POETIC IN POLICIES, PROSE IN EXECUTION

REALIZING MALAYSIA AND ASEAN'S SHARED FUTURE

Opinion

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With great pomp, Malaysia handed over the ASEAN chairmanship to the country of Philippines on October 28, 2025. It symbolized the official transition of the grouping's stewardship from Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim to President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. After the hosting of two Summits in Kuala Lumpur, one in May 2025 and another in October 2025, questions abound as to what impact has Malaysia's chairmanship brought to the region, and most importantly, its societies. Malaysia has made great strides and initiatives during its Chairmanship, among others announcing key and strategic documents such as the *ASEAN Community Vision 2045*; *ASEAN Political-Security Community Strategic Plan*; *ASEAN Economic Community Strategic Plan 2026-2030*; and *ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Strategic Plan* among others, in addition to being host to an array of distinguished list of attendees in the October 47th Summit, including Donald Trump, Mark Carney, Luiz Inacio Lula de Silva, Anthony Albanese, Cyril Ramaphosa, and Li Qiang.

However, not all that glitters is gold.

Planning for the Future

The Malaysian Prime Minister and the regional leaders of ASEAN are in tune with the shifting currents and core challenges of the region, extending that mindset to the world.The announcements and affirmation of the many different plans with its goals and objectives reflect this keen sense of awareness. For these leaders, there is much at stake in a world and milieu where economic growth and security strength is tied to social order; that social order filters into social stability, to political legitimacy and stability.

With the formulation of these plans and declarations, operationalisation and execution to achieve those goals and targets in those documents now become pivotal.
The pertinent and necessary question to be asked henceforth, more than what and why, is how.

The ASEAN Economic Community Strategic Plan 2026-2030 or AEC, for instance, consists of 6 goals, 44 objectives and 192 strategic measures. The mechanisms and avenues have to take precedence here by which these various elements would be implemented, monitored

and assessed, achieved, and reviewed.

Under the ASEAN Secretariat, based in Jakarta, Indonesia, there are numerous departments, sections, councils, committees and agencies, among others, that assist in managing cooperation among its member States and the outreach with different groups and communities. Among its departments, there is the ASEAN Political-Security Community Department, the ASEAN Economic Community Department, and the ASEAN Socio-cultural Community Department.

The question to ask is whether or not these departments would be well equipped to ensure the efficient coordination and execution of the goals and objectives in the ASEAN documents among its member States. What would be their scope and mandate? Would their terms of reference include enforcing and assessment of government or regional programs? This relates and connects to the idea of institutional-building. There is a need to establish and fund competent institutions at the regional level that can drive regional programs, coordinate and streamline national and regional goals and targets, and assess achievements and failures of member States.

By doing so, transition and progress from consensus and cooperation to systematic, legislated and coherent institutional integration among member States in critical and focused areas of development.

Reflecting Back, Moving Forward

Conviction and effort among ASEAN leaders are undeniable, and commendable. The vision has been, and continues to be there. However, there is a push to have a newer and stronger vision. This vision should include not only what form of future we desire, or why that is the future we aspire, but the details to how or the landasan, that vision will be attained.

It was this vision, held by Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet, Konrad Adenuer and Alcide De Gasperi, that set the foundations for the establishment and expansion of the European Union (EU) to what it is today. From the establishment of the Western European Union (WEU) in 1948, to the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 in the initial phases, the European Union now has 27 member States. The Union embeds deep integration among member States and at the European regional level, and is supported in its work by, among others, the European Commission, the European Council, the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament, the European Central Bank, the Court of Justice of the European Union, and the European Court of Auditors. One of the significant outcomes and achievements of the European Union has also been the establishment of a single monetary currency across EU member States.

To some observers, for ASEAN to emulate the progress and achievements of the European Union may be far-fetched or fantastical. In efforts to build a stronger and prosperous region, referencing and benchmarking our initiatives to best practices in Europe and elsewhere in the world is instructive. More importantly, it is crucial to understand the gaps and limitations that inhibit the ability in this part of the world to adopt and adapt the approaches of our European counterparts. A survey of the various histories and developments of countries in Southeast Asia and specifically Malaysia, will inform the areas of institutional building and reform, and programmatic execution, continue to be weaknesses plaguing our societies and governments.

Starting Anew, Starting Stronger

While ASEAN and its member States have confronted immense challenges in the past decades, from the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 to political instability and social unrest, to cross border and geopolitical conflicts, this region has persevered through its governments and communities. The area of Southeast Asia and her peoples, continue to possess enormous energy, resources and potential for further progress and regional prosperity.

When the Bangkok Declaration was signed in 1967, the leaders of the representing member States understood and believed in the promise of a young and modern, yet steep in old civilizations and traditions, region. A region where progress and developments in the fields of the economy, social life and cultural refinement could be guaranteed. Malaysia and Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's 2025 chairmanship of ASEAN has reiterated and reaffirmed these beliefs.

Moving forward, region-building, like nation-building, should pivot beyond the commitments to peace, stability and cooperation, towards the institutionalization of regional cooperation as well as socio-economic regional policies and programs for implementation. The country is

blessed and fortunate to have a leader of Anwar Ibrahim's caliber, who exudes poise and understands the pulse of global trends and challenges. His call for the developed nations to engage in meaningful measures and to make concrete progress to reducing economic and trade inequalities among nations, including less and developing nations during the recent G20 Summit in Johannesburg is testament to this sensitivity. In furtherance of these outcomes, Malaysia and ASEAN can go still further to be builders of regional union and governance.

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