

Reinventing
ASEAN

The circular graphic contains the following text: Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Brunei.

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Tables</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Contributors</i>	xiii
I. THE CONTEXT FOR CHANGE	1
1. The Relevance of ASEAN: Crisis and Change <i>Simon S. C. Tay and Jesus P. Estanislao</i>	3
2. ASEAN's Past and the Challenges Ahead: Aspects of Politics and Security <i>Jusuf Wanandi</i>	25
3. ASEAN in the Past Thirty-Three Years: Lessons for Economic Co-operation <i>Narongchai Akrasanee</i>	35
II. CHALLENGES TO CO-OPERATION	43
4. Trade, Investment, and Interdependence <i>Mohamed Ariff</i>	45
5. Southeast Asia: Development, Finance, and Trade <i>Jesus P. Estanislao</i>	67
6. Challenges for Society and Politics <i>Carolina G. Hernandez</i>	103
7. ASEAN in the Age of Globalization and Information <i>Chia Siow Yue</i>	121
8. New Security Issues and Their Impact on ASEAN <i>Kusuma Snitwongse and Suchit Bunbongkarn</i>	148

9. The Greater Mekong Subregion: An ASEAN Issue <i>Kao Kim Hourn and Sisowath D. Chanto</i>	163
III. FUTURE NEEDS	183
10. Expectations and Experiences of the New Members: A Vietnamese Perspective <i>Nguyen Phuong Binh and Luan Thuy Duong</i>	185
11. ASEAN and East Asia: A New Regionalism? <i>Simon S. C. Tay</i>	206
12. Towards an East Asian Regional Trading Arrangement <i>Hadi Soesastro</i>	226
13. Institutions and Processes: Dilemmas and Possibilities <i>Simon S. C. Tay</i>	243
14. ASEAN in 2030: The Long View <i>Hadi Soesastro</i>	273
<i>Selected Bibliography and References</i>	311

THE RELEVANCE OF ASEAN Crisis and Change

Simon S. C. Tay and Jesus P. Estanislao

INTRODUCTION: CRISIS AND CHANGE

Crisis and changing times challenge our fixed ideas and our institutions. Few institutions die, but many may lose their relevance and limp on, with less urgency, importance, and credibility. On the other hand, it is also possible that, when faced with crisis, some institutions are able to change and reinvent themselves. If so, they may secure a new mission, relevance, and energy.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has not died in the crisis that swept the region from mid-1997. There is little doubt, however, that its credibility has been dented. The crisis affected the economies of all the ASEAN members and many more in Asia. A sense of doom and gloom prevailed. The Association was criticized for being unable to effectively address the financial crisis. The "miracle" was over, and some feared there would be a lost decade for the region.

The economic crisis was not the only point of criticism. A second concern was the Indonesian forest fires in 1997 and 1998 that blanketed the region with haze pollution. This was a literal and symbolic pall over the countries. In this environmental crisis too, ASEAN seemed ineffective. A third criticism of ASEAN concerned East Timor and the inability of ASEAN and its members to take a firm and united stand in dealing with the humanitarian and security crisis that arose after the vote for independence from Indonesia. A fourth ground for criticism of ASEAN was with regard to