

INTRODUCING THE ISSUE

ASEAN – 2017 RECORD AND CHALLENGES OF REGIONALISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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The collection of articles on the fifty year history, the current state and the future prospects of regionalism in Southeast Asia (SEA) published in this issue of „International Trends“, was prepared by a group of Russian experts working at or closely with the ASEAN Centre at MGIMO University. Since June 2010, when it was officially inaugurated, the Center has not only been spreading information about different aspects of the cooperation between Russia and ASEAN, but has also been involved in this cooperation as an active participant. Together with its partners within ASEAN, it has initiated projects aimed at stimulating dialogue regarding issues of policy and security, at an expansion of trade, economic and humanitarian ties between our peoples. Each step along this way – be it joint conferences and workshops, presentations by Russian companies successfully operating in one of the member-states of the Association, or the staging of a Russian-ASEAN youth forum – leads to an expansion of the circle of the Center's friends in Russia as well as abroad. There is also a deepening understanding of how ASEAN actually works, and of the motives guiding it towards a partnership with Russia.

As fate would have it, the Association's 50th anniversary coincides with a critical moment in international relations, when ASEAN's achievements are as clearly visible as the new issues it is confronted with head-on, as they say. In virtually all articles of the “ASEAN collection” commended to the attention of the journal's readers both subjects are present in differing proportions. As to the article at hand, both subjects are equally central to it.

Abstract

On August, 8th, 2017 the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) turned 50. Five decades ago on that day the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines and the Vice-Premier of Malaysia signed the Bangkok Declaration thus establishing ASEAN. In so doing, the Association's founding fathers were longing to mitigate mutual contradictions and conflicts (including territorial ones) for the sake of one common goal – repelling the ‘communist threat’ emanating from within the then ASEAN member states as well as from neighbouring Indochina and China. It was hard to imagine at that time that in the early 21st century the People's Republic of China would head the list of key trade and investment partners of ASEAN; that ASEAN would embrace Vietnam as its member and that the Association itself would turn to be a model of regional cooperation for developing countries. ASEAN's achievements are evident, though they did not come easily. Internal problems in certain Member States and transnational challenges complicated intra-ASEAN interaction. ASEAN countries had to resist external pressure, too. That only emphasizes the fact that the ASEAN phenomenon is not the result of a happy coincidence. Rather, ASEAN success stems from well-thought-out and coherent efforts. This article, thus,

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analyses the Association's achievements in overcoming intra-regional cleavages, then it talks about challenges ASEAN is facing today and ends up with a brief assessment of strategic goals common to both ASEAN and Russia. The article argues that cooperation in achieving these goals could help the dialogue partners to find a common response to numerous global and regional challenges.

Keywords:

ASEAN; ASEAN-Russia; dialogue partnership; Asia-Pacific; ASEAN Way.

The eighth of August 2017 is the day on which 50 years ago four Ministers of Foreign Affairs – Adam Malik (Indonesia), Sinnathamby Rajaratnam (Singapore), Thanat Khoman (Thailand), Narciso Ramos (Philippines) – and the then Vice-Premier of Malaysia, Tun Abdul Razak, signed the Bangkok Declaration which created the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Did they muse on the foreseeable future of their brainchild? Even if they did, it is hardly likely that anyone of them could have imagined what path the Association would follow in its development and what it would be come five decades later. While negotiating ASEAN's creation, the founding fathers were mostly concerned about how to mitigate their mutual contradictions and conflicts (including territorial ones) for the sake of achieving the primary common goal – to repel the 'communist threat' emanating from both internal and external sources, especially from neighbouring territories that were in the throes of the everlasting Indochina war and, certainly, from 'Red China' where the rhetoric of the 'cultural revolution' resounded. Who could have fancied then that in the early 21st century China would top the list of the Association's key trade and investment partners and ASEAN would 'embrace' united, socialist Vietnam, increase the number of its members to ten and would be generally considered to be a model of regional cooperation for developing countries?

Although the achievements of ASEAN and its members are unquestionable, they did not come easily. Intra-ASEAN interaction was hampered by internal problems in certain member states and transnational systemic challenges in a number of them simultaneously (as was the case with the Asian financial crisis at the turn of the century). ASEAN members had to resist concerted external pressure as well

(for instance, when the USA and the EU did not want to accept that ASEAN admitted Myanmar that was in the grip of a military regime). Thus, it becomes even more obvious that the ASEAN phenomenon is not the result of a happy coincidence, but rather ASEAN's success stems from measured and coherent efforts, which makes it even more valuable.

1

At the time when ASEAN was established, each country of the ASEAN-5 had more than enough unresolved problems in nation-building, or, if you will, nation-state integration. As regards regional integration (that implies, strictly speaking, the establishment of supranational institutions), even in the best-case scenario it seemed unlikely to take place in the near future. Through their union the five neighbouring countries of Southeast Asia sought to compensate for each other's weaknesses, including lack of managerial experience that was only to be expected in the context of newly declared independence. They longed to acquire, in their circle, the feeling of safety and historical perspective that they needed so much at the height of the Cold War.

What also worked to that end was the benevolence of Western countries that were virtually interested in a multinational union in the Asian Southeast, whose members would make a choice in favour of capitalism and resistance against 'red expansion'.

It appears that, from the very beginning, ASEAN's activities presupposed a more or less synchronous strengthening of nation-states, of their cooperation at the regional level and the system of their global ties, with priority given to nation-state integration.

At the early stages of the Association's existence, ASEAN's members 'carved out' some subregional space within Southeast Asia segregated from the 'troubled' zone of Indochina.

Joint efforts made it possible to ensure there was such a degree of top-level political control and stability and such a quality of government regulation of economic life that they, coupled with a steady inflow of foreign investment, gave a significant boost to socio-economic modernisation. Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, following Singapore, had the honour of being numbered among newly industrialised economies. Each of them (and the Philippines, too) experienced moments when the annual rate of economic growth exceeded eight per cent. This success story left a proper impression on the ruling circles of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, disposed them towards their own market reforms, towards a political dialogue with ASEAN for a speedy settlement of the conflict in Indochina and ultimately towards accession to the Association.

2

In the early 1990s the prevailing opinion was that a real rapprochement between former adversaries would require a whole historical era. Yet, the reality proved to be different: ASEAN as a union of ten Southeast Asian countries came into being before the turn of the century.

The parallel process of the EU's expansion was under way, and its differences from ASEAN's expansion are very instructive. In the EU's case, the candidates for membership representing post-communist East Europe were offered a long list of requirements that they had to meet in order to get the EU's 'admission ticket', while the ASEAN founders showed a far greater loyalty to the Indochinese candidates. When ASEAN admitted Vietnam as its member in 1995, nobody pressed it to abandon its 'fallacious' ideology and dismantle its power system built around the Communist Party. They were satisfied with the fact that the revival of market relations was in progress in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Vietnamese economy had already begun to transform within the framework of the 'renovation policy' (*Doi Moi*). Today, when this course has allowed Vietnam to join the ranks of the countries with the middle level of development and turned it into one of ASEAN's solid pillars, and when similar processes are gaining mo-

mentum in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, one cannot but praise the Association's founders (plus Brunei that joined the ASEAN-5 as far back as 1984) for their magnanimity and note that the wise and respectful attitude to their former opponents that later became 'members of the family' was natural to them. In fact, the Association's members themselves always searched for a common view on various regional and global challenges on the basis of the principles of non-interference in each other's internal affairs, absolute respect for national sovereignty and consensus in decision-making. The political and diplomatic practice, for many years already known as the 'ASEAN Way', has the following constituents: soft manner of negotiation; patient readiness 'to go slower in order to get farther'; no haughty moralizing and imposition of one's own point of view on anyone; search for such a pace of progress towards a desired goal that would be optimal for all the participants in the process; care for both one's personal and the other's reputation. By the standards of four Indochinese states that endured so many hardships in the period of bipolar confrontation and needed more than hardly anybody else a comfortable niche in the foreign-policy arena, ASEAN was appealing not only due to the economic success enjoyed by its members but also owing to the social conventions adopted by them.

3

In the waning 20th century the following processes overlapped: ASEAN expansion, diversification of its foreign relations and strengthening of its moral and political prestige, this time at the level of the entire Asia-Pacific region.

As early as the 1970s, ASEAN – driven by both geopolitical and geo-economic considerations – began to establish the so-called dialogue partnerships with outer-regional (in relation to Southeast Asia) powers. While in the Cold War period they were the USA, Japan and other representatives of the Western bloc, in the 1990s they were joined by Russia, China and India.

During the formation stage and institutionalisation of that system of relations, the groundwork was being laid for enshrining the

principle of ‘ASEAN Centrality’ in multilateral initiatives aimed at deepening economic cooperation and maintaining peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region. According to this principle, the Association, which did not threaten anyone and had no military strength to coerce anyone into doing anything, gained the right to establish the agenda and to coordinate activities of relevant bodies. The recognition of ASEAN’s centrality in macro-regional affairs made it possible, in particular, to establish the forum of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), which has been around for more than 25 years. Later on, the same principle formed the basis for the work of the ASEAN Regional Forum on Security (ARF; 1994), East Asia Summit (EAS; 2005) and ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting engaging the Association and its eight dialogue partners (ADMM-Plus; 2010). A significant portion of the expert community perceived the creation of those three multilateral dialogue platforms as a sign of a drift towards a ‘new security architecture’ that could take shape within the Asia-Pacific region in the foreseeable future.

ASEAN envisaged that another ‘ASEAN-centric’ structure – the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) – should become the economic foundation for the system. According to the blueprint announced in 2012, ASEAN was to align its own free trade area (AFTA) with five other similar areas that it had either already established or agreed to establish together with China, Japan, South Korea, India, as well as Australia and New Zealand (ASEAN signed a general agreement with the last two). The process was expected to finish by the end of 2015, but the question concerning the RCEP launch date remains open so far.

Anyhow, the eve of ASEAN’s 50th anniversary was marked by such a milestone event as the formal establishment of the triune ASEAN Community (2015) with its dedicated divisions focused on cooperation in such fields as politics and security, economy and socio-cultural development. From now on, investment and production, supply of goods and services, movement of labour and other issues are regulated within ASEAN by uniform rules.

Meanwhile, the demographic and business potential of the Association’s member states continues to grow: their combined population has well exceeded 600 million people, and their cumulative GDP is nearing three trillion dollars in the second half of this decade. If economic statistics treated the ten ASEAN members as a single entity, with this indicator it would rank sixth in the world. ASEAN’s contribution to maintaining economic dynamism in the Asia-Pacific region – as well as to a multilateral dialogue on security in that part of the world – is incontestable. Given the specific nature of the Asia-Pacific as a region with a pronounced global dimension, it would be justified to regard ASEAN both as a regional and global player and, therefore, as a candidate for an independent role in the emerging multipolar world.

There are signs, however, that on the cusp of the 50th anniversary, the Association and its members are faced with unexpected and alarming challenges.

4

If we compare the situation unfolding in the Asia-Pacific region in the latter half of the 2010s with the events and processes happening at the same time in the Middle East or North Africa, it seems that there are no two ways about it. The Asia-Pacific region – to where, according to the widespread notion, the ‘centre of gravity’ of global economy is shifting – seems to fare far better in general.

Nevertheless, there are grounds for concern; and they have been multiplying over the past few years. In their discussion of the essence and direction of the changes, experts and diplomats often use the formula of ‘Asian paradox’. They imply that though the economic conjuncture is basically favourable in the Asia-Pacific region and in particular the ASEAN zone (where the GDP growth rate in Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia and Laos is fluctuating within the range of five to eight per cent and even higher in the middle of this decade), there are signs of a systemic increase in political tensions in the Asia-Pacific zone. Tensions can also be perceived in the domestic affairs of some countries, and they

are not the most backward countries; in bilateral relations between them; within regional subsystems; and, finally, at the level of the entire Asia-Pacific region.

Examples are plentiful. The following processes are crystal clear in interstate relations (with which we mostly deal in this article): steadily sharpening contradictions between the USA and China and a dramatic deterioration in Russian-American cooperation. Within the North Asian triangle of Japan–China–South Korea a tenacious debate erupts between any two of them both on current and historical issues at the slightest provocation. The animosity between two Koreas continues unabated. Mutual distrust between Beijing and Delhi is on the rise, rather than on the wane. In the Greater Mekong basin a few Southeast Asian countries seem willing to reach an agreement between themselves and with China, but fail to do so, on an acceptable (from the ecological point of view) scale and form of water resource development. The multilateral dispute over ownership of the islands in the South China Sea (which before the early 1990s was only interesting to dedicated specialists) becomes – to a large extent through Washington's efforts – a matter of universal concern and a potential trigger for a very serious conflict. And there is also such a challenge as the rise of religiously motivated radicalism in traditionally Islamic countries and, consequently, the escalation of cross-border terrorist threats.

What does it all signify? In the first place, it means that the political climate in the Asia-Pacific region is changing and not for the better, which blurs the prospects of a further gradual movement along the path of economic development, growing commodity exchanges, search for optimal lines and forms of regional economic integration.

It is characteristic that neither the intentions, voiced on multiple occasions against that background, to ‘reset’ APEC, nor the attempts to boost integration processes through alternative initiatives along the lines of the RCEP and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (which was so enthusiastically advanced by the USA under Barack Obama and so flatly rejected by Donald Trump’s administration)

have produced any tangible results. Being a reminder of the indissoluble ties which bind policy and economy in the Asia-Pacific as a region of global significance, those factors – coupled with ‘*Brexit*’ and sharp disagreements within the EU that come to light – are indicative of a ‘global crisis’ of regionalism as such. And they also reflect a crisis of the neo-liberal model of globalisation that the USA has been trying to impose on other countries since the late 20th century and that instead of global unity produces its direct opposite in the shape of a plethora of cleavages between ethnic groups, religious groups, states and civilisations. The requital for that policy is its frustrating consequences that the USA itself faces: judging by the results of the 2016 presidential elections and by the bitter internal political confrontation that followed in the first half of 2017, it undermines the foundations of its own might. And it happens at a time when China continues to strengthen its competitive positions in global economy, despite America’s attempts to put it at odds with the rest of Asia; when Russia looks for and finds asymmetrical responses to the sanctions imposed on it by the USA and the EU, rather than ‘confessing its sins in public’; when transatlantic solidarity grows weaker; and when the phase of an evolutionary, step-by-step shift towards the multipolar world gives place to the phase of an open fight between its opponents and adherents.

The time has come for ASEAN and its members to face the moment of truth, the meanings and requirements of which have not been realised yet by everybody and to an adequate degree. It is the time to say goodbye to the illusions that the epoch when humankind faced the threat of major wars allegedly sank into oblivion with the end of the Soviet-American confrontation; and that the guarantee of everlasting peace is general economic interdependence that would be created through globalisation and would make fighting wars detrimental to those who fight. It is the time when American-style globalisation looks less and less like a process which it is possible and necessary to join with the maximum benefit to oneself (what ASEAN members had managed to do more or less successfully until recently).

It is the time when the intensity of the Sino-American confrontation makes it questionable whether economic integration on a region-wide scale and a comprehensive security system, worthy of this name, would be possible in the Asia-Pacific region in the foreseeable future. But if the future of the two is problematic, where would ASEAN's Centrality be implemented and how can it be, in effect, retained? Does the 'ASEAN Way', as a mode of behaviour in foreign policy, have any future at all, if the 'only superpower' continues to respect no rules both in Asia and on the global field?

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Viewing these problems from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan, Vladivostok or any other 'observation point' in the Russian territory, it is hard not to notice that today both ASEAN and Russia face challenges of a truly existential nature. What, in this case, should constitute the substance of the Russia-ASEAN partnership? Apparently, it should be planning, harmonisation and joint implementation of such programmes and projects that collectively would serve the vital – national, regional and global – interests of each partner, in the sense that can be grasped only on sharp bends in history, and would consolidate their positions as subjects of history. To cut it short, Russia and ASEAN should give a common and reasonably affirmative answer to Hamlet's well-known question.

Do the partners have political will that is required to bring their relations to an appropriate level? If they didn't have it, the leaders of the ten countries would not have come to the summit held in Sochi in May 2016 and dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the Russia-

ASEAN dialogue; this step alone showed that they were not going to toe the Western line of unfair and stifling sanctions.

Do Russia and ASEAN have similar strategic goals? We daresay they do, though they do not speak about them openly yet. It suffices that in practice each of the dialogue partners is orientated to an independent role in the emerging multipolar world. Each of them regards the other one as a candidate worthy of this role and deserving support in its aspirations. ASEAN would only lose if Russia, which is now in the vanguard of the struggle for a multipolar world, has a breakdown in this struggle. It is by no means in the interests of Russia, which is represented at multilateral forums of the Asia-Pacific region largely owing to its partnership with ASEAN and the Association's 'centrality' in the region, if this role erodes into nothingness.

Are ASEAN members and Russia able – through joint efforts with other adherents of the multipolar world – to find such a globalisation model that would have an edge over the neo-liberal one? Anyway, the idea – which was also actively discussed at the Sochi summit – of an economic dialogue and then of practical cooperation in the EAEU–SCO–ASEAN format paves the way for a productive search to that end.

As for providing political conditions in which to bring such an ambitious project to life, in this respect Russia with its unique expertise in counterterrorism and a military industrial complex that has well-known production and technological capacities is capable of offering all-round effective support to its integration partners in Big Eurasia, among them, naturally, ASEAN member states.