

The modern miracle that is Asean

The regional grouping is a strategic umbrella for Singapore that Mr Lee Kuan Yew laboured for



BY
INVITATION

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LIKE all great men, Mr Lee Kuan Yew left behind many legacies.

Some are obvious. The transformation of Singapore from Third World to First World is one of them. So, too, is the strong multiracial and multicultural fabric of Singapore.

But some of his legacies are not so obvious. They will be uncovered over time. One such legacy will be Asean.

Sadly, even though Singaporeans benefit greatly from the strategic “umbrella” that Asean provides for Singapore, few in Singapore are aware how remarkable Asean is. Even fewer know that Asean is the result of the work of a few remarkable men, including Mr Lee.

This is one reason why my next book will be on Asean. Singaporeans and the world need to understand this remarkable organisation better.

To describe Asean succinctly, let me assert that Asean is a living and breathing modern miracle.

Why do I say this?

After World War II, many regions launched regional organisations. Many of them failed or barely stayed alive. Amazingly, even some initiatives launched by the Europeans have failed.

For example, the much-vaunted Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe failed to prevent war in the Balkans and in Ukraine.

Other organisations, like the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Sarc) sputter on.

There are only two really successful regional organisations – the European Union (EU) and Asean. The most successful is the EU and it remains so despite the recent problems with the euro. Its economic achievements are spectacular but its security achievements are far more spectacular.

Today, there are not just zero wars between any two EU member states. There is zero prospect of war. This is the highest civilisational achievement any organisation can have.

Asean has not yet achieved zero prospect of war between its member states. But it is moving solidly in that direction. And in some respects, Asean’s success in preventing war is more remarkable because it is a far more diverse region than Europe. Virtually every major culture and civilisation can be found within the Asean fabric. By contrast, the EU remains a mono-civilisational Christian club. Indeed, South-east Asia was described as the Balkans of Asia.

When the Cold War ended, it



Indonesia's President Suharto welcoming Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew at the Jakarta airport in 1982. Despite being a strongman domestically, Mr Suharto took a laidback approach towards Asean and allowed its smaller members to exercise leadership within the group – partly because he came to trust his fellow Asean leaders, especially Mr Lee.

would have been more natural to have wars in the Balkans of Asia than in the Balkans of Europe. Instead, the opposite happened. War broke out in Yugoslavia.

Why?

As I outline in a chapter on “the Asean ecosystem of peace” in my forthcoming book, many factors led to this extraordinary peace. One of these key factors was leadership, especially the leadership provided by Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

Support from Indonesia

THROUGH his links with key capitals, especially those of Washington DC and Beijing, Tokyo and Brussels, Mr Lee was able to rally great power support for the fledgling Asean experiment in the 1970s and 1980s.

However, what truly solidified Asean was the extraordinary relationship he developed with President Suharto of Indonesia.

Indonesia’s role was critical. As the largest member of Asean – its population came up to 40 per cent of Asean’s total population – Indonesia could have easily stifled Asean’s growth.

Indeed, one reason why OAS and Sarc failed is that their largest members, the US and India respectively, were too dominant and prevented real cooperation.

By contrast, President Suharto was remarkably wise and benign in his attitude towards Asean. Even though he was a strongman

ruler domestically, he took a laid-back approach towards Asean and allowed the smaller members, including Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand to exercise leadership within the group.

One reason why President Suharto did so is that he came to trust his fellow Asean leaders, especially Mr Lee. The friendship and trust that developed between President Suharto and Mr Lee was a remarkable achievement as their cultural perspectives and world views could not have been more different.

President Suharto saw the world through traditional Javanese cultural lenses. By contrast, Mr Lee, in addition to his Chinese and Peranakan roots, had adopted many Anglo-Saxon perspectives on how to create a well-ordered universe. Hence, when Mr Suharto and Mr Lee met, there could have been a real clash of civilisations. Instead, there was remarkable harmony.

Ambassador Barry Desker was a first-hand observer of this extraordinary relationship. He has described well in these pages their relations on managing Asean.

He wrote in an article, titled *Lee Kuan Yew And Suharto: Friends Till The End*, published in *The Straits Times* on April 8: “While Mr Suharto did not throw his weight around, he was the most influential leader within Asean. Mr Lee respected Mr Suharto because he was consistent and provided space for each

Asean state to develop in its own way. In this, Mr Suharto practised the Javanese dictum, *mikul dhuwur, mendhem jero* (“to look for the best in others and to forgive the trespasses of those whom we respect”).”

Mr Desker added that they were also good at managing differences. He wrote: “On several occasions, Mr Lee mentioned that Mr Suharto had never reneged on a commitment, even if it was politically difficult. It meant that Mr Lee was aware of the limits of Indonesia’s willingness to agree to proposals from Singapore.”

President Suharto’s objections led to the derailing of proposals for an Asean free trade area at the first Asean Summit in 1976 but his support facilitated the declaration at the fourth Asean Summit held in Singapore in 1992 that an Asean Free Trade Area (Afta) would be established within 15 years.”

In short, a key reason why Asean succeeded is that Mr Lee made an extraordinary effort to understand and work with President Suharto.

I have been told, for example, that Mr Lee would ask the Singapore Embassy in Jakarta to send him tape recordings of President Suharto’s speeches.

He would listen patiently to Mr Suharto’s speeches to understand his world view better and also to understand the language he used. There are few world leaders who could have replicated this pa-



Mr S. Rajaratnam (right), then Singapore's Foreign Minister, at the historic 1967 Bangkok meeting, which saw the founding of Asean. With him are envoys (from left) Narciso Ramos from the Philippines, Adam Malik from Indonesia, Thanat Khoman from Thailand and Tun Abdul Razak from Malaysia. ST FILE PHOTOS

If Asean were to disappear overnight, Singaporeans would wake up to discover that they lived in a region of greater uncertainty. One key reason why Singapore’s economy is thriving is that we are in the epicentre of a relatively peaceful and increasingly prosperous region.

tience and dedication that Mr Lee showed towards maintaining and strengthening a key relationship.

Let me therefore assert very bluntly that if Mr Lee had not developed his extraordinary relationship with President Suharto, Asean would not have succeeded as well as it did.

This is why I urge my fellow Singaporeans to heed the point that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made at the 26th Asean Summit in April on the elder Mr Lee’s role in Asean.

PM Lee said: “He, together with other pioneering Asean leaders, including pioneering (Malaysian Prime Minister) Tun Abdul Razak, worked hard to make Asean a success. They fostered peace and stability, and set us on a path of regional integration. It is incumbent on us to build on their legacy.”

Building on Asean legacy

PM LEE’S last remark is key: “It is incumbent on us to build on their legacy.”

We should do so out of respect for the legacy of Mr Lee Kuan Yew. But we should also do so because it is in the national interest of Singapore to do so. Why?

If Asean were to disappear overnight, Singaporeans would wake up to discover that they lived in a region of greater uncertainty.

One key reason why Singapore’s economy is thriving is that we are in the epicentre of a

relatively peaceful and increasingly prosperous region. Without Asean, we may find ourselves having to deal with continuing difficult relationships between neighbours, like those between Iran and Saudi Arabia, India and Pakistan, China and Japan, South Korea and Japan – I could go on and on with such a list.

Why do we now not have dysfunctional bilateral relationships between any two South-east Asian states? The simple, correct answer is Asean.

Despite Asean’s amazing success against all odds, it is fashionable for some Western scholars to rubbish the achievements of Asean.

Western ignorance of Asia is not surprising. What is truly surprising is to see some Asians, including Singaporeans, join these Western scholars in rubbing Asean.

In so doing, they are sadly shooting holes into one of the greatest legacies that Mr Lee has left behind.

It took decades of extraordinary hard work on his part to build this strategic umbrella for Singapore.

Let us try to strengthen the fabric of this umbrella, not shoot holes in it, for our national interest, and if we want to respect the legacy of Mr Lee.

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