

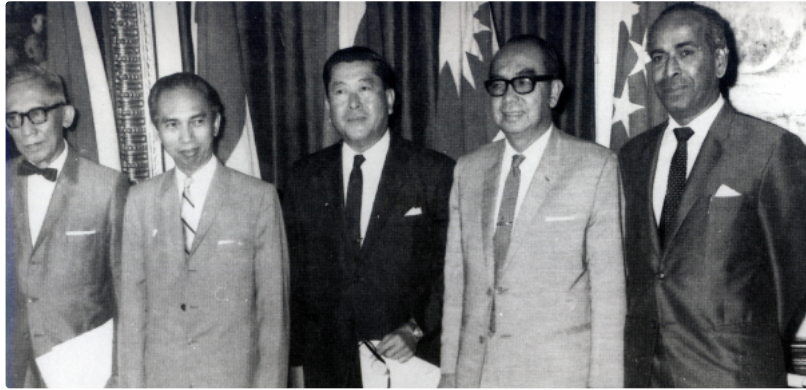
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## The Founding of ASEAN



On 8 August 1967, five leaders – the Foreign Ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – sat down together in the main hall of the Department of Foreign Affairs building in Bangkok, Thailand and signed a document. By virtue of that document, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was born. The five Foreign Ministers who signed it – Adam Malik of Indonesia, Narciso R. Ramos of the Philippines, Tun Abdul Razak of Malaysia, S. Rajaratnam of Singapore, and Thanat Khoman of Thailand – would subsequently be hailed as the Founding Fathers of probably the most successful inter-governmental organization in the developing world today. And the document that they signed would be known as the ASEAN Declaration.

It was a short, simply-worded document containing just five articles. It declared the establishment of an Association for Regional Cooperation among the Countries of Southeast Asia to be known as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and spelled out the aims and purposes of that Association. These aims and purposes were about cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, technical, educational and other fields, and in the promotion of regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter. It stipulated that the Association would be open for participation by all States in the Southeast Asian region subscribing to its aims, principles and purposes. It proclaimed ASEAN as representing “the collective will of the nations of Southeast Asia to bind themselves together in friendship and cooperation and, through joint efforts and sacrifices, secure for their peoples and for posterity the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity.”

It was while Thailand was brokering reconciliation among Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia over certain disputes that it dawned on the four countries that the moment for regional cooperation had come or the future of the region would remain uncertain. Recalls one of the two surviving protagonists of that historic process, Thanat Khoman of Thailand: “At the banquet marking the reconciliation between the three disputants, I broached the idea of forming another organization for regional cooperation with Adam Malik. Malik agreed without hesitation but asked for time to talk with his government and also to normalize relations with Malaysia now that the confrontation was over. Meanwhile, the Thai Foreign Office prepared a draft charter of the new institution. Within a few months, everything was ready. I therefore invited the two former members of the Association for Southeast Asia (ASA), Malaysia and the Philippines, and Indonesia, a key member, to a meeting in Bangkok. In addition, Singapore sent S. Rajaratnam, then Foreign Minister, to see me about joining the new set-up. Although the new organization was planned to comprise only the ASA members plus Indonesia, Singapore’s request was favorably considered.”

And so in early August 1967, the five Foreign Ministers spent four days in the relative isolation of a beach resort in Bang Saen, a coastal town less than a hundred kilometers southeast of Bangkok. There they negotiated over that document in a decidedly informal manner which they would later delight in describing as “sports-shirt diplomacy.” Yet it was by no means an easy process: each man brought into the deliberations a historical and political perspective that had no resemblance to that of any of the others. But with goodwill and good humor, as often as they huddled at the negotiating table, they finessed their way through their differences as they lined up their shots on the golf course and traded wisecracks on one another’s game, a style of deliberation which would eventually become the ASEAN ministerial tradition.

Now, with the rigors of negotiations and the informalities of Bang Saen behind them, with their signatures neatly attached to the ASEAN Declaration, also known as the Bangkok Declaration, it was time for some formalities. The first to speak was the Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Narciso Ramos, a one-time journalist and long-time legislator who had given up a chance to be Speaker of the Philippine Congress to serve as one of his country’s first diplomats. He was then 66 years old and his only son, the future President Fidel V. Ramos, was serving with the Philippine Civic Action Group in embattled Vietnam. He recalled the tediousness of the negotiations that preceded the signing of the Declaration that “truly taxed the goodwill, the imagination, the patience and understanding of the five participating Ministers.” That ASEAN was established at all in spite of these difficulties, he said, meant that its foundations had been solidly laid. And he impressed it on the audience of diplomats, officials and media people who had witnessed the signing ceremony that a great sense of urgency had prompted the Ministers to go through all that trouble. He spoke darkly of the forces that were arrayed against the survival of the countries of Southeast Asia in those uncertain and critical times.

"The fragmented economies of Southeast Asia," he said, "(with) each country pursuing its own limited objectives and dissipating its meager resources in the overlapping or even conflicting endeavors of sister states carry the seeds of weakness in their incapacity for growth and their self-perpetuating dependence on the advanced, industrial nations. ASEAN, therefore, could marshal the still untapped potentials of this rich region through more substantial united action."

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