



## Op-Ed Series

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# ASEAN Member States: So Close, Yet So Far Away From Each Other

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Despite having a shared geographical location in Southeast Asia along with the fact that countries in this region share much or less similar cultures, the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have been steadfastly trying to enhance their diplomatic relations. With the current goals of accelerating economic growth, social progress, cultural development, promoting regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law among countries in the region, the ASEAN states still cannot come together from the core but rather seem to be tied together by mutual economic benefits, the rapidly changing strategic environment around their peripheries, and the obligation to regional order and peace. Although ASEAN member states' relations seem to improve over time, both ASEAN's government-to-government relations and people-to-people connectivity might not be as close as they seem.

Looking at the ASEAN's state-to-state relations, differences of political interests and previous border disputes among the ASEAN countries are the two major contributors to dissatisfaction among the ASEAN member states.

Geographically, ASEAN is divided into two important groups: the mainland ASEAN and the maritime ASEAN. This geographical distinction has differently shaped the interest among the ASEAN member states. For instance, the mainland Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia are highly concerned about China's activities in the Mekong region, whereas Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines are more worried about China's behavior in the South China Sea. Vietnam, however, is an exception in this case as Vietnam has stakes in both the Mekong River and the South China Sea.

The division of the concerning interests such that in the matter of the South China Sea and the Mekong River issues could cause the members of ASEAN to feel disconnected to each other and turned the pursuit of a 'close intra-ASEAN relation' into a far-fetched dream. Although the concerning

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actor of these two issues is China, ASEAN still could not confront China collectively as they seem [to remain silent](#) and try to not get involved in any disputes that they are not a part of. This behavior among the ASEAN member states could be the reason that causes them to feel less connected to each other as they could not help to solve each other's problems when needed.



ASEAN Member States Flags. Photo: AFP

Border dispute among the ASEAN member states is also another critical challenge to their relations. The conflicts caused by border disputes do not only challenge the relations of the conflicting states but to ASEAN as a whole. Even if the creation of ASEAN has lessened the number of border conflicts among its members, the dispute existed even before the 21st century could have pre-determined the aftermath of the ASEAN members' relations until today. As sovereignty is one of the most important values embedded in the heart of the ASEAN member states, being violated by others on the matter of territorial sovereignty is something that the states in ASEAN could not tolerate.

For instance, in 1991, the case of a territorial dispute between Indonesia and Malaysia over the islands of [Pulau Sipadan and Pulau Ligitan](#) was escalated until 2002 when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) concluded that the Island belonged to Malaysia. Both the government of Indonesia and the government of Malaysia jointly notified the ICJ in 1998 about the dispute and suggested many pieces of evidence to support their claims. Another dispute that should be noticed is the maritime dispute between Malaysia and Singapore over the three maritime features of Pedra Branca/Batu Puteh, Middle Rocks, and South Ledge. This dispute was settled by the ICJ only in 2008 after a long period of conflict between the two took place since the 1980s. In addition to that, other ASEAN member states including Cambodia and Thailand, and Vietnam have had disputes over the border and maritime disputes as well. Likewise in 2008, Cambodia and Thailand fell into a border conflict that escalated into an armed clash between

the Cambodian army and the Thai army which soured the relations between these two. In this case, not only that Cambodia and Thailand's relations are at stake, but the unity of ASEAN could also be determined by how the other ASEAN states respond to the conflict of other states. The disputes that existed before and in the early 2000s could be the factor that skepticizes the ASEAN members and challenges ASEAN's closeness.

There is more complexity in the people-to-people connectivity compared to that of the government level of interaction. Many reasons make the ASEAN people-to-people relations very challenging including, the deeply embedded national identity, historical legacy, and the level of human development.

Although one of the ASEAN goals is to establish a regional identity, the pursuit of creating a regional identity is very challenging, at least for the time being, as the national identity of the ASEAN individual states still remains important to the citizens of each ASEAN country. With the history of being under the colonization of Western powers, national identity was a force that helped to create the sense of nationalism that, historically, had help the ASEAN members (except Thailand) to free themselves from foreign's power and exploitation. It can be seen that the sense of national identity also caused the people to quarrel over the issues of culture, cuisine, music, and ancient heritages. For example, Indonesian and Malaysian are often seen having conflict on the issue of their shared culture and language. The complexity of the history between these two countries and its geopolitics cause the population of these two nations to adopt each other's culture. The adaptation, later on, causes the people of these two countries to argue and to show resentment toward each other just like in the case of Indonesian's claim to be the true owner of [Batik](#) (Batik Fabric) and Malaysia is the adopter of Batik. In 2007, the Indonesian protested in front of the Malaysian Embassy in Jakarta when the Malaysian government used a folk tune titled '[Rasa Sayang](#)' as an oversea tourism campaign. The protest was to claim that that folk song belongs to Indonesia.

This cultural quarrel also happened between Cambodians and Thais. Given an example, in 2003, a Thai movie star known as '[Morning Star](#)' said that Angkor Wat belongs to the Thai people that caused a protest at the Royal Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh and the protesters also tried to burn the Thai embassy down as well. The sentiment was so strong that the Cambodian people also boycotted on Thai products, and stopped watching Thai movies despite the denial of such a statement from the Thai movie star.

Because of this, the shared culture of the ASEAN countries sometimes does not seem to unite those countries that shared similar cultures but instead, those similarities tend to fall as a victim of the start of conflicts among those countries as each nation tries to claim their righteousness ownership. This sentiment by the earlier generation could be passed to the younger generation which could create a favorable environment for the later generation to have prejudice over one another.

The legacy of history could also further divide the people of ASEAN. Looking at the history of Southeast Asia, the formation of states was through war and conquering each other (Khmer Empire, Siam, Dai Viet, Champa). As the practice of conquering also stresses on the winning and losing as well as the rising and falling of the empires, the populations of the nations that evolve from those empires tend to be attached to their past victory and defeat that could have been creating the sense of sentiments toward each other.

Last but not least, the level of human development could also be the reason that disconnects the relationship among the people of ASEAN. Unskilled labor of an ASEAN nation that flows into another ASEAN nation could be discriminated by the nationals of the host country as they are employed to work in any field that requires less sophisticated skills like working on the fishing boats. This could create prejudice and stigma on the population where the unskilled labor comes from. The thoughts and prejudice then could also lead to racial discrimination that is a barrier to bringing people of the ASEAN countries close together.

In conclusion, although ASEAN has been trying to strengthen their relations together both at the government level and people to people level, there are still obstacles to overcome. In the meantime, it could be seen that in terms of the state-to-state relations, the differences of interest and previous border disputes drew the line between the relations of ASEAN while national identity, historical legacy, and the level of human development are the factors that stand in the way of people-to-people connectivity. In order to create a unified ASEAN, the first step ASEAN, especially the least developing states could do is to develop themselves socially and economically to catch up with other ASEAN friends. As the developments of the ASEAN states stand at the same level, it could be easier for ASEAN to figure their common goals and common grounds to work together which would help to narrow the differences of interest that are caused by the development gaps as well.

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