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# ASEAN Focus



ASEAN

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CELEBRATING FIVE DECADES  
OF REGIONAL COOPERATION

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**ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute**  
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Pasir Panjang  
Singapore 119614  
Tel: (65) 6870 4509  
Fax: (65) 6778 1735

# ASEAN

The past two months have been eventful in this corner of the world. Millions of Thais gathered in Bangkok to bid farewell to the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej. In Myanmar, raging violence in Rakhine state led to a large-scale humanitarian crisis with over half a million of Rohingyas fleeing to Bangladesh. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte declared victory after the 148-day long siege against ISIS forces in Marawi City. Just weeks later, Manila rolled out the red carpet to welcome leaders from around the world, including US President Donald Trump, to attend the 31<sup>st</sup> ASEAN Summit and related Summits. Ms. Hoang Thi Ha reviews some of the important outcomes from this year-end ASEAN summitry.

Further afield, the snap Japanese general election in October saw Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's coalition win a convincing majority in the lower house, paving the way for Japan to play a more proactive role in the regional security architecture. But perhaps the one event that has dominated the news cycle was the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in Beijing, which saw President Xi Jinping assert himself as the most powerful leader China has ever seen since Deng Xiaoping. His consolidation of power within the CPC will undoubtedly have major implications to the region, especially in the way China projects its power as a strong global power by 2050. Dr. Alice Ekman analyses the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress

from a foreign policy perspective while Dr. Tang Siew Mun gauges what it would mean for Southeast Asian nations and ASEAN. For *Insider Views*, we are pleased to have China watcher Dr. Merriden Varrall share her thoughts on the new era of Chinese politics and of a risen China in the world.

Beyond China, ASEAN also has much to look forward to in relations with other dialogue partners. This year celebrates the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ASEAN-India dialogue relations with a commemorative summit to be held next month in Delhi. Dr. Termsak Chalermphanupap looks into the current state and the big potentials that remain untapped in ASEAN-India relations. This issue's *ASEAN in Figures* will showcase ASEAN-India ties in its most tangible form.

After the withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), President Trump marches on to re-open the US' existing trade agreements with its partners. As the chance of American return to the TPP remains far-fetched, the TPP-11 countries have recently committed themselves to reviving this high-quality trade pact in the form of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Dr. Deborah Elms analyses the potential benefits that the CPTPP would bring to businesses in the participating countries. Dr. Malcolm Cook meanwhile looks into elements that make the CPTPP a less powerful and more limited agreement than its TPP-12 precursor.

Continuing on our *Outlook at 50* series, we delve into the topic of religions in Southeast Asia. Dr. Terence Chong gives us a nuanced view of rising religiosity as a complex phenomenon in the region. Dr. Norshahril Saat, Mr. Fauzan Roslee and Ms. Nor Diyana Zait analyse the rise of Islam conservatism affecting several countries in Southeast Asia. Dr. Jeaney Yip looks into the growing phenomenon of prosperity gospel and megachurches in big Southeast Asian cities, and Dr. Brooke Schedneck examines new facets of Buddhism in the region influenced by globalisation and modernity.

We finish off this issue with a virtual ride on the Ship for Southeast Asian Youth Programme (SSEAYP) for *Know Your ASEAN*, and an introduction to Vietnamese visual artist Tiffany Chung as well as Vang Vieng in Laos for *People and Places*.

On the last note, we send our heartfelt condolences and deepest sympathies to the family of the late Dr. Surin Pitsuwan whose sudden and untimely demise on 30 November 2017 saddened us all. Throughout his illustrious career, especially as former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand (1997-2001) and former Secretary-General of ASEAN (2008-2012), he worked tirelessly to effect change to ASEAN in profound and meaningful ways. His charisma, intellectual brilliance and larger-than-life personality pushed the boundaries of ASEAN cooperation and brought ASEAN closer to the world. He will be deeply missed and his legacy will be cherished. ■

# Finding Common Ground to Move Forward

*HOANG THI HA reviews the key outcomes of ASEAN's November summits.*

The 31<sup>st</sup> ASEAN Summit and related Summits in Manila from 12-15 November were the capstone of the Philippine chairmanship. Behind all the pomp and ceremony of ASEAN's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, there was a lot of hard work to reconcile divergent interests and perspectives in search of common ground. The results are chequered but ASEAN is inching forward in its own way.

Out of 12 outcome documents of the ASEAN Summit, 10 are related to the socio-cultural pillar – an effort to deliver on a “people-oriented and people-centred ASEAN” – a priority of the Philippine chairmanship. But the jewel in the crown – a legally binding instrument on the rights of migrant workers – remains elusive. The inventively titled “ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers” carries with it only moral force and political significance. Furthermore, the ubiquitous qualifying clause “subject to laws, regulations and policies of ASEAN countries” disappoints many advocates who wish to see a more robust protection mechanism for migrant workers in the region.

The Consensus nevertheless remains a significant achievement in itself, setting out key principles, parameters, rights of migrant workers, and obligations of all ASEAN states. Criticism of the Consensus overlooks the fact that thus far only two ASEAN countries – Indonesia and the Philippines – are parties to the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. Given that the Convention has found very little traction in Southeast Asia, the Consensus provides a common reference point and a normative framework for ASEAN countries to push forward cooperation on this complex and difficult matter.

Furthermore, after a decade of labourious negotiations, the gaps between the sending and receiving states remain simply so wide that an encompassing legal instrument is beyond reach for the foreseeable future. This is because migrant workers are not only a social-economic issue but increasingly a political-sovereignty one with both sides of the spectrum having their respective legitimate interests

and concerns. The Consensus is thus a practical and realistic choice, a return to ASEAN's building-block and evolutionary approach.

On the South China Sea (SCS) issue, ASEAN leaders continued to exhibit positive tones, with the announcement to start substantive negotiations on the code of conduct (COC) and a shifted focus to developing mechanisms for prevention and management of incidents at sea. Unlike the previous years, the Chair's statement registered no concerns regarding developments on the ground, showing Manila's determination to push forward a cooperative rather than confrontational approach in dealing with China. ASEAN however still holds on to international law by reinserting the standard clause “full respect for legal and diplomatic processes”, besides an affirmation of “rules-based order” and the non-militarisation principle in the SCS.

There remains a lot of uncertainty on how substantive negotiations on the COC will unfold, and whether they can deliver an effective and binding instrument in governing the behaviour of the states concerned. The same can also be said about developments on the ground, as both sides continue to carefully watch out for each other's movements at sea.

On another sensitive matter, the plight of the Rohingyas fleeing from recent violence in Rakhine was addressed in a more pronounced way than reported. While stopping short of calling the Rohingyas by name, the Chair's statement displayed ASEAN's more robust posture in urging the Myanmar government to implement the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, ensure the safety of civilians, end violence and address the refugee problem. It was also revealed that the Summit's closed-door discussions on the issue were as frank as they were constructive, as many leaders recognised that ASEAN's perceived inaction on such a large-scale humanitarian crisis was undermining its credibility.

Through quiet diplomacy, ASEAN has managed to play a more active role in delivery of humanitarian assistance to the affected persons through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre



A scene from the 31<sup>st</sup> ASEAN Summit in Manila.

ASEAN Secretariat

for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre). The Centre has recently delivered the first batch of supplies to Rakhine. Singapore has pledged S\$100,000 to the Centre’s humanitarian efforts while Indonesia will start building a US\$1.8 million hospital in the area.

As ASEAN and its member states are seeking ways to help with due respect of Myanmar’s sovereignty, the onus is on Myanmar to reciprocate with open-mindedness and confidence in ASEAN institutions. That is the essence of being together in an ASEAN community. Instead of tucking itself under the comfort of non-interference, Myanmar should address the Rohingyas problem with a greater sense of urgency and responsibility to prevent ASEAN’s credibility from going down with it. This is no longer a purely Myanmar internal affair but a regional concern since the prolonged Rohingyas problem has been increasingly linked to rising radicalism, terrorism and trafficking in persons in the region.

On the external relations front, the Manila summitry witnessed a medley of new initiatives and policy announcements by external powers to deepen their engagement with ASEAN. For China, it was the proposed ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership Vision 2030 that aims to further bind ASEAN countries and China into a Community of Shared Destiny as envisioned by President Xi Jinping. In the same spirit, President Moon Jae-in launched his New Southern Policy to build a community-connected future between ASEAN and South Korea. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also had a charm offensive onto the region through a Commemorative Summit with ASEAN.

Most noteworthy were the first ever interface with US President Trump in the ASEAN setting during which he reiterated the Open and Free Indo-Pacific. Trump’s assurance of continued US engagement was, however, blemished by

his fixation on US trade deficits with regional countries. His Open and Free Indo-Pacific remains an incoherent concept, especially in terms of the trade-security nexus. As the emerging centerpiece of this concept, the revived US-Japan-India-Australia quadrilateral grouping (Quad) obviously has security insinuations, but trade remains the front and centre of Trump’s encounter with Indo-Pacific.

Trump’s “America First” version of “free and reciprocal trade” seemed to be a lone voice at the Summitry which witnessed the conclusion of the ASEAN-Hong Kong Free Trade Agreement and the first ever Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Leaders’ Meeting. The convening of the RCEP summit reflected the participating countries’ continued commitment to trade liberalisation, as against Trump’s stance of trade revisionism. It also showcased ASEAN centrality in Indo-Pacific’s multilateral trade architecture since RCEP is the only trade grouping that brings in China, Japan and India – the three largest Asian economies.

Southeast Asia in the years to come will see intense interactions among the major powers and between them and ASEAN. The choice by the major powers to embrace multilateral institutions or rely only on power-based configurations will define the contours of the regional security architecture. Much also depends on whether ASEAN can maintain a dynamic multi-directional equilibrium in its external engagement for an open and inclusive regional order without losing sight of its central goal of building a united and integrated ASEAN. This is the essence of a resilient ASEAN in a rapidly changing world – part of the ‘Resilience and Innovation’ theme that Singapore will focus on for its chairmanship next year. ■

*Ms. Hoang Thi Ha is Lead Researcher II (Political and Security Affairs) at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.*

A scene from the CPC's National Congress at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.



# CPC's 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress: A Foreign Policy Perspective

*ALICE EKMAN* deciphers the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China in foreign policy terms.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress is now over, questions about foreign policy implications of China's leadership reshuffle are raised. The promotion to the Politburo of Yang Jiechi, State Councillor supervising foreign policy and former Foreign Minister, is a significant move that made him the most powerful foreign affairs official since Qian Qichen, who served as Vice-Premier under President Jiang Zemin. Some observers have analysed the elevation of Yang as a clear sign of President Xi Jinping's ambitions for China as a rising global power. But this is not new. Since 2013, Xi has promoted a very proactive foreign policy with the aim to consolidate China's position as a regional and global leader.

In practical terms, Xi may send Yang or other top ranking officials abroad whenever possible to represent China for international meetings and visits. According to China's online state media, so far Xi spent 193 days abroad since 2013 and has cut down significantly on his overseas travel in the past two years, after very frequent international visits at the beginning of his mandate. He has reduced his international travel from 42 days in 2015 to less than 30 days in 2016, and he is likely to maintain this trend in the coming years.

But this evolution is only logistical. Xi has been overseeing the foreign policy decision-making process over the last five

**“Continuity in China’s foreign policy priorities, orientations and ambitions is to be expected. China will continue to be very active in its neighbourhood first and foremost. It will continue to deploy its economic leverage extensively.”**

years, and will most likely continue to do so in his second term. He has consolidated his hold on foreign policy to such an extent that his imprint will remain robust in the coming years, independently of the recent nomination of Yang or other top officials.

The concepts that Xi has approved and promoted over the past five years (i.e., “Belt & Road Initiative,” “Community of Common Destiny/Future,” “China Solution,” “New type of international relations,” or “Chinese dream of national renewal”, among others) will continue to be key words of reference for China’s diplomacy in the coming years.

Similarly, continuity in China’s foreign policy priorities, orientations and ambitions is to be expected. China will continue to be very active in its neighbourhood first and foremost. It will continue to deploy its economic leverage extensively. The choice of sanctions or inducements as the preferred method of engagement depends on the recipient’s position on key regional issues deemed by China as part of its “core interests.”

Embracing a more proactive economic diplomacy, Chinese officials now regularly refer to the building of a “global network of partnerships.” This speaks to China’s ambition to build a partnership system that would, in the long term, replace the US-led security alliance system, starting from China’s neighbourhood.

China also announced the creation of a “new security architecture in Asia” two years ago, and is likely to push for its implementation in the coming years in a flexible

way, participating more actively in non-institutionalised regional cooperation frameworks, and building bridges between them as much as possible. In broader terms, China’s diplomacy will be more active in reforming the global governance system not only in the economic but also security, cyber, and cultural fields, among others. This active engagement will be pursued by both integrating into existing institutions and creating new ones at the same time, and investing further in multilateralism in all directions.

Xi’s opening speech at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress also signals continuity in China’s diplomacy to promote an alternative model of development in the region and the world, positioning China as a solution provider (“China solution” – 中国方案). South-South cooperation and the “principle of non-alignment”, which China’s diplomacy continues to refer to on a frequent basis, constitute the conceptual framework of such promotion, along with a strong historical and ideological resentment against the United States, and what China sees as the “West” in broader terms. In this context, the strong rivalry between Washington and Beijing is likely to remain, even if bilateral relations may be eased at a practical level by Yang’s extensive experience of working with the US.

Rivalry will continue to surround regional flashpoints, including the Korean peninsula, the South China Sea and especially Taiwan, one of the very few flashpoints that Xi explicitly mentioned in his opening speech at the Congress. Furthermore, Sino-US rivalry will increasingly focus on international rules, standards and norms, as China has launched a policy of creating new ones in a diversity of fields (transport, construction, energy, big data, etc.)

In addition, China is likely to conduct a more hierarchical diplomacy, as it aims to position itself as a major country. The theme “major country diplomacy with Chinese features” was lately extolled by high-ranking foreign policy officials, including Yang and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Recent official communications, including China’s White Paper on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation issued in January 2017, indicate the emergence of a new a form of diplomatic categorisation by Beijing which labels some countries such as the US and Russia as “major countries.” This categorisation, if consolidated further, may have significant implications for Asia-Pacific, as China has listed Japan and India as “major countries in the region” and underlined that “small and medium-sized countries should not take sides.” Such hierarchical diplomacy, and China’s foreign policy in general terms, are designed towards long-term ambitions and is likely to be implemented further in the coming years. Short-term hiccups (such as slowing down growth rate) have not led to a downgrading of Xi’s foreign policy ambitions and determination. ■

*Dr. Alice Ekman is Head of China Research at the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri), and Associate Professor at Sciences Po in Paris.*

# Can China Be a Considerate Power?

**TANG SIEW MUN** ponders what a risen China might mean for its Southeast Asian neighbours.

The world keenly watched the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on 18-24 October 2017 for glimpses of China's national priorities and the announcement of the new Standing Committee leadership line-up. In the run-up to the National Congress, President Xi Jinping had emerged as the strongest Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping. But China's most important political event of the year was more than just a personal victory for Xi. It was a celebration of China's ascendency to the highest echelons of global power. Xi's 3<sup>1/2</sup>-hour keynote address left no doubts that China has risen and the sky is the limit as far as its ambitions are concerned.

China's self-identification as a global leader resounded loudly throughout the Great Hall of the People. Xi set the marker that "China should become a nation with pioneering global

influence by 2050." He reminded the 2,280 party stalwarts that "China now leads the world in trade, outbound investment and foreign reserves." Xi also noted with pride that China's international influence has blossomed, along with its "ability to inspire and power to shape" global developments. Nowhere are Chinese leadership aspirations felt stronger than Southeast Asia. Although China has been ASEAN's largest trading partner since 2009, Beijing has found it difficult to translate its economic power into political influence, as seen in the lukewarm reception towards China's call in 2014 for a new security concept premised on the notion of "Asia for Asians."

Reiterating a commitment made by his predecessors, Xi declared that "no matter what stage of development it reaches, China will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion." This reassuring stance flies in the face of history since it is in the nature of major powers to dominate weaker states. What makes China any different from other major powers? How does one differentiate between leadership and domination? Leadership, by definition, denotes a superior-subordinate relationship. How can China rise as a leader





without lording over smaller states who would always carry the instinctive fear of subjugation? Can Southeast Asia and China untie this Gordian knot?

China has plenty of reasons to be confident in its future. Bloomberg projects China's gross domestic product (GDP) to overtake that of the US in 2028. To safeguard China's prosperity and well-being, Xi reported to the National Congress that the modernisation of China's national defence and People's Liberation Army (PLA) would be completed by 2035. And by 2050, the PLA would be transformed into "world class forces ... built to fight." Unfortunately, the region need not wait until 2050 to appreciate the PLA's growing power given China's overwhelming advantage over its Southeast Asian neighbours. China's edge is a double-edged sword. Seen in a positive light, the PLA could play a larger role in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions in the region. On the other hand, China's military power could unsettle the region's military balance and exacerbate strategic mistrust among the major powers. Southeast Asia would be caught in the crossfire of this budding major power rivalry.

Xi's pledge to keep China open and "turn China into a trader of quality" is music to ASEAN's ears. ASEAN has been labouring under a widening trade deficit with China, with the trade balance in China's favour ballooning from US\$6 billion in 2010 to US\$77 billion in 2015. ASEAN's trade deficit in 2015 as a percentage to its exports with China is 57.9% – a ten-fold increase from 2010. This qualitative aspect of the ASEAN-China trade relations is almost always downplayed in favour of the rosy but incomplete picture of expanding bilateral trade. Xi reinforced his message of "openness" at the APEC CEO Summit on 10 November 2017 when he underlined China's support for "the multilateral trading regime and practice open regionalism." The onus is on China to translate Xi's aspirations into tangible actions. Helping ASEAN to push a high-quality Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) past the finishing line would send a strong signal of China's commitment to multilateral trade regimes.

No major speech would be complete without a reference to Xi's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Xi sees the BRI as a priority for China's "going global" with trade, investment and technology. He even went one step further by inscribing the BRI into the CPC's constitution, ensuring

that the initiative would progress beyond his second five-year presidential term.

The BRI has the potential to transform the regional infrastructure landscape. This grand strategy and ambitious vision, which literally connects China with the world, will be a key yardstick to measure China's exercise of its enormous and growing economic and political power. Would China's earnest push to establish a network of high-speed rail across Southeast Asia benefit the people who would have to bear the responsibility of paying the long-term loans of its construction? Would the BRI pave the road

for mutual prosperity or saddle the host countries with a mountain of debts? Malaysia's US\$13.3 billion East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) and the US\$5.8 billion Laos-China link would provide early indications of the BRI's political and economic costs and benefits. For the moment, the BRI appears to be the answer to the region's prayers for funds to develop its inadequate infrastructure.

ASEAN-China relationship during Xi's first term was blemished by the South China Sea issue, and Beijing's more assertive posturing that signalled the end of its successful "charm diplomacy." Xi's second term may see a more engaged and proactive China in regional and global affairs. The US' apparent indifference to global leadership across a wide range of issues such as free trade, climate change and supporting UN agencies has paved the way for China to step up. Thus far, Chinese leadership is manifest mainly in the economic sphere, for example through the BRI and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

(AIIB). China would no doubt want to cast its imprint in the political and strategic domain as well.

Deng Xiaoping's legacy is opening China to the world; now Xi Jinping is laying down his own legacy of opening up the world to China. For ASEAN, a risen China has been a boon and a welcome development. It is anyone's guess as to what the nature of China's leadership is and how it exercises its power, questions that would have an important bearing on the immediate and future trajectory of ASEAN-China relations. ■

*Dr. Tang Siew Mun* is Head of the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. *Mr. Jason Salim*, Research Officer at the ASC, provided research assistance for this article.

**“Reiterating a commitment made by his predecessors, Xi declared that “no matter what stage of development it reaches, China will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion.” This reassuring stance flies in the face of history since it is in the nature of major powers to dominate weaker states.”**

# Understanding the CPTPP

**DEBORAH ELMS** analyses the *Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)* and what it means for businesses.

One of the most significant accomplishments of the APEC meeting in Da Nang, Vietnam, happened on the sidelines. After a bit of confusion, leaders from 11 APEC countries announced that the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is continuing to move ahead. The agreement has a new, more complicated name: the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Twenty provisions from the original negotiated text have been suspended. These suspended elements range from the deletion of a couple of words to the removal of a section from a chapter. Overall, approximately 28 total pages have been frozen from the 622 pages of rules.

These provisions may be reinstated at a future point, but for now, the 11 members (Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile,

Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam) need not implement these rules at the domestic level.

Leaders agreed to continue with the TPP because the benefits on offer to members remain substantial. The deep, interlocking commitments that partner countries made to one another have not been altered. Not one of the original member schedules for goods, services, investment, government procurement, or state-owned enterprises have been changed. 19 out of 30 chapters were untouched and three chapters had less than one sentence altered.

The final deal should be signed within weeks, once the legal teams have had an opportunity to thoroughly examine the document. Entry into force will happen after at least six countries have completed domestic ratification procedures. This may take place quite quickly in 2018.

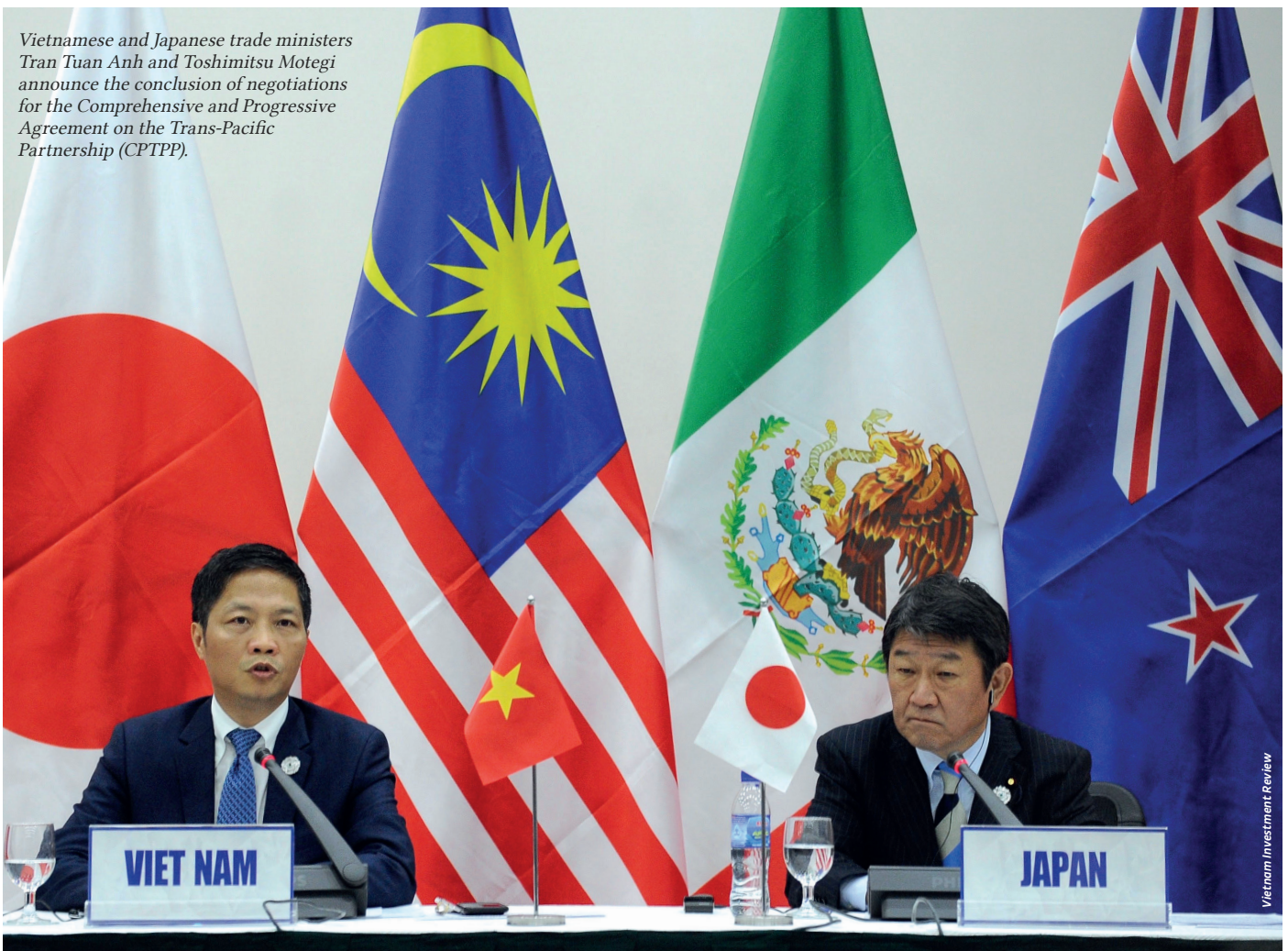
On that date, tariffs will drop to zero for a substantial portion of goods between members. Many of these tariff cuts are substantial and will apply to goods that are typically carved out or not included at all in trade agreements, including sensitive agricultural products. The remainder of goods will see tariffs fall to zero within 3-5 years and nearly all will be gone in less than 10 years.

The rules for trading goods are especially helpful for firms. Once a company has met the criteria to manufacture or produce a product for CPTPP, it can be shipped without change into all 11 markets. It does not need a certificate of origin, but paperwork can be kept internally in qualified companies. Customs should expedite trade at all points of entry.

Services and investment markets are open for all sectors – including all 160 sub-sectors, unless a member has specifically carved out or noted a problem. In practice, nearly all items are opened. This will make it much easier to deliver even manufactured goods, since the value of goods is increasingly found in services. Past Asian trade agreements have tended to do a poor job of opening up services markets for firms.

**“Leaders agreed to continue with the TPP because the benefits on offer to members remain substantial. The deep, interlocking commitments that partner countries made to one another have not been altered. Not one of the original member schedules for goods, services, investment, government procurement, or state-owned enterprises have been changed.”**

Vietnamese and Japanese trade ministers Tran Tuan Anh and Toshimitsu Motegi announce the conclusion of negotiations for the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).



The CPTPP also provides new access for government procurement. This access will not apply to every contract, however. It does mean that TPP member governments will be required to put in place systems for clear, open and transparent procurement in the future.

The agreement does not go far in writing new standards for food, food safety or other products. It does mandate that member governments provide adequate notice before new regulations come into force, and set up greater transparency and consultation with businesses going forward.

Intellectual property (IP) is a vitally important part of an innovative economy. The CPTPP's most extensive chapter remains the one on IP, even though most of the suspended elements in the revised agreement can also be found here. The CPTPP gives businesses more confidence that ideas will be protected and that IP will be enforced in the future.

Getting the agreement finished after the withdrawal of the United States under Donald Trump has been challenging. Many of the members were hesitant to continue since the original deal was a hard-won balance of compromises. Taking one partner out of the agreement left a hole in the web of commitments.

But, since the United States crafted the deal to fit its own domestic rulebook and since the US economy is fairly open with limited tariffs in place and few restrictions on services and investment, the removal of the US from the TPP actually resulted in more minimal damage to market access than might have been anticipated.

In the meantime, members recognised the opportunities for economic gains between one another, which are likely to be quite substantial. Firms will shift up supply chains to take advantage of the CPTPP in the future, resulting in often unexpected new economic growth in member markets.

In the final analysis, the CPTPP members also saw that it was important to maintain the high-quality, high-ambition rules and commitments in the trade agreement. At a time when trade seems to be under threat from some quarters, showing that gains can be had from economic integration was quite important. The CPTPP is likely to become the benchmark for trade agreements in the future. Members salvaged the agreement from the dustbin for good reasons. ■

*Dr. Deborah Elms is Executive Director, Asian Trade Centre, Singapore.*



# TPP's Revival

**MALCOLM COOK**  
*canvasses the difficult terrain  
for the TPP-11 negotiations.*

**T**he Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) without the US is a less powerful and alluring political economic proposition. The withdrawal of the US immediately shrank the 12-member mega trade pact's collective GDP by two-thirds and removed its greatest source of magnetism for its expansion in the future. The TPP has been revived as a smaller, more modest and more limited Asia-Pacific agreement.

## REVIVAL

The remaining TPP members, led by Japan, have persevered to save the TPP-11 and the years of hard work and difficult decisions that the TPP negotiations entailed. On the sidelines of the APEC Summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, the TPP trade ministers concluded a ministerial level agreement on core elements that will provide the basis for concluding a revived TPP agreement.

A planned TPP-11 leaders meeting to endorse the agreement at APEC though had to be postponed due to Canadian concerns and brinksmanship. During the 2015 Canadian elections that saw a change of government from the Conservative Party to the Liberal Party, the Liberal Party



under Justin Trudeau expressed ambivalence towards the TPP agreement being negotiated. In a similar vein, this year saw a change of government in New Zealand from the conservative National Party to a Labour coalition with the Labour Party also expressing concerns over the TPP agreement signed in 2016.

This new agreement on core elements gives the TPP-11 a new name, the tongue-twisting Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and some new realism. In the original TPP agreement, states accounting for 85% of the total TPP-12 economy had to ratify the agreement before it could come into force, giving the US de facto veto power. The new agreement on core elements sets a much lower bar, only requiring that a majority of the remaining 11 states ratify the CPTPP. The CPTPP may end up having fewer than 11 members. No timeline has been provided for the conclusion of the CPTPP negotiations.

## DOCK

The hope that the US will “re-dock” onto the revived TPP at some point in the foreseeable future is serving as a major source of momentum for the current CPTPP

renegotiations. Japan’s economy minister Toshiimitsu Motegi, when discussing the new agreement on core elements, noted that “there will be no future TPP 12 [with the US] if there is no TPP-11”.

However, a US return to the TPP in the later Trump years or even in the post-Trump era is no sure thing. In an interview this September in the US with CNBC, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong echoed this sense of caution when asked if the US withdrawal had delayed the TPP: “Yes, of course. It will take several years before you can come back to it, and stars have to come back into alignment.”

In 2016, the leading candidates for nomination as the presidential candidate of the Republican and Democratic parties (Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders respectively) each expressed opposition to the TPP agreement signed in February 2016. Moreover, in an alternate present in which Hillary Clinton were elected president, it would be hard to see how the 2016 TPP agreement could get through the US Congress regardless of which party had a majority in which house. The Trump/Bannon insurgency and the earlier Tea Party one that Cruz associates himself with in the Republican party and the Sanders’ ‘democratic socialist’ uprising in the Democratic party share a rejection of the TPP and an ability to mobilise large groups of voters that is unlikely to dissipate anytime soon. Prime Minister Lee’s alignment of the stars that would bring the US back to the TPP seems unlikely.

## PATHWAY

The much-reduced market size of the TPP after the US withdrawal will likely make any CPTPP agreement less attractive. If Canada, the second largest TPP-11 economy, balks at committing to the CPTPP deal, the attraction will be diluted further. In market exchange rate terms, the GDP of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) grouping is close to two and a half times larger than the TPP-11, and the population of the RCEP parties is over seven times larger than the remaining TPP members. Joining a CPTPP agreement that is similar to the February 2016 TPP agreement will be particularly difficult for three of the four largest Asian economies outside of the CPTPP, namely China, India and Indonesia. China and India have already expressed serious reservations to becoming TPP members given their current level of development and the high-level requirements for joining the TPP.

In 2014, APEC’s Beijing Roadmap for the Realisation of the FTAAP identified the RCEP and the TPP as the potential pathways to a Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific. The US withdrawal from the TPP pushes this aspiration further over the horizon and makes the ASEAN-led RCEP process, if it can deliver a deal, the more promising and inclusive pathway. ASEAN now is the central node for East Asian trade diplomacy. ■

*Dr. Malcolm Cook is Senior Fellow at the Regional Strategic and Political Studies Programme at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.*

# ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership: High Potentials Await Realisation

**TERMSAK CHALERMPALANUPAP** looks into the potentials that remain untapped in ASEAN-India relations.

India looked East in the early 1990s and found ASEAN. Now, Prime Minister Narendra Modi wants India to “act East” and intensify economic engagements with ASEAN, especially with the CLMVT countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam) in the Mekong sub-region.

As for ASEAN countries, India constitutes a useful strategic counterweight to China and a prospective lucrative economic partner to wean themselves from their increasing

dependency on China. Excessive economic dependency on China – which is now the top trading partner and most important source of foreign tourists in many ASEAN countries – risks undermining their foreign policy independence. China’s recent unilateral economic action to hurt its trade partners who do not toe Beijing’s line on diplomatic or security issues is a worrisome development. A case in point is Chinese retaliation against South Korean businesses due to Seoul’s decision to deploy the THAAD anti-missile system.

ASEAN Leaders and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 15<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-India Summit.



Ministry of External Affairs, India

**“Huge potential remains untapped in the ASEAN-India partnership. Geographical proximity, emerging transport connectivity, and especially geostrategic considerations will be important factors in bringing ASEAN and India closer in the future.”**

### HISTORICAL TIES AND CONNECTIVITY

One important advantage that India has in its engagement with ASEAN is the longstanding cultural ties dating back to ancient times, when Indian traders and scholars introduced art and craft as well as Hinduism and Buddhism to Southeast Asia. The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) launched in 2000 was designed to capitalise on the cultural ties as well as physical contiguity between India and the Mekong sub-region. India has offered US\$1 billion worth of credit line for ASEAN countries to fund connectivity projects which will strengthen ASEAN-India economic ties.

Since the early 2000s, India, Myanmar and Thailand have been constructing their 1,360km Trilateral Highway to link India's north-eastern province of Manipur with Thailand's northern province of Tak at Mae Sot and major cities in Myanmar. Discussion is now underway to link the highway from Mae Sot with the Mekong sub-region via the arteries in the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC) that connect Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

There is also a growing interest to extend the EWEC to Dawei in southern Myanmar, where Thailand and Myanmar are engaged in a joint venture to build a deep-sea port and a special economic zone. If realised, the connectivity between the EWEC and the Dawei port will effectively link the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean through overland routes and the South China Sea, and Indian eastern seaboard ports will benefit from additional shipping traffic to and from the Dawei port. Furthermore, India has been working with Myanmar in the Kaladan multimodal transit transport project to provide sea access to India's north-eastern landlocked provinces through the Kaladan River.

ASEAN and India have been in talks for an open skies agreement to promote business and tourism. Currently, only five ASEAN countries – Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam – have direct flights with India and vice versa. Although air traffic growth in India is among the

highest in the world, at 19.4% for 2014-2015, there remains much reluctance on the Indian side to liberalise commercial air links too far and too fast for fear of competition from some ASEAN big airlines.

### SLOW GROWTH IN ASEAN-INDIA COMMERCE

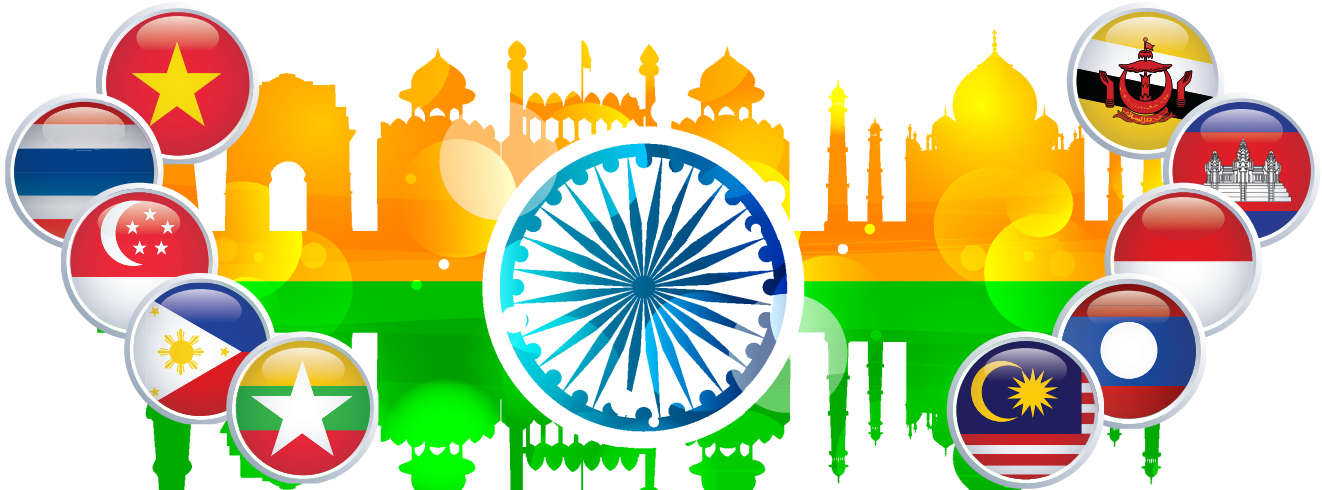
There is clearly a huge growth potential in ASEAN-India economic relations. Their combined population is 1.8 billion, and their aggregate GDP more than US\$4.5 trillion. Together, they constitute the world's largest consumer market with a rapidly growing middle class. However, ASEAN-India trade volume remains modest and its growth is rather sluggish even after the coming into effect of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area on 1 January 2010. ASEAN-India trade in 2016 amounted to only US\$58.5 billion, or about 2.6% of ASEAN's total trade, far below the target set at US\$100 billion. In a sharp contrast, ASEAN-China trade in 2016 was US\$368 billion. The new target for ASEAN-India trade is to reach US\$200 billion by 2022, a fraction of the target set for ASEAN-China trade at US\$1 trillion by the same year.

India's concern about growing trade deficits is one reason why India has been very cautious in the negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The ASEAN-led process also involves China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. India has no FTA agreement with China, and yet about half of all Indian global trade deficit is with China. India appears reluctant to enter into any framework that would widen its existing trade imbalance with China, a consideration which partly explains its feet-dragging on RCEP.

In terms of FDI, both India and China are newcomers in the ASEAN region, but China clearly has the advantage of riding on the Belt and Road Initiative with its deep pockets. In 2016, Indian investments in the ASEAN region amounted to only US\$1.05 billion, compared with Chinese investments of US\$9.2 billion. In fact, ASEAN countries invest more in India than the other way around.

Huge potential remains untapped in the ASEAN-India partnership. Geographical proximity, emerging transport connectivity, and especially geostrategic considerations will be important factors in bringing ASEAN and India closer in the future. The upcoming Commemorative Summit to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ASEAN-India dialogue relations in Delhi in December should be an auspicious opportunity for both sides not only to reaffirm but also substantiate their political will with concrete initiatives to further their multi-faceted cooperation. India must “act East” with meaningful investments to integrate more deeply with Southeast Asia. As for ASEAN members, they must be seen as capable of “looking West” to engage India in their efforts to maintain strategic equilibrium in the region. ■

*Dr. Termsak Chalermpanupap is Lead Researcher I (Political and Security Affairs) at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.*



# ASEAN-India Relations

## TRADE



The ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA) is one of the world's largest FTAs covering almost **1.8 billion** people with a combined GDP of **US\$4.5 trillion**. (ASEAN Secretariat, 2017)



India is ASEAN's **8<sup>th</sup> largest** external trading partner, accounting for **2.6%** of ASEAN's total trade in 2015. (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016)

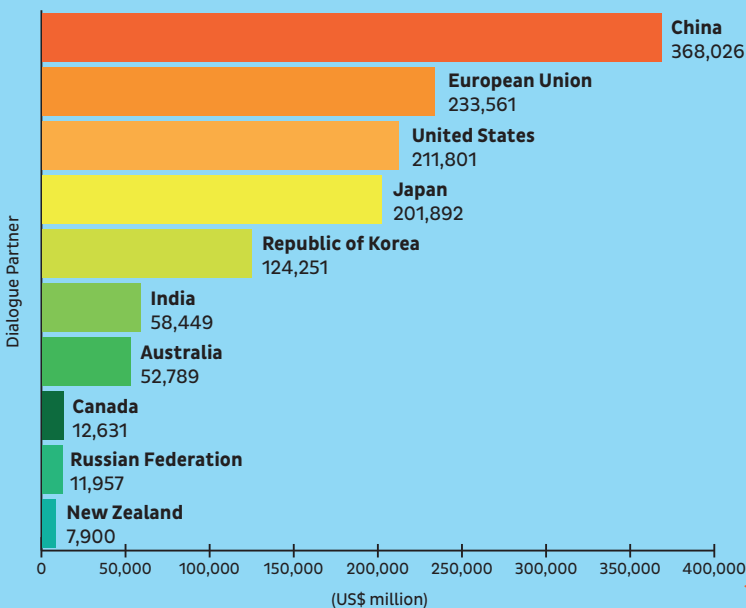


Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia are India's top three trade partners in ASEAN. These countries account for **69%** of India's trade with ASEAN. (ASEAN Secretariat, 2017)



ASEAN's total trade with India expanded **2.5 times** from **US\$23 billion** in 2005 to **US\$58.5 billion** in 2016. (ASEAN Secretariat, 2017)

ASEAN trade with its Dialogue Partners in 2016



(Source: ASEAN Secretariat, 2017)

## TOURISM AND CONNECTIVITY



**3.3 million tourists** from India visited ASEAN in 2015, making up **3%** of the total tourist arrivals to the ASEAN region. (ASEAN Secretariat, 2017)

More than **700,000** Southeast Asian tourists visited India in 2015, almost **40%** of which were from Malaysia and **20%** from Singapore. (India Ministry of Tourism, 2016)

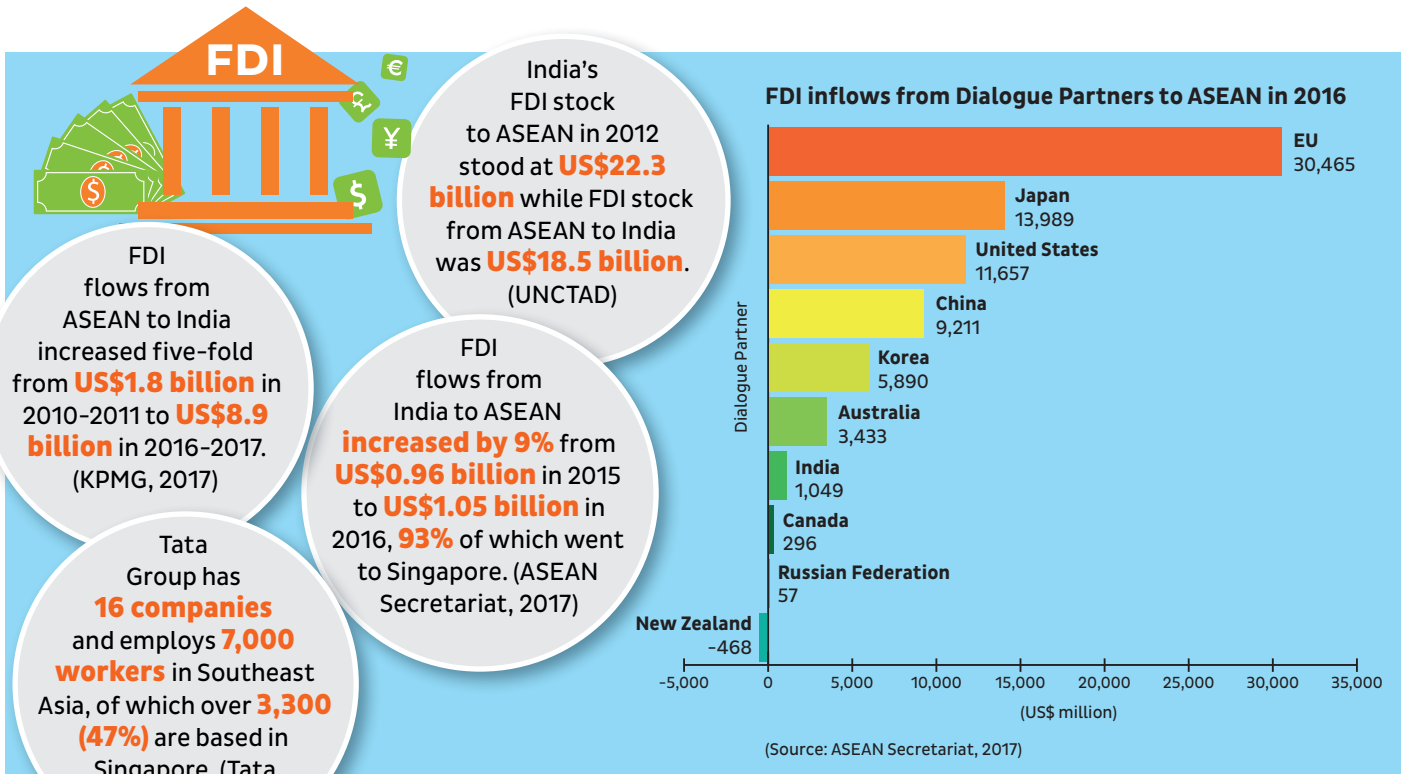
India announced in 2015 a **US\$1 billion** line of credit to promote physical and digital connectivity with ASEAN and a Project Development Fund of **US\$77 million** to develop manufacturing hubs in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2017)

ASEAN constituted about **16%** of international passenger flow from and to India in 2015, **18%** of international freight flows from India and **11%** international freight flow to India. (ASEAN-India Centre at RIS, 2016)

Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam have direct flights to India and vice versa. (ASEAN-India Centre at RIS, 2016)





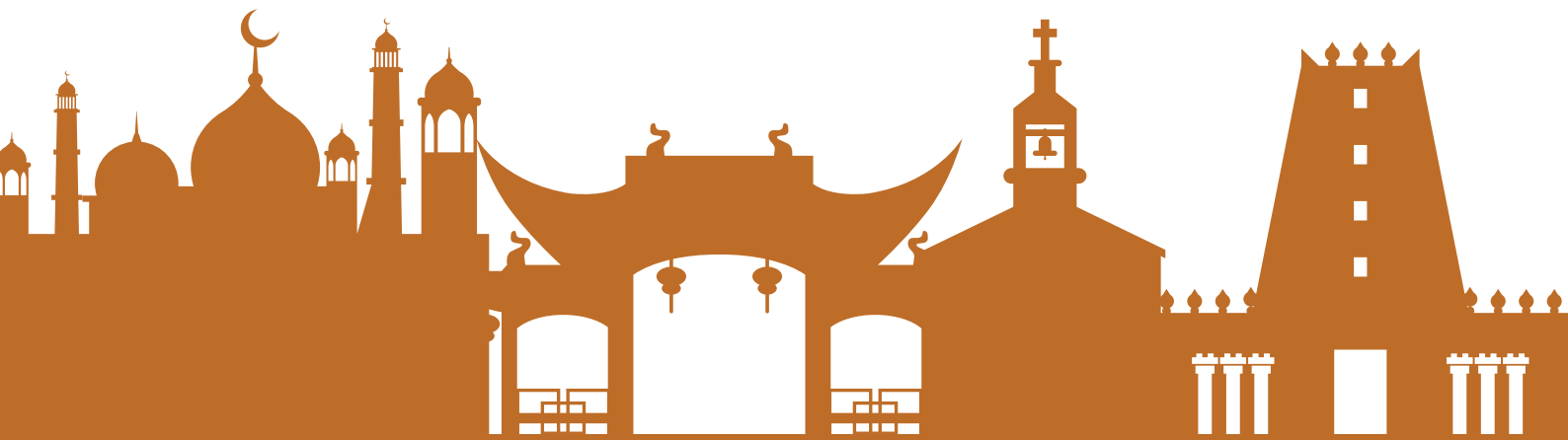


## SOCIAL-CULTURAL LINKS

- **9.2%** of Singapore citizens, **6.7%** of Malaysian citizens and **2%** of Myanmar citizens are of Indian ethnicity. (United Overseas Bank Limited, RSM Chio Lim LLP and Rajah & Tann Singapore LLP 2016)
- The ASEAN-India Student Exchange Programme was established in 2007, under which **250** students from the ten ASEAN countries visit India annually. (Indian Mission to ASEAN, 2017)
- More than **3,000** tertiary students from the ASEAN region are studying in India, **60%** of which hail from Malaysia. (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017)
- The Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia, including Persons of Indian Origin and Non-Resident Indians, are recorded at **6.1 million** in 2016. Almost **3 million** Indian diaspora are living in Malaysia and **2 million** in Myanmar. (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2016)
- India's financial contributions to ASEAN-India cooperation include, among others, **US\$5 million** to the ASEAN-India Green Fund, **US\$5 million** to the ASEAN-India Science and Technology Development Fund, **US\$1 million** to the ASEAN Development Fund, and a pledged addition of **US\$50 million** to the ASEAN-India Fund. (India Mission to ASEAN, ASEAN Secretariat, 2017)

## Did You Know?

Indian influence on Southeast Asian history and culture is pervasive. Many of Southeast Asia's fabled literature and performing arts were inspired by the Indian epic Ramayana, including Ramakien in Thailand, Phra Lak Phra Lam in Laos, Reamker in Cambodia, Yama Zatdaw in Myanmar, and Hikayat Seri Rama in Malaysia. The famous Balinese Kecak dance in Indonesia is also based on the story line of the epic.



# Understanding Religiosity in Southeast Asia

*TERENCE CHONG examines the nuances of rising religiosity in Southeast Asia.*

It is now commonplace to hear of increasing religiosity in Southeast Asia. The implication of this is that believers are becoming more fundamental, more exclusive, and perhaps even intolerant of different values. This is undoubtedly true for small sections of some religious communities where teachings and dogma from holy texts are interpreted with a pathological desire for purity to the point of incompatibility with modern life. When this happens, we need to tackle it decisively to uphold the multicultural complexion of the region.

If only reality were always so clear-cut. The view on the ground often yields a more complex story. After all, there is an important distinction between individual hardline clerics who denigrate other faiths or call for greater segregation, and the general societal increase in religiosity. The latter

can be for a variety of reasons such as desire for greater life-meaning, the need for spiritual fulfilment or purpose, or even something as mundane as peer-pressure.

From a sociological perspective, religiosity can be measured. How many times do you go to church or the temple? How many times a day do you pray? How often do you read or listen to religious materials in your private time? How much do you spend on religious products? How much of your appearance and dressing is reflective of your religious beliefs?

We then measure these over a period of time to make an informed statement on whether religiosity has intensified or diminished. But such a statement must not overreach in its conclusions because an increase in religious activities does not automatically signify millennialism or intolerance.

Another reason for not overreaching in our conclusions is, ironically, religion's evolutionary ability to adapt to contemporary trends and political needs. People do not become religious only for spiritual reasons but also to send political and cultural signals to the rest of the society. It has been too easy for pundits to miss this much subtler signaling in their explanations of overt religious practices because they see only what they want to see, and this has been detrimental to our understanding of the region.

To avoid mistaking the symptoms for cause, we need researchers to walk the ground. Take for example the recent Indonesian National Survey, commissioned by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. It found that the vast majority of Indonesian women believed that they should wear the hijab. More interestingly, the better educated the women were, the more likely they would wear the hijab. A superficial reading of this finding would conclude that religious conservatism is growing because of the embrace of the hijab. This would, in turn, stoke latent concerns that Indonesians are cozying up to an Islamic conservatism closely linked to Wahhabism or radicalism in order to resurrect a dated Islamic culture for contemporary society.

However, as ISEAS researchers rightfully observe, "What is often neglected in understanding this kind of conservatism, which is different from other forms of conservatism, is its association with capitalism, market forces and global trends."

It is not uncommon to see the hijab on international fashion runways or magazines. Hence, though the hijab remains a symbol of oppression among some Western liberals, Indonesian women view it as a fashion accessory that is comfortingly familiar. "Thus, the hijab is getting more ubiquitous in Indonesia not just because Muslim women

**“Another reason for not overreaching in our conclusions is, ironically, religion’s evolutionary ability to adapt to contemporary trends and political needs. People do not become religious only for spiritual reasons but also to send political and cultural signals to the rest of the society.”**

are getting more conservative, but because they are getting more *fashionably* conservative.”

In other words, religious symbols and garb, like any form of culture can be co-opted by fashion and mass consumerism. When this happens, the hijab is imbued with multiple meanings from symbol of conservatism, heightened religiosity, to an expression of Indonesian individual aesthetic distinct from Western fashion. It is crucial that researchers of Southeast Asia are able to tease out these different meanings.

The same lesson holds when we cross over to mainland Southeast Asia into the highlands of Vietnam to look at the Hmong community's conversion to Protestantism. Scholars have argued that the Hmong community in Vietnam found Christianity to be a politically helpful option because of their marginal status. Christianity's association with colonial authority and the West gave local Hmong communities political leverage in their asymmetrical relationship with local authorities or the state. As Christians, they believed that they transcended their minority status and became part of a global community, and could thus rely on new alliances and networks to pay careful attention to their plight in lieu of state assistance. Meanwhile, over in Thailand, Christian conversion was a useful means for the Hmong minorities to retain their Hmong identity without being absorbed by the Thai state.

We see the same pattern playing out in Malaysia with the trends of growing Islamisation and Arabisation within the Malay community and in the public sphere. ISEAS' 2017 Johor Survey to ascertain the attitudes of Johor residents towards a variety of issues, including religion, found that an overwhelming majority of Malay respondents (89%) agreed with the statement "Malaysia is an Islamic state". However, a majority of these Malay respondents (75%), albeit smaller, also agreed that *hudud* laws should apply to Muslims only. If extrapolated, these figures suggest that, for now at least, the majority of Malay-Muslims in Malaysia continue to abide by the boundaries of their multicultural society despite their growing religiosity. The million-dollar question is how long this will hold out.

Religiosity is a complex phenomenon. This however does not preclude the fact that the influence of religion – of different stripes – in politics is on the rise, and that conservatism is not exclusive to Islam. It is precisely because of this complexity that we need to get a better handle on this trend, especially as religion seeps into the public sphere in more ways than before. ■

*Dr. Terence Chong is Deputy Director of ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. He is the Principal Investigator of the Social Science Research Thematic Grant project on "Christianity in Southeast Asia: Comparative Growth, Politics and Networks in Urban Centres." He is also editor of Pentecostal Megachurches in Southeast Asia: Negotiating Class, Consumption and the Nation (ISEAS, forthcoming).*

# Framing Conservatism in Religion

**NORSHAHRI SAAT, FAUZAN ARIF ROSLEE and NUR DIYANA ZAIT**  
*examine the emerging disjunction of moderate and conservative Islam in the region.*

A Pew Research Centre study in 2015 indicated that the world is becoming more religious. The rise in piety is generally a non-issue, but the rise of religious conservatism across all religions is a cause of concern. Southeast Asia is not excluded in witnessing stricter observance of religious practices among the faithful.

However, religious conservatism does not necessarily equate to radicalism because conservatism can manifest in many forms. It seeks to restore and preserve “original” religious beliefs and practices popularly espoused by adherents of faith groups, which can be a boon or a bane to progress. Conservatism becomes a problem when progressive ideas are to be outright rejected. Religious conservatives may resort to rhetorical methods against those whom they see as threatening their beliefs. They also apply labels such as “liberals,” regarding them to be synonymous with deviants.

In Singapore, the rise of religious conservatism among the majority Sunni Muslim community is evident through the surge of hate speech on social media condemning the minority Shias. This occurred despite the fact that Shias have made significant contributions to the social well-being of the Singapore Muslim community over the last few decades. For instance, both Sunni and Shia Muslims in Singapore had worked together to establish the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), a collaboration made possible by the two communities’ mutual respect and harmonious co-existence for over a century. Of course, one could not rule out the systemic banning and crackdown on Shias by the Malaysian authorities across the causeway as a causal factor to the emergence of such aversions in Singapore.

The increase in religious conservatism among the Muslim community is also evident through their dismissive attitudes towards Pink Dot gathering. The community associates the gathering with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Conservative Muslim individuals organised a counter-campaign, joining forces with like-minded Christian groups, to affirm family values.

**“Southeast Asia is not excluded in witnessing stricter observance of religious practices among the faithful... Conservatism becomes a problem when progressive ideas are to be outright rejected.”**

In other parts of Southeast Asia, Islamist parties such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in Indonesia and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) in Malaysia have gained popular support and have been advocating for the institutionalisation of shariah in their respective countries. Recently, FPI and PAS have successfully widened their support base by rallying members of the ruling elites towards their cause.

Conservatism is not only a Muslim problem. The conservatism trend in Islam is also seen in other major religions, i.e. Christianity and Buddhism, albeit to a lesser extent and at smaller scope. In Singapore, the attempt by some Christians to take over the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) in order to curtail the support for homosexuality is an example of how conservatism is also apparent in other faith groups. Besides that, the Ma Ba Tha Buddhist movement, which calls for the protection of Myanmar from the threat of Islam and Muslims, demonstrates yet another clear indication of a general rise in religious conservatism within Southeast Asia.

### MODERATE OR PURE MUSLIMS?

Southeast Asian Muslims have always prided themselves to be the upholders of “moderate” Islam. Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia, for example, promotes a form of religious observance under the brand of “Islam Nusantara,” or Archipelagic Islam. This advocacy essentially aims to unite Muslims in the archipelago through the practice of the moderate Islam which takes into account contextual circumstances of a society. Similarly, in Malaysia, the slogan of “Islam Wasatiyyah” or “Moderate Islam” is trumpeted across the country to reflect the progressive, yet principled practice of Islam that is deeply-rooted within the significant Islamic heritage of yore.

Nevertheless, Islamic conservatism is gaining ground in the region. A recent example could be observed in the Malaysian state of Johor through the short-lived presence of Muslim-only laundromats which refused service to non-Muslims for “hygienic” reasons. This policy initially got the nod of approval from the former and current Mufti of Johor. However, the Sultan of Johor intervened with his disapproval and demanded an apology from the laundromat owner for such an exclusivist service policy.

Similarly in Indonesia, the FPI had mobilised thousands of Muslims to the streets of Jakarta to demand the prosecution of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (“Ahok”), the then-governor of Jakarta for his alleged blasphemous remarks on the Quran. Ahok, a Christian of Chinese descent, while speaking to his constituents, was misunderstood to have claimed that the Quran does not forbid Muslims from voting a non-Muslim for a leader. Despite Ahok’s commendable track record in office, he lost the Jakarta gubernatorial election to Anies Baswedan, a Muslim candidate backed by Islamist parties.

These instances illustrate how some Muslim communities have been polarised into an exclusive disjunction, giving

the more assertive socio-political players the authority to claim the truth and condemn all others who do not conform. However, this approach is not confined within those parties; rather it is a representation of the same mentality that has permeated into the larger Muslim community. What follows is the demonisation of Muslims by Muslims themselves, citing that the former are “less Muslim” for not adhering to the “pure” teachings of Islam. If anything, these episodes indicate the rise of religious conservatism over the years, especially within Islam in the region.

### ASPIRING FOR A MODERATE ISLAM

In general, Islam as practiced in this region can be regarded as homogenous in its approach – which adopts the Sunni faith and Shafie school of jurisprudence– but heterogeneous in praxis. Such a distinction is imperative as the Malay Archipelago and the larger Southeast Asia are home to starkly different communities and cultures, which do not afford them a one-size-fits-all style of Islam.

Although Muslim communities in Southeast Asia have always professed to practicing a moderate form of Islam, recent episodes of conservatism and exclusivism have challenged this contention. But there has been pushback against this worrisome trend. Of note is the rare move by the nine monarchs of Malaysia issuing a joint royal decree reiterating the imperative for Muslims in the country to uphold moderate Islam following the “exclusive laundromat” episode in Johor.

How then can Muslims uphold a truly moderate form of Islam? The answer lies in the need to close the education gap between religious authorities and the masses. The Muslim masses need to be inculcated with education on Islam that is congruent to the context of the society they are living in. This is where the religious preachers play an integral role in ensuring the kind of religious instruction given does not contradict the position of the religious authorities on any given matter.

The proliferation of social media where information gets shared without any bounds poses a great challenge to these communication efforts. The authorities should therefore engage in active advocacy through new media to ensure that the brand of moderate Islam gets heard, and eventually internalised by their respective Muslim communities. More importantly, messaging from “top to bottom” is only effective when the leadership is consistently moderate. That requires constant and conscious efforts at the top not to buckle under populist pressure or electoral temptations and stay firmly on the moderate line. ■

*Dr. Norshahril Saat is Fellow and Co-Coordinator of the Indonesia Studies Programme. He is the Principal Investigator of the Social Science Research Thematic Grant project on “Singapore’s Islamic Studies Graduates: Their Role and Impact in a Plural Society.” Mr. Fauzan Arif Roslee and Ms. Nur Diyana Zait are Research Officers at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.*

# The Rise of Megachurches in Southeast Asia

**JEANEY YIP** looks into how the prosperity gospel has redefined Christianity in Southeast Asia and contributed to the mushrooming of megachurches.

The experience is emotionally charged and spectacular. The music is modern and entertaining, while the message is motivating and empowering. This is a contemporary megachurch that is full of energy and over-flowing with eager church-goers. With sermon messages such as “Discover your inheritance in Christ” or “God wants you to prosper”, the rise of what has become labelled as the prosperity gospel is thriving in metropolitan cities of Southeast Asia. From Singapore to Jakarta, megachurches that proclaim prosperity in life as a sign of God’s blessings represent a growing feature in contemporary Christianity in the region.

Associated with upward mobility, middle-class aspirations and technological sophistication, megachurches in these

urban cities are hugely popular with ‘English speaking’ segments of the population and have successfully attracted the young, the professionals, and other aspiring individuals. In fact, the rise of megachurches is correlated to the growing appeal of religion amongst the young across different religious stripes, dispelling the myth that the young is less inclined toward religion.

There is no ‘typical megachurch model’ apart from size. Their explosive growth in numbers is a testament to their popularity, which may serve as an attractive alternative to mainstream Christianity (Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and the like). Generally being associated with, and said to originate from the United States, megachurches tap onto the aspirational nature of prosperity theology. The other part

A typical scene of worshippers at a megachurch in Jakarta.



© Gereja Reformed Injili Indonesia

of their success lies in their adoption of active marketing techniques such as branding, market segmentation and effective messaging.

Gaining momentum in Southeast Asia since the 1980s, the megachurch phenomenon is thriving in Southeast Asian big cities (City Harvest Church and New Creation Church in Singapore, Jakarta Praise Community Church in Jakarta, Mawar Sharon Church and Bethany Indonesian Church in Surabaya, Calvary Christian Church in Kuala Lumpur, and Victory Church in Manila, to name a few). These megachurches normally rely on their transnational network of similar churches (in style and ideology) in offering a diverse spectrum of service experience. They are often influenced by each other, as seen in how name brand pastors like Stephen Tong and Joseph Prince regularly travel around the region to deliver sermons in their counterpart churches.

The appeal and growth of this type of branded non-denominational megachurches is context specific. While earlier versions of prosperity-preaching Pentecostal churches attracted churchgoers from lower socio-economic status, the contemporary prosperity gospel appears to be more aligned with middle-class ideals (with the exception of the Philippines where megachurches are very popular among the working class). This is evident in how a lot of megachurches, despite their humble beginnings starting from someone's home, a hired theatre or a hotel function room, eventually embark on ambitious projects to build big and sophisticated church buildings. These buildings can serve as conference venues capable of hosting events, rallies, concerts or performances of gigantic proportions. With a fixation on size and growth, these buildings become a tangible manifestation of the prosperity gospel.

While earlier versions of the prosperity gospel focused on material wealth (or the health and wealth gospel), the megachurch operations often mix business and religion. It is not uncommon that proselytising the Gospel occurs alongside serving people with business operations that sell merchandise and services such as childcare centres and property investments. This is besides substantial donations mobilised from the expanding flock. This mixing often draws criticisms from both religious and secular counterparts, and sometimes ends up in scandals, most notably the case of church funds misuse involving Kong Hee, the senior pastor of Singapore's City Harvest Church. It remains to be seen how the prevalence of megachurches and the prosperity gospel has had any impact on the divide between the rich and the poor, especially in urban environments where the "haves" and the "have-nots" often live in close proximity to each other.

Of late, the expansion of megachurches is watched with concern by adherents of other faiths in the region. This has led to megachurches standing in the toxic intersection of religion and politics even though most megachurches remain apolitical in nature. In Indonesia, the sustained

**“Associated with upward mobility, middle-class aspirations and technological sophistication, megachurches in these urban cities are hugely popular with ‘English speaking’ segments of the population and have successfully attracted the young, the professionals, and other aspiring individuals.”**

attacks against former Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja “Ahok” Purnama come from hard-line Islamist elements who contend that his belonging to this emerging strand of Christianity should disqualify him from holding such a high public office. In Malaysia and Singapore, the megachurches are often vanguards in conservative popular movements such as the one against LGBT rights. Whether on its own volition or otherwise, megachurches may find themselves embroiled in politics and social movements.

The rise in the number of “mega-churchgoers” corresponds to the growing middle class in Southeast Asia, and many young people in the region longing for empowerment in their lives. This new form of “applied” religion, with the aid of pop culture and modern media, shows its practicality and adaptability to an ever expanding metropolitan space across the region. The potential for megachurches to emerge as an effective political and social force should not be downplayed. For example, how will this growing phenomenon alter the contours of political alignment in the Philippines where the Catholic Church has been the dominant religious institution?

The growth of the megachurches demonstrates that religion is dynamic and complex. Understanding the role and impact of religion in contemporary Southeast Asia cannot be done just by studying “establishment” religions (i.e., Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism). The megachurch phenomenon is redrawing the boundaries within Christianity just as it is fast becoming a factor in inter-faith relations. ■

*Dr. Jeaney Yip is Lecturer in Marketing at the University of Sydney Business School.*

# Age-Old Traditions and New Expressions

**BROOKE SCHEDNECK** shares with us the evolution of Buddhism in the region in pace with worldly change and modernity.

A number of noteworthy trends within the Buddhist religion have recently emerged in mainland Southeast Asia, especially Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. It is apparent that social media and globalisation are significant factors contributing to these trends.

Social media has brought to the public domain scandals within Buddhist monastic institutions as well as opening debates about the appropriate behavior of monks. Coverage of some aspects of financial, sexual, or drug-related scandals involving Buddhist monks has become a staple of the Thai media landscape, but few can rival the sensational disclosures about the Wat Dhammakaya and its abbot, Phra Dhammachayo. Recently, the monastery and its leader grabbed the headlines with allegations of embezzlement, money laundering, and land encroachment from the 1990s, ending in a lockdown of the temple earlier this year.

This large scandal with significant media coverage seemed to open the door for reporting on other kinds of inappropriate behavior among monastics. From Luangpu Nenkham, who famously left Thailand on a private jet wearing designer sunglasses, to monks winning the lottery, monastic behavior is being questioned, critiqued, and debated in new ways. As Thai Buddhists increasingly capture photos and videos of inappropriate monastic behavior on their cell phones, these materials become viral through social media. With this wide coverage of monastic scandals, the most debated topic seems to be if Buddhism is actually in decline.

Buddhist-Muslim conflicts are also incited and inflamed over social media as can be seen in the case involving the Rohingya Muslims and the Rakhine Buddhists in the

Rakhine State of Myanmar. Since 2012, occasional eruptions of violence have sent hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas fleeing the country for Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand in vulnerable conditions. Meanwhile, international aid to Rohingya refugee camps has fueled already inflammatory Burmese Buddhist rhetoric against the Rohingyas. This rhetoric envisions Muslims as a threat to the Buddhist nation of Myanmar. Particular Buddhist figures such as U Wirathu and organisations such as MaBaTha have been especially vocal in inciting violence.

Of course, Buddhism has always been a political force in the region, perhaps made most famous by the images of self-immolating monks during the Vietnam War. Especially in relatively closed societies where political participation is circumscribed, the moral authority of Buddhism remains an avenue for political expression and dissent.

Apart from social media, globalisation has impacted the Buddhism landscape in Southeast Asia in profound ways. Eased restrictions on visas for Chinese to Thailand and increased movements of Chinese developers and workers into Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos have opened up new financial opportunities for Buddhist temples across the region. With growing numbers of visitors from mainland China, the benefits from tourism loom larger and leaders of temples

search for ways to manage and mobilise resources from this new audience. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, Chinese tourists are a major part of the reason why a number of popular temples are now charging a foreign entrance fee. Monastic leaders continue to look for creative ways to bring in money to their temples, including setting up temple coffee shops. This apparent commercialisation of Buddhism makes an important contribution to the maintenance and upkeep of the temples.

**“Globalisation and social media have created new expressions of Buddhist religiosity and possibilities for exchange among the global Buddhist community and between Buddhist monastics and lay Buddhists.”**





Monks gather at dawn for almsgiving in Luang Prabang.

Wikimedia Commons

The influence of globalisation is also manifest in the fact that international Buddhist organisations have made further inroads into the region. The Taiwan-based Tzu Chi Foundation, a philanthropic Buddhist organisation, has made its presence felt in Southeast Asia with regional offices in Bangkok and Chiang Mai and branch offices in Phnom Penh and Yangon. Disaster relief and other services provided by this group are attractive to followers who are interested in volunteer work. Soka Gakkai has also moved into Southeast Asia with youth study groups and peace-training courses held in Bangkok with representatives from Cambodia and Laos. The organisation's appeal, with branches in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, is based on a simple chanting technique, and a focus on peace-building. This phenomenon highlights the increasingly porous divide between the spiritual and social realms. The involvement of the Tzu Chi Foundation and Soka Gakkai in humanitarian disaster relief operations and peace work broadens and brings a new dimension to the traditional welfare and charity work by religious organisations.

In another example of globalisation effects, the ordination of Theravada female monks (*bhikkhuni*) has been hotly debated in Thailand since 2001 when Dhammananda Bhikkhuni first received novice ordination in Sri Lanka.

This Theravada female ordination lineage has been revived in Sri Lanka since 1998 but many Southeast Asian Buddhists have not embraced this. Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country to have communities of female monks, with three groups located in Central, Northern, and Southern Thailand. There is even less acceptance in Myanmar where a female monk, upon return to her country from studying in Sri Lanka, was thrown into prison for wearing the robes of a fully ordained woman in 2005. This kind of controversy has not surfaced in Cambodia or Laos, where there are precept nuns but no discussion thus far of female monks.

Globalisation and social media have created new expressions of Buddhist religiosity and possibilities for exchange among the global Buddhist community and between Buddhist monastics and lay Buddhists. Buddhist leaders are finding ways to manage emerging challenges and make the most of new opportunities arising from these global forces. The on-going trends in Buddhism serve to further prove the point that religion is not merely confined to the social and spiritual realms, but also transcends into the political and economic spheres. ■

*Dr. Brooke Schedneck is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee.*

# Mapping Memory

*Through her art, Tiffany Chung attempts to articulate deep traumas in a world divided.*

BY CHERYL TEH

At the Central Pavilion of the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2015, ink bloomed on paper, like the dying wisps of floating clouds. Visitors stopped to marvel at the exquisite detail on the works displayed on the stark white walls – pieces that conveyed a profound sense of conflict and division, illustrated through lustrous fields of green and gold split by spidery veins of vermilion, or stark, pitch-black lines cleaving a city into two.

These maps at the Biennale, collectively titled ‘Syria Project’, were part of Vietnamese contemporary artist Tiffany Chung’s exhibition, *“Finding one’s shadow in ruins and rubble”*. In galleries worldwide, from New York to Japan and the UAE, Chung has since presented a complex compilation of historically-accurate topographies. These maps are cartographic representations of distinct geographical locations torn apart by growth, decline or conflict – most prominently, the Kobe 1995 earthquake; the on-going conflict in Syria, and the battlefields of the Vietnam War.

Chung’s life was also hit by war and displacement. Her family fled her

hometown Da Nang in the wake of the Vietnam War, eventually settling in the United States. Chung has since returned to Vietnam, and is now based in Ho Chi Minh City, where she is best known for her rich oeuvre of drawings, sculptures and photographs that critically examine topics close to her heart – history, displacement, migration, conflict, and urban progress.

From her studio in Vietnam, she has conceptualised masterpieces that have garnered a host of accolades, including a 2010 New York Art Matters Grant, a prized place at the Asia Pacific Triennial, and the Sharjah Biennial Artist Prize in 2013. Chung’s works are also held in the collections of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (Japan), the Queensland Art Gallery (Australia), and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (the United States).

Notable installations by Chung include *“Stored in a jar: monsoon, drowning fish, color of water, and the floating world”*, displayed at the 2011 Singapore Biennale, *“Roaming with the dawn – snow drifts, rain falls, desert wind blows”*, at the 7<sup>th</sup> Asia-Pacific Triennial

of Contemporary Art in Queensland, Australia, and *“Archaeology Project for Future Remembrance”* (2013), at Galerie Quynh in Ho Chi Minh City.

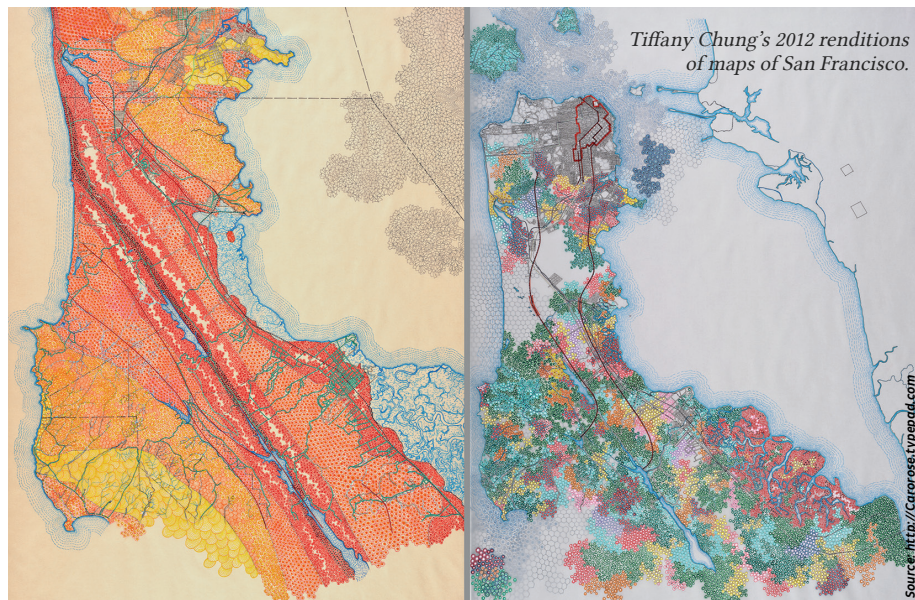
From Ho Chi Minh City, Chung has also leveraged her influence in the contemporary art world to found a non-profit, artist-initiated independent gallery space, Sàn Art. This gallery provides valuable resources and opportunities to up-and-coming Vietnamese creatives, assisting in the process of promoting and showcasing their works.

The Vietnam War has affected Chung deeply. Having been a refugee herself, Chung has worked extensively to understand the ‘versions’ of these conflicts being told from the perspectives of both South and North Vietnam, as well as of the American. Yet, Chung felt strongly that stories of war were rarely, if ever, told by the people who experienced it first-hand, their stories fading away and being lost in the vicissitudes of history.

Chung has since presented an installation of new works at Art Basel Hong Kong in 2016, debuting the first part of her *The Vietnam Exodus* project – cartographic drawings that aimed to shed light on the experiences of Vietnamese refugees via a visual representation of demographic statistics, refugee networks, detention centres, and geographical divides.

Drawing from her in-depth studies of humanitarian conflicts and the decline of cities, Chung now seeks to provide an alternative, lesser-heard narrative – one that not only acknowledges the trauma of war but also ensures that these struggles will serve as critical lessons in managing current and future refugee crises around the world. Chung has, truly, opened the world’s eyes to the increasingly vibrant and expanding world of contemporary art in Vietnam – adding a burst of colour to the exciting canvas that is the Southeast Asian art world. ■

*Ms. Cheryl Teh is Research Associate at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.*





Vang Vieng's picturesque countryside.

Wikimedia Commons

# Vang Vieng: Back to Nature

*The backpacker's paradise is revealing its true allure by shedding its 'wild wild west' pedigree.*

BY NUR AZIEMAH AZIZ

Nestled half way between Laos' capital city Vientiane and its premier travel destination Luang Prabang lies the small sleepy town of Vang Vieng. If Luang Prabang is a popular attraction to those who love to behold Laotian architectural and artistic heritage, Vang Vieng has earned its place on the Banana Pancake Trail by drawing droves of backpackers and adventurers from all around the world seeking to venture off the beaten track on a dime.

Vang Vieng in the mid-2000s was infamously known as a haven for backpackers indulging in hedonistic deeds, be it raging all night at extreme rave parties or tubing down the Nam Song River. But starting from 2012, Vang Vieng has cleaned up and shed off its "wild" image. The hippies' mania over Vang Vieng has faded away, leaving a much more tranquil and charming town.

Visitors are welcomed to Vang Vieng with views of lush green paddy fields and limestone cliffs. And the picturesque landscape keeps unfolding

like an endless pastoral painting as they ride on their rented bikes or motorcycles on uneven roads. Dotted around the town are caves, nature trails and mountains teeming with flourishing flora and fauna. As part of Vang Vieng's plans to attract tourists and move past its chequered image, a number of tour operators are now focused on promoting ecotourism with adrenaline packed adventures from easy hikes and cave tours to adventure sports such as ziplining, kayaking and rock climbing.

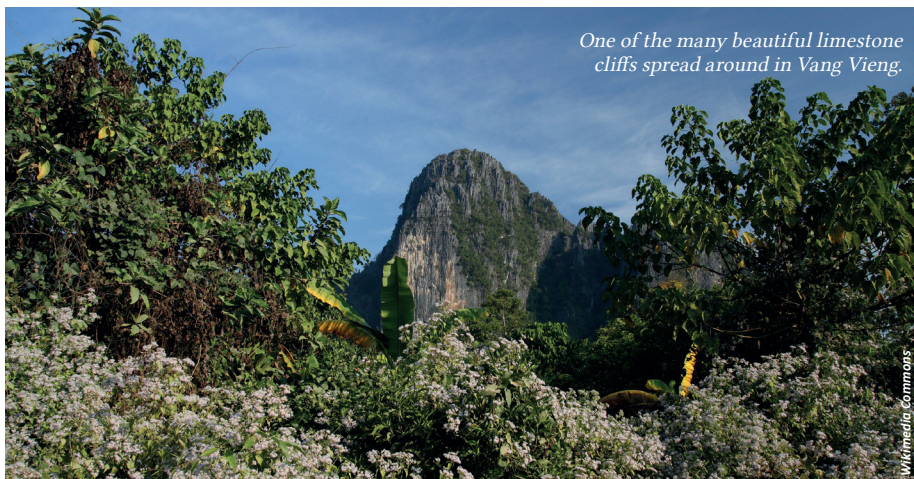
Tham Nam water cave is famous for the unique experience of cave tubing as visitors sitting on a tube have to pull themselves through the cave by ropes. Tham Chang cave may not offer an 'Indiana Jones' experience but it holds a special place in the hearts of the locals because of its rich history. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was used as a bunker against the Yunnanese invaders and provided refuge for villagers who escaped from the scourge of war. From Tham Chang, visitors can enjoy an unspoiled view of Vang Vieng's breathtaking karst landscape of cliffs and mountains.

Located 6km west from the town is Tham Phu Kham cave where visitors are treated to a maze of nooks and crannies filled with stalactites and stalagmites and bedazzled by the beautiful blue lagoon at the bottom. The lagoon is an ideal place for lounging with friends over snacks, followed by a dip into the cooling beautiful blue waters for a respite from the tropical heat. Local villagers also frequent Tham Phu Kham to light incense and pay homage to a bronze reclining Buddha statue enshrined in the first chamber of the cave.

As Vang Vieng continues to redefine itself, the relaxing and peaceful atmosphere is still present all around the town. The hustle bustle of city life is worlds away as one floats down the Nam Song river, dives into the many beautiful aquamarine swimming holes, or bikes through the idyllic Lao countryside and meets with amiable villagers along the river bank. As the day winds down, one can behold the ethereal sight of the skies turning into hues of fiery orange and pink while the karst formation slowly fades from green to grey.

Vang Vieng is set to embrace ecotourism in its make-over to be a clean and green destination. Shedding its own hedonistic past does not disconnect Vang Vieng from visitors. Instead, it unveils Vang Vieng's true allure as one of ASEAN's nature gems that reaches out to travellers and explorers who are keen to discover their pristine beauty. ■

*Ms. Nur Aziemah Aziz is Research Officer at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.*



One of the many beautiful limestone cliffs spread around in Vang Vieng.

Wikimedia Commons

# A Risen China and the Dawn of a New Era?

*The 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China was anything but conventional. MERRIDEN VARRALL explores what it would mean for China and the world.*



**DR. MERRIDEN VARRALL** is Director, East Asia Program at the Lowy Institute. Before joining the Lowy Institute, Merriden was the Assistant Country Director and Senior Policy Advisor at UNDP China, taught at the China Foreign Affairs University, and had a stint with the Australian Treasury. She received her PhD in Political Anthropology from Macquarie University and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

**AF: President Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era is now enshrined into the Communist Party of China's (CPC) Constitution. How does it add value to or differentiate from his predecessors' thoughts?**

**MV:** Xi Jinping's thought on a new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics is in many ways a continuation and consolidation of a trend since Hu Jintao was in power – a turning away from 'Western' approaches to modernisation, and a determination to chart a unique course for China's future. However Xi's Thought also seems to signal a clear shift away from Deng Xiaoping's maxim of "biding one's time and hiding one's light." It also identifies a new "principal contradiction" of inequality rather than "backward social production" as the primary challenge for Chinese society.

**AF: Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress, President Xi was elevated to "core leader." What is the significance of this designation?**

**MV:** The designation of core leader is not exclusive to Xi. Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao were also accorded this status. It in itself does not indicate or prescribe how much actual power a leader has.

**AF: In a move that did not cause much surprise, President Xi went against convention in not designating a successor. What is the rationale of this move?**

**MV:** Many analysts conclude that this indicates Xi's intention of holding on to power for longer than two terms. This is of

course not impossible, but is not the only valid interpretation. In the past, designating an heir has caused instability and infighting, and allowed opportunities for alliances to form around the successor. Not designating anyone to take over allows Xi to wait and see how various individuals perform in the next five years, and maximise the focus on getting on with the job of governing, with him at the helm.

**AF: President Xi Jinping's firm grip of power heralds a new era of strong man politics in China. Is this the end of "collective leadership" in the CPC?**

**MV:** It is too early to say it is the end of collective leadership. While Xi has certainly consolidated control, he is not the unilateral and unopposed decision-maker. And although he has considerable power now, his methods are not universally welcomed among the Chinese elite. It is not impossible that the pendulum could swing back towards the Deng and Hu approach in the future.

**AF: The 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress put greater emphasis on balanced and sustainable development. Does this suggest that China is embracing slower growth from now on? And what would this mean to the world economy?**

**MV:** CPC legitimacy depends on improvements to the Chinese people's quality of life. The GDP numbers are neither here nor there to most Chinese. Slower growth, but more sustainable development, meaning breathable air, drinkable water, and food safe for consumption, is now the focus – at least from the top levels of government. Even slow

growth in China is far better for the global economy than environmental disaster or social and political unrest.

**AF: The 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress is suffused with full confidence in “Chinese wisdom” or “Chinese solution”. How would this impact China’s projection of its soft power abroad and what is China’s chance of success in this realm?**

**MV:** The messaging around confidence in Chinese wisdom at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress is largely for the domestic audience. It equates to ‘trust us, we can do better doing things our own way’. This does not mean that China wants to export its approach to others – it firmly believes in its own uniqueness. However, the message would have some resonance to other countries who do not find the ‘Western model’ for politics and economics suitable for them, for whatever reasons.

**AF: With the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation now becoming the overarching purpose of the CPC, do you expect Chinese nationalism to be on the rise and what are the possible implications in foreign policy terms?**

**MV:** Chinese nationalism has been strong for many years. What is also rising is broader anti-foreign sentiment. This is true both among elites and their policies, as well as among ordinary people. Since around the time of the global financial crisis, Chinese people increasingly feel that they do not need any help from the outside world to develop and become an important international actor. This certainly has implications for how China conducts its foreign policy. I would expect even less patience for external advice on how to behave and what to do.

**AF: It is observed that the promotion of Mr. Yang Jiechi, State Councilor and former Foreign Minister, to the Politburo has elevated the importance of foreign policy under Xi’s era. What is your take on this?**

**MV:** The promotion of Mr Yang does suggest that foreign policy is more important under Xi, particularly given the inclusion of the Belt and Road Initiative into the Party Constitution.

**AF: A consistent message throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress is to build a China that is not only rich but also strong. What implications would this entail to Southeast Asia and beyond?**

**MV:** Again, much of this 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress messaging about China’s rejuvenation is targeted at the national audience – the long-awaited recovery from the ‘Century of Humiliation’ at the hands of foreign powers is seen to be close. For Southeast Asia, this means that China sees itself as being able to resume what it sees as its “natural” role as the central actor in the region. It sees regional relations not in Westphalian terms as horizontal interactions among equal states, but as a familial hierarchy, with itself as the benevolent father figure.

**AF: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has also been written into the CPC’s Constitution. How will this affect the implementation of the BRI?**

**MV:** Enshrining the BRI into the CPC’s Constitution strongly suggests that this is a central priority for the Party. It is to

be part of Xi’s legacy of rejuvenation. However, this does not necessarily indicate that the BRI is – or will be in the immediate future – a coherently designed and executed strategy under the clear direction of the Party-state. That would be to presume that the BRI adds up to more than the sum of its parts. It is still an agglomeration of multiple actors with various agendas, experiences, and capabilities. Some projects will “succeed” and others will not. What matters is that the Chinese people see it as China making headway in the world, and at the same time addressing poverty and underdevelopment in China, thereby validating the CPC under Xi’s leadership.

**AF: During the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress, President Xi Jinping highlighted the building of artificial islands in the South China Sea as a major achievement. What would be the next steps in this trajectory in your view?**

**MV:** China’s view of the South China Sea’s strategic importance is defensive and reflects a politically expedient and carefully maintained psychological scar. It sees the South China Sea as the safety buffer between it and Western interference – in a way, similar to how it sees North Korea. The narrative around China’s “humiliation” is that it came from the sea, and China must prevent that from ever happening again. The next steps are difficult to know, but there will not be any pullback.

**AF: The age of “hiding your brilliance and biding your time” is definitely over and China is soaring into the world stage with confidence. Do you agree with this assessment and why?**

**MV:** It seems that Xi believes that China has bided its time quite long enough, and now is the moment for China to re-emerge as a prominent global actor. It is important to remember though that there is a difference between rhetoric (targeted primarily at domestic audiences), and will and capability. China’s “opening up” to the world is still recent, and as yet its real capacity to undertake any practical responsibility in global governance is still underdeveloped.

**AF: President Xi’s report to the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress reads like a blueprint for China to emerge as the world’s leading power. Is the Chinese leader setting the foundation for China to overtake the US in the coming decades?**

**MV:** The 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress is something like a mid-term review for Xi and the CPC. This means that Xi reported to the Chinese people on progress so far against the goals set out at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, and enumerated the challenges still to come. CPC legitimacy has for some time rested on two pillars – improvements in material well-being for Chinese people, and a sense of overcoming the humiliation and weakness caused by foreign incursions. As such, Xi needed to ensure that his report to the Chinese people painted the picture of a strong, wealthy, respected and relevant China. People should not take this to mean that China has any immediate interest in or any real capability to take over the US’ global role. Unless that is good for the CPC – which they do not currently see it as being – it is not important. ■

# The Nippon Maru: Building Bridges of Friendship at Sea

**JASON SALIM** takes us on board the Ship for Southeast Asian Youth Programme – a hallmark of ASEAN-Japan people-to-people connectivity.

Imagine going onboard a ship for more than a month with no one else except your peers. Sailing across the vast waters from Tokyo Bay through the Southeast Asian archipelago into the coasts of Indochina, you will get to bond with your fellow sojourners. As you come to know each other, friendships blossom across nationalities and cultures. This, in short, is what the annual Ship for Southeast Asian Youth Programme (SSEAYP) is all about.

SSEAYP started as a joint initiative between ASEAN countries and the Japanese government all the way back in 1974 – three years before Japan became ASEAN’s formal dialogue partner. When it was first conceived, it was meant to be an opportunity for Japanese and Southeast Asian youths to

share a common sense of wanderlust and adventure whilst collaborating with each other on projects that would benefit some part of the host country for the year.

However, it also had another essential purpose. As the programme was started merely less than 30 years following the end of World War II, its conception was intended to foster greater understanding between the Japanese and Southeast Asian peoples, and afford them a chance to move ASEAN-Japan relations beyond their troubled past. This epitome of people-to-people diplomacy also took place around the time that Japanese corporations were beginning to invest robustly in the region, turning old foes to new friends and partners.

Scenes of youths enjoying themselves on board the Nippon Maru.



**“Beyond the fun and joy of interacting with fellow young people, SSEAYP serves the ultimate purpose of gelling Southeast Asian and Japanese youths together in the spirit of amity and friendship.”**



The Nippon Maru all decked out for SSEAYP.

There have been 44 editions of the programme thus far, and over 10,000 youths have sailed the seas under its auspices, which is still primarily funded by the Cabinet Office of Japan. In recent years, there have been close to 300 participants every year, of which 10% hail from Japan and the rest are drawn from the ten ASEAN countries.

As the programme has developed to become a leading platform for Southeast Asian and Japanese young leaders to interact with one another, participants spend a significant amount of time preparing for their role as “mini-ambassadors” for their respective countries. Prior to the programme, each country’s delegation would engage in a three-month period of preparations, honing their English, deepening knowledge of their own country and planning for their national showcases and performances during the cruise. That means an assortment of national costumes, cuisines, profile books, name-cards, handicrafts, plays, dances and even songs.

After the three months, participants will embark on the first leg of the programme – flying to Japan. For most of the participants, a trip to Tokyo would be a thing of dreams. After a few days exploring Tokyo in autumn (the programme normally takes place around October), participants will go aboard the *Nippon Maru*, a luxury cruise ship which for the next 50 days will serve as home to 300-over youths and their facilitators.

From lectures and exhibitions to cultural shows, parties and even morning exercises, the days and nights at sea are packed with opportunities for these youths to mix and mingle with their peers from Japan and ASEAN countries. Of these, the most fascinating ones are perhaps cultural activities that constantly carry participants to different cultures, religions and customs, thereby opening their eyes to the cultural richness in the region.

The 2015 programme, for example, offered enriching experiences that included Myanmar and Vietnamese food, traditional dances of Bali and Okinawa, tea ceremony, handicrafts with Indonesian batik fabric or Cambodian symbolic leaves, and Arabic and Japanese calligraphy.

Trying each other’s food, learning each other’s languages, and wearing each other’s costumes – there can be no better way to develop people-to-people connectivity and lasting friendships among the future movers and shakers of ASEAN and Japan.

Participants also engage in substantive discussions on various issues of relevance to their life, especially youth entrepreneurship and youth participation in social activities. Other issues of common interest and concern such as environment, education, health and ASEAN-Japan cooperation feature high on the agenda. Through these exchanges of views, not only do they get to improve their English but also develop their communication and presentation skills. Perhaps an even more valuable take-away is their exposure to different perspectives that helps expand their horizons and foster their appreciation of diversity.

Another highlight of the programme for these young peoples is the chance to partake in homestay programmes in the various ports-of-call where they live, eat and interact with their “foster parents” from a fellow ASEAN country for several days. These homestay experiences help bring down cultural and national barriers for these young people, most of whom rarely get the opportunity to travel within Southeast Asia. In fact, geographical barriers were brought down when in 2015, Laos – the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia – took part in the homestay programme for the first time.

Beyond the fun and joy of interacting with fellow young people, SSEAYP serves the ultimate purpose of gelling Southeast Asian and Japanese youths together in the spirit of amity and friendship. Through their shared experiences, these youths will fondly remember the cherished memories of their 50 days aboard the *Nippon Maru* and travelling across the region together. To many participants, this experience is a life-changing opportunity. Most importantly, they will take the message of understanding and cooperation to heart when they become the leaders of tomorrow. ■

*Mr. Jason Salim is Research Officer at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.*



*The national flowers of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia and Laos  
(counter-clockwise from top): River Simpor, Rumdul, and Dok Champa*

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