

## 'PARTNERS' FOR CHANGE: UNDERSTANDING THE EXTERNAL RELATIONS OF ASEAN

by Louie Dane C. Merced

In the [joint communiqué](#) of the 50<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on 5 August 2017 in Manila, Philippines, the Foreign Ministers announced the acceptance of Turkey as a new Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN. This comes after several years of Turkey's bid to formalize relations with ASEAN. For ASEAN, this marks another milestone in the regional bloc's growing external relations. ASEAN's journey in the past 50 years has not only witnessed its expansion into a Community of 10 Southeast Asian states, but also the establishment of formal relations and partnerships with many countries and organizations outside the region toward shared objectives and mutual benefit.

### *Extensive external relations*

While non-Southeast Asian states cannot become members of ASEAN, the ASEAN Charter states that they can still 'join' through the extensive external relations that the Association has developed over the decades. ASEAN, through the Foreign Ministers, can confer to an external party the status of a Dialogue Partner, Sectoral Dialogue Partner, Development Partner, Observer, or Guest. These vary in terms of breadth and depth of engagement, with the Dialogue Partnership being the most extensive. ASEAN decides on which external party to elevate ties with based on the intensity and substance of interactions, as well as the potential for the external party to contribute to the objectives of the Association. It should also be stressed that along with other ASEAN decisions, the conferment of formal partnership with an external party is done through consensus among all Member States.

ASEAN's formal engagement with its Dialogue Partners started in the 1970s with the Post-Ministerial Conferences (PMC) where ASEAN Foreign Ministers would meet with their counterparts from the external parties (i.e., ASEAN-Australia, ASEAN-Japan). Today, ASEAN has 10 Dialogue Partners, namely Australia, Canada, China, European Union, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States. ASEAN Dialogue Partnerships are characterized by regular high-level exchanges and dialogue, including ministerial meetings and summit meetings.

Initially, Dialogue Partnerships focused on securing technical and economic assistance for the developing economies of ASEAN. Eventually, the agenda broadened to include the promotion of two-way trade and investments; strengthening of socio-cultural links; exchange of views on regional political issues; and addressing non-traditional challenges such as terrorism and transnational crimes – all of which correspond to the three pillars of the ASEAN Community. This also highlights the confidence on ASEAN as an active and equal partner in promoting regional stability and economic growth.

ASEAN Member States also take turns in being a Country Coordinator for each of the Dialogue Relationships. For example, for the period of 2015-2018, the Philippines is the country coordinator for ASEAN-Canada Dialogue Relations; Singapore for ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations; and Brunei Darussalam for ASEAN-Japan Dialogue Relations. The Country Coordinator promotes and liaises ASEAN's activities with a Dialogue Partner and co-chairs relevant meetings. In addition, there are also ASEAN Country Coordinators for engagement with other organizations such as the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Meanwhile, ASEAN has a comprehensive partnership with the UN, which was initially a dialogue relationship with the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

Aside from Dialogue Partnerships, ASEAN has Sectoral Dialogue Partnerships with Pakistan, Norway, Switzerland, and Turkey being the latest, in which concrete cooperation is pursued in more specific issue-areas. ASEAN also has a Development Partnership with Germany on capacity-building and development cooperation. Meanwhile, Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste were granted observer status in 1976 and 2002 respectively. Given their geographic location, membership in ASEAN may be more feasible for these two countries. Finally, ASEAN, through the Chair, can also invite a country as a guest in ministerial or summit meetings.

*An outward-looking ASEAN*

The [ASEAN Vision 2025](#) stresses ASEAN's aspiration to become "an outward-looking community" that "plays a responsible and constructive role globally". Enhancing ASEAN's external relations is one way by which this can be realized. Aside from the Dialogue Partnerships and the ASEAN Plus One model, ASEAN leads the ASEAN Plus Three, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the East Asia Summit (EAS). The complementing web of bilateral and multilateral engagements is that through which ASEAN is driving regionalism in Asia, or what is known as the principle of "ASEAN Centrality".

While establishing new formal partnerships may be desired, it should also be noted that such create responsibilities both for ASEAN and the prospective partners. On the part of the prospective partners, they must first accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and commit to principles including non-interference in internal affairs, mutual respect for sovereignty and equality, and renunciation of threat and use of force. They should also articulate what they intend to contribute in their respective engagements with ASEAN, usually through agreed Plans of Action.

On the part of ASEAN, expanding external relations may create both procedural and practical challenges for the Member States and for the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. First is the need to build consensus – the ASEAN Way – with each formal bilateral partner, in order to substantiate the relationship. While ASEAN has been experienced in finding shared ground in a diversity of views and interests, new external partners may yet to be socialized in this form of decision-making process. Another concern is how to manage meetings, consultations, and activities with the new partners, on top of the already hundreds of meetings that ASEAN is conducting among its Members States and with its existing partners. This is among the reasons why ASEAN for the past two decades has imposed a moratorium on the establishment of new Dialogue Partnerships. Also, at the same time, there is a need to ensure that ASEAN's partnership with an external party is not only nominal, but is effectively utilized to support ASEAN objectives.

*Engaging the world*

Engaging different countries, whether big or small, has been a hallmark of ASEAN in its 50 years of existence. The interest of more countries to connect with ASEAN through Dialogue Partnerships or Sectoral Dialogue Partnerships should be welcomed as it is a recognition of ASEAN's relevance in the global stage. As ASEAN becomes a more dynamic and prosperous community, it may also be time to explore formal relations not only with developed countries but also with developing ones.

While procedural and logistical concerns are valid, these should not prevent ASEAN from pursuing relations with more external parties. ASEAN Member States should strengthen the ASEAN Secretariat, and enhance the ASEAN national secretariats in each capital, to effectively coordinate and manage ASEAN's growing external relations. ASEAN should also look beyond the number of high-profile meetings and declarations as the gauge of a successful relationship with an external partner, but instead look into how these translate to more tangible outcomes that benefit the people. Finally, ASEAN should utilize its external relations to socialize other countries to the same norms and principles toward an inclusive, open, and rules-based region. ASEAN's external relations is therefore not about the quantity of partnerships created, but on how these partnerships contribute to ASEAN Community-building, and to regional and global stability. 🌸

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