

BOOK REVIEW

The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace

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*The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace*¹ is a thought-provoking and informative book with some bold claims in favor of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As its name may suggest, the book attempts to honor ASEAN for its extraordinary achievements in facilitating and fostering regional and global peace, particularly peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region. The book discusses how ASEAN has provided a diplomatic platform, under the auspices of its many annual multilateral meetings, for regional and great powers and ASEAN members themselves to settle their issues and ease tensions through dialogues rather than the armed forces. Having acted as a critical catalyst for peace in Southeast Asia and in the larger Asia Pacific region as well as the world at large, the authors argue, ASEAN is certainly deserving of the Nobel Peace Prize.

The ASEAN Miracle begins with a 14-page Introduction which strives to explain why ASEAN is a “living and breathing modern miracle” (p. 1). On the one hand, ASEAN has defied growing widespread pessimism being felt throughout the globe, particularly in America and Europe, by offering a healthy dose of optimism and perfect examples of peaceful coexistence. Amidst global pessimistic views on almost everything from cultural value to economic development and geopolitical issues, ASEAN is providing hope to the rest of the world that a miracle can happen and that people can live peacefully with one another despite enormous diversity in terms of culture, ethnicity, and religion, to name a few. On the other hand, in spite of its many imperfections, ASEAN has arguably attained incredible success, since its inception in the 1960s, in bringing about durable peace and stability to the

¹ Mahbubani, K., and Sng, J. (2017) *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace*. Singapore: NUS Press. Pp. xvi + 264. ISBN 9 789814 722490.

region. It is therefore truly remarkable that ASEAN has transformed itself into ‘the world’s second-most successful regional organization’ (p. 6) after the European Union (EU).

Apart from the Introduction, *The ASEAN Miracle* is divided into six chapters. The first chapter is of historical nature and tries to explain why Southeast Asia today is a culturally and linguistically diverse region. To provide a clear understanding of this phenomenon, Mahbubani and Sng cite four cultural waves, namely the Indian, Chinese, Muslim, and Western waves, which have had profound cultural impact on the Southeast Asian region. The contact between India and Southeast Asia began 3,000 years ago and therefore the influence of the Indian cultural wave can now be seen in different forms from royal rituals in Thailand to the world’s largest religious monument, Angkor Wat, in Cambodia. Equally influential was the Chinese wave whose impact has been greater in ‘the political and economic realms’ (p. 25). The over 2,000-year history of contact between China and Southeast Asia has been mutually beneficial and their generally harmonious relations are likely to improve with the launching of China’s Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. Several centuries after the advent of the Chinese wave came the Muslim wave which began to gain general acceptance in the 12th or 13th century before reaching the peak of its influence in Southeast Asia in the 16th and 17th centuries. Evidence of the impact of the Muslim wave on Southeast Asia can be effortlessly found in modern Brunei and Indonesia. The last cultural wave which hit the region was the Western wave, arriving in Southeast Asia in the 16th century. The Portuguese were the first to bring Western influences to the region. Later were the Dutch, the Spanish, the British, the French and the American. According to the authors, the Western wave was rather violent compared to its predecessors. This wave, however, has left both positive and negative legacies to the region. In addition to its enormous contributions to the modernization of Southeast Asia, the Western influence has also succeeded in its conversion of the Philippines to Christianity.

Having discussed the four waves which contributed to the making of the culturally diverse Southeast Asian societies, the book explains, in Chapter 2, how ASEAN has developed an ecosystem of peace which has benefited many of its neighbours, dialogue partners, the region itself, and the wider Asia Pacific region. Five key factors explain this resilient ASEAN ecosystem of peace: the fear of communism, the role of strong leaders, geopolitical luck, market-oriented economic policies, and ASEAN-based regional networks. ASEAN was formed because of the overwhelming fear of communism which was later gaining ground in Indochina. This organization, however, was blessed with its outstanding leaders and great

diplomats such as Suharto of Indonesia, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia, and Siddhi Savetsila of Thailand, to mention a few. These leaders have great political wisdom which could bring ASEAN together amid many regional challenges. Geopolitical luck was another major factor contributing to the success of ASEAN. ASEAN fortunately sided with the US who later won the Cold War and with the US support this regional organization has established partnership and enjoyed good relations with many of the US's allies, including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and the EU. The last two factors which are of economic and diplomatic relevance have helped to accelerate ASEAN integration into the regional and global spheres, which in turn further enhances ASEAN's successful and peaceful development and spreads the ASEAN ecosystem of peace into the neighboring countries and regions. This chapter is one of the most informative and interesting sections of the book – providing a brief background of how ASEAN came into existence and how this organization has developed into a catalyst for peace in the region and the wider world.

The next chapter outlines ASEAN relations with five great powers, including America, China, the EU, India, and Japan. ASEAN relations with Russia are only briefly discussed in this book because their relationship lacks real substance and decisions in Russia tend to have 'little impact on Southeast Asia' (p. 80). ASEAN-Australia relations are not discussed in depth either because of Australia's status as a middle power, not a great power, although Australia is one of ASEAN's major dialogue partners. This section is without question of great significance to policy makers and readers of international relations because the authors attempt to provide a detailed description of the relations between ASEAN and the five great powers – examining challenges and opportunities arising from the partnerships and suggesting remedies for improving their relationships. This chapter suggests that the great powers develop a deeper knowledge and better understanding of ASEAN and Southeast Asia, help to strengthen ASEAN unity and cohesiveness, and critically reflect on their long-term interests vis-à-vis ASEAN, if they wish to benefit from the existence of ASEAN and their relations with this organization.

Chapter 4, entitled *Pen Sketches*, offers a brief yet excellent historical account of each ASEAN member state in alphabetical order. With their broad focus on each ASEAN country's recent history, Mahbubani and Sng provide readers with a fascinating insight into the character of the ten countries – pointing out their main achievements and challenges as a state and a fellow member of ASEAN. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the authors seem

to be fairly critical of Cambodia with regard to its close relations with China. They tactfully suggest that this small state play the geopolitical game more carefully and not to completely bandwagon with China at the expense of its ASEAN membership to remain useful to China. This suggestion has obviously taken the long-standing Cambodia-China relationship for granted. Of great significance in this chapter are the authors' strategic suggestions for each ASEAN country to improve its standing in ASEAN in particular and on the world stage in general.

A SWOT analysis of ASEAN is provided in Chapter 5. Unity in diversity or a sense of community is one of ASEAN's strengths. Through numerous meetings, ASEAN members have developed mutual trust and a sense of responsibility among themselves; this helps enhance ASEAN's centrality. Thus, ASEAN's main strengths lie in its resilient ecosystem of peace and its ability to offer a platform for the great powers to meet and solve disagreements. As for its weaknesses, ASEAN, unlike the EU, has no custodian whose responsibility is to keep this regional block going. ASEAN's other weak spots are its lack of strong institutions to monitor and ensure the implementation of its collective decisions and its citizens' lack of ownership of this regional block. Added to its weaknesses, ASEAN has three main threats. First is the power competition between the US and China in the Asia Pacific region, which could destabilize or destroy ASEAN. Second is the lack of strong leaders who are committed to tackling ASEAN challenges since many of them are heavily engaged in their domestic affairs. The third threat to ASEAN is its own vulnerability to internal and external conflicts. With the threats come opportunities. One of ASEAN's opportunities lies in the global growth of multilateralism or multilateral institutions which may need ASEAN as a model; this in turn cements ASEAN's bilateral and multilateral ties. Another opportunity is ASEAN can take advantage of the geopolitical competition in the Asia Pacific region to bolster the economy of its member states and the infrastructure network within the region. ASEAN can also seize the opportunity from what many call the Asian century, a term referring to the rise of several successful Asian countries such as Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and now China and India. This particular section is fascinating and of great significance to all readers, particularly ASEAN policy makers and current and future ASEAN leaders because they can gain a deeper insight into the organization's strengths and weaknesses as well as its opportunities and threats. Such a thorough understanding of ASEAN is critical to the future success of this regional block.

The concluding chapter has three functions – reminding readers about ASEAN’s three massive achievements, discussing three ongoing processes which benefit the region and its neighbors, and putting forward three bold recommendations for strengthening and sustaining ASEAN. To reiterate, the authors briefly present the three impressive achievements of ASEAN, including the maintenance of peace in Southeast Asia; the improvement of livelihoods of people in the region; and the cultivation of good relations between the regional block and the great powers. For the three beneficial ASEAN processes, they elaborate on a strong sense of camaraderie among ASEAN leaders and officials, close cooperation among non-governmental organizations within the region, and ASEAN’s multilateral meetings which help to foster harmonious relations among the great powers. To conclude, the writers make three firm recommendations for ASEAN’s sustainable development. First, a greater sense of ownership of ASEAN among the people should be cultivated and enhanced. This could be achieved through incorporating basic ASEAN studies into the curricula of primary schools in each ASEAN member. Second, the stunted ASEAN secretariat should be made more dynamic and vibrant. To do so, ASEAN needs to reconsider and revise its policy of equal funding for the organization and introduce the principle of ‘capacity to pay’, as practiced by the UN. Third and finally, ASEAN should be promoted to be a new beacon of hope for humanity. With its extraordinary achievements discussed earlier, together with its ability to bring about unity in great diversity within the region, ASEAN deserves to be a bright beacon of hope for the world.

The ASEAN Miracle, in essence, is a must-read for all who have interest in ASEAN-related affairs and ASEAN development. For policymakers and researchers, the book would provide them with profound insights into how a non-state actor plays its role in shaping and altering the geopolitical landscape in the region and the world. For general readers, this book would also be of particular interest to them in that it provides a fascinating history of the culturally diverse Southeast Asian region, an in-depth analysis of the development of ASEAN’s durable ecosystem of peace, and an excellent introduction to each ASEAN member state. More interestingly, this volume offers an engaging and valuable read on ASEAN’s relations with the great powers, ASEAN’s key strengths and weaknesses as well as its threats and opportunities, and what ASEAN should do to maximize its relevance and guarantee its future existence on the regional and global stage. Overall, *The ASEAN Miracle* is a highly recommended book on ASEAN.