Why the World Can't Ignore Southeast Asia

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I first encountered the concept of "ASEAN centrality" as a young professional attending various think tank conferences. At the time, it felt vague, an idea that could mean everything or nothing, depending on who was speaking. Over the years, I have come to understand its essence: ASEAN must be the driver of the Asia Pacific region's evolving architecture.

However, ASEAN centrality alone is not enough. It must evolve into ASEAN Confidence. We need to be confident in our narrative, our economies, and our development. ASEAN must stand firm against any forces that threaten the stability of our region. Confidence, not neutrality, should define our collective future.

ASEAN Confidence in Action

As Senior Director of External Relations at KSI Strategic Institute for Asia Pacific, I have witnessed ASEAN's potential firsthand. Through three major events hosted by KSI this year, we showcased the strength and leadership of Indonesia, Laos, and Cambodia.

In **Jakarta**, the World Digital Economy and Technology Summit highlighted Indonesia's rise as a leader in innovation and renewable energy. Indonesia's digital economy is projected to grow to $146 billion by 2025, according to the e-Conomy SEA 2024 report. During the Summit, leaders such as Sandiaga Uno, former Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, and Nadiem Makarim, former Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, reflected the country's ability to modernize while preserving its national identity and philosophy.

In **Vientiane**, the ASEAN Leadership and Partnership Forum underscored Laos PDR's transformation from being landlocked to 'land-linked.' Laos, known as the "Battery of Southeast Asia," now generates 80% of its electricity from hydropower, exporting to countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, and China. During the Forum, President Thongloun Sisoulith and Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone touched on driving Laos' efforts to integrate further into regional supply chains and become a model of sustainability.

In **Phnom Penh**, the Global Chinese Economic and Technology Summit highlighted Cambodia's resilience and ambition. The nation's GDP grew by 5.5% in 2023, reflecting its robust recovery and adaptability to global economic shifts. Prime Minister Hun Manet and President of the Senate Hun Sen are leading efforts to diversify the economy, with a focus on technology and green manufacturing, positioning Cambodia as a rising star in the region.

These events demonstrated that ASEAN thrives when its nations act with confidence. Indonesia's leadership, Laos' innovation, and Cambodia's resilience are not isolated examples but reflections of the bloc's collective strength. ASEAN's diversity is its power, and its future depends on transforming centrality into confidence.

Shaping ASEAN's Narrative

ASEAN Confidence requires owning the narrative. This means shaping global discussions on key issues like climate change and digital transformation, rather than allowing others to define ASEAN's role.

In previous articles for KSInsights, I proposed establishing an ASEAN Climate Change Envoy and an ASEAN Tech Envoy. These roles would position ASEAN as a leader in sustainability and technological innovation. The Climate Change Envoy could drive ASEAN's net-zero ambitions, while the Tech Envoy could champion the region's growing digital economy, ensuring ASEAN remains competitive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

ASEAN must also deepen its engagement in multilateral platforms such as the G20 and the United Nations Climate Change Conferences. By asserting its voice on these stages, ASEAN can ensure its priorities are not just recognized but actively influence global agendas.

The Future is ASEAN Confidence

ASEAN Confidence is more than a mindset. It is a commitment to standing tall in the face of challenges, amplifying our successes, and to safeguarding the stability of our region. ASEAN must no longer be content with being a balancing act between superpowers. Instead, it must lead with conviction, shaping the future of the Asia Pacific.

As the Lao proverb reminds us, "When the water rises, the fish eat the ants. When the water falls, the ants eat the fish." This wisdom reflects ASEAN's ability to thrive amid changing circumstances. By uniting its diverse strengths and embracing confidence, ASEAN is poised not just to participate in the action but to lead it.