

After 50 years of Asean, why are we behind?

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First, a few lines on Da Nang.

Da Nang is the second Vietnamese city to host the recently concluded Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit. It is Vietnam's third-largest city, after Ho Chi Minh to the south, and Hanoi up north.

During the Vietnam War, the first US combat troops to arrive in South Vietnam in March 1965 were some 2,000 Marines of the 9th US Marine Expeditionary Force. They landed at Da Nang. In his book "Vietnam," Stanley Karnow reported that the Marines "in full battle regalia, splashed ashore at Da Nang, the first American combat troops to set foot on the Asian mainland since the end of the Korean conflict. They rushed onto the beach just as their fathers had stormed Pacific atolls during World War II—to be greeted by grinning Vietnamese girls distributing garlands of flowers and a poster proclaiming 'Welcome to the gallant Marines.'"

The deployment of the Marines was one of the crucial decisions of the war and signalled the beginning of an ever-increasing US combat involvement that would rise to more than half-a-million by the end of the conflict. Just 10 years after the Marines landed in Da Nang, North Vietnamese tanks entered Saigon bringing to an end the Republic of South Vietnam.

Last Friday, US President Donald Trump made his own landing at Da Nang International Airport. Most people forget that it was here that the Vietnam War escalated into a conflict resulting in the loss of 58,000 US lives and many more Vietnamese casualties including civilians. Incidentally, President Trump avoided the draft for the Vietnam War by receiving five deferments: four for academic reasons, and one for bone spurs in his heel.

Sen. John McCain, a Vietnam war vet, said: "We drafted the lowest income level of Americans, and the highest income level found the doctor that would say they had a bone spur."

This week, we mark the 50th founding anniversary of Asean. It was in 1967 that a declaration establishing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations was signed in Bangkok by ministers of five countries in the region, namely: Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik, Malaysian Defense Minister Tun Abdul Razak (father of Malaysia's current Prime Minister Najib Razak); Philippine Foreign Secretary Narciso Ramos

(father of former Philippine president Fidel Ramos); Singapore Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam, and Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman.

The five would be known as the Founding Fathers of Asean, and viewed the association as the expression of the “collective will of the nations of Southeast Asia to bind themselves together in friendship and cooperation...and secure for their people and for posterity the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity.”

In January 1984, Brunei Darussalam was admitted to Asean after gaining its independence from the United Kingdom. Vietnam became a member in July 1995 and in 1997, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and the Union of Myanmar were admitted to the association. Two years later in 1999, Cambodia became its 10th member. Cambodia’s entry was a historic milestone for Asean as it placed all 10 countries in the region under one umbrella “bound by friendship and solidarity.”

For better appreciation of Asean it should be mentioned that as early as 1950, the Philippines under President Elpidio Quirino sought to forge some form of unity among independent nations in the Asia-Pacific region. The initiative did not prosper.

In September 1954, the Philippines became a signatory to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (Seato), a collective security arrangement aimed at stopping the advance of communism in the region. However, the members had different strategic interests and priorities, making the organization ineffectual and Seato gradually withered away until it was dissolved in 1977.

In July 1961, the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) was founded with Thailand, the Philippines and the Federation of Malaya as members. It did not last long. For one thing, Indonesia was not included.

When Diosdado Macapagal was elected president, he pushed for the establishment of a vehicle that would achieve unity among the Malay people. At a summit meeting held in Manila in 1963, President Sukarno of Indonesia, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman of Malaya, and President Macapagal, agreed to form Maphilindo: “Ma” for Malaysia, “phil” for Philippines, and “indo” for Indonesia. The principle at the core of Maphilindo was that Asian problems should be solved by Asian nations in the Asian way. During a state visit to Indonesia in 1964, Macapagal explained that “the Asian way is *mushawarah*, the spirit of consultations among nations having problems with the friendly assistance of their neighbors in a determined effort to patch up the differences by bringing to bear the weight of brotherhood, neighborliness, and common interests.”

Unfortunately, as with ASA and other attempts at regional unity, Maphilindo did not survive. But they provided the seeds of goodwill and trust among Southeast Asian neighbors that made Asean possible.

Over the past five decades, much progress has been made by Asean although it has not always lived up to the vision of one community pursuing a common objective. A few

years back, during a foreign minister's meeting in Cambodia, then Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario found himself talking into a dead microphone as he was about to deliver a talk on Chinese activities in the South China Sea. So much for Asean brotherhood and solidarity. As with similar organizations, member nations have their own interests and priorities to defend.

As we mark Asean's 50th anniversary, the question we must ask ourselves is this: As one of the five Founding Fathers of Asean, why have we fallen behind Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia in terms of economic progress? It is very likely that Vietnam has already overtaken us. That leaves us on top of Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. And if we continue with our merry ways, pretty soon Cambodia may just pass us by.

Check out our Asean 2017 special site for important information and latest news on the 31st Asean Summit to be held in Manila on Nov. 13-15, 2017.

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