stages of readiness. President Duterte recognizes this when he said in his Jan 15 speech that the unity that built ASEAN over the last five decades will be crucial to its continued success. We should not allow other countries or issues to divide ASEAN.

National sovereignty is not just a right. It is a responsibility. The international system of states is based on the notion that each member has the capacity to act not only rationally and responsibly, but also with credibility, so that we could all contribute to the stability of that international system. Failed and weak states not only place at risk their own citizens, but also the international community if they become sources or transit points of terrorists, drug traffickers, international criminal networks, or even transnational environmental hazards.
They also indirectly threaten their neighbors if they allow themselves to be bullied if not overtaken by countries with “imperial tendencies,” to use the term of Carl Bildt in his most recent comment on what’s happening in Europe. Every state should strive to be a stable frontline state, which has the will, recourse, and might to take measures of defensive nature.

In the end, therefore, the Philippines must take care of itself. It is obvious as it is serious. We build and maintain bridges with others, of course, particularly those with whom we share fundamental and universal values. Our identity is in fact partly others. But we could only be a valuable member of the community of nations if we are not a burden, but instead able to contribute in meaningful ways. We should have the means to help ourselves and others. To be able to do that, we should not be distracted from building our national economy in the years ahead.

Such is the paradox of being a responsible member of the international community: that we live for ourselves and for others and that we maintain peace through individual and collective resilience.

Let us wish the Philippines success as it takes the helm of ASEAN at the beginning of its next 50 years.

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Endnotes

1 These include holding dialogues among defense and military officials and undertaking cooperative activities like marine environmental protection and scientific research, the safety of navigation, search and rescue operation, and combating transnational crime, including trafficking in illicit drugs, piracy and armed robbery at sea, and illegal traffic in arms.


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