

*ASEAN: A Study of Problems and Prospects*

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**Background:**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a geo-political and economic organisation of ten countries located in Southeast Asia which was established on 8th August 1967. The aims and objectives of ASEAN as enshrined in its founding document, the “Bangkok Declaration” of 1967 are promotion of regional cooperation on matters of common interest in the economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific, and administrative spheres in order to strengthen the foundation for peace, progress and prosperity while being determined to ensure stability of member states and their security from external interference.

At the time of its formation ASEAN did not see itself as an association for formal relations with external powers and it mainly concentrated on developing mutual trust and confidence amongst the member states. After 1970’s the association gained confidence and started linking up with the external powers. Today ASEAN members have strong political, economic and strategic relations with external powers like the US, China, Japan, India and organisations like APT, ASEM etc.

The relationship between ASEAN and India is considered to be the most promising and prospective relations in Asia. India in its quest to evolve into an emerging giant launched its revolutionary *Look East Policy* which over last two decades strengthened India’s economic, political, security and civilisation links with Southeast Asia. India’s Look East Policy is providing an invaluable vent to the North Eastern region to come out of its state of developmental and economic dormancy.

ASEAN has to its credit some great and impressive achievements like for instance ASEAN’s diplomacy helped in fostering peace, progress and stability in the region through initiatives like ZOPFAN, TAC, ARF, AFTA, APEC, ASEAN Concord etc. Since its inception ASEAN has been facing challenges and hindrances which posed threat to its existence like Corregidor Affair, Asian Economic Crisis and South China Sea dispute etc. Apart from these, ASEAN has been facing problems like haze crises, terrorism, human rights violations and transnational crimes which mar the association from realizing its full potential and on this account the critics of ASEAN have been raising questions about the future and relevance of ASEAN.

The criticism however seems to be premature. In the current international scenario ASEAN has become a part of balance of power and has been playing an increasingly important role in the Asia Pacific region in political, strategic as well as economic fields. It is rightly stated

that absence of ASEAN would be regionally destabilizing. ASEAN continues to be relevant and has tremendous prospects and potential for promoting peace prosperity and stability in the region. Selected Socio-economic indicators show that the region has been economically resilient even if there was a marked slowdown in economic growth. “*ASEAN Vision 2020*” adopted at Kuala Lumpur informal summit envisioned creation of stable, prosperous and highly competitive ASEAN region to ensure equitable economic development. This will help in reducing poverty and socio-economic disparities. ASEAN has been experiencing remarkable economic growth. ASEAN is today fourth largest exporting region in the world accounting for 7% of global exports with GDP exceeding US\$ 2.4 trillion. As a result, the region is now recognized as a center of growth open to the world, and is attracting much global attention.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. to study the historical, geographical, economic and political dimensions of ASEAN;
2. to evaluate the aims and objectives of the organisation and how far the same have been realised;
3. to evaluate the significance of the organisation at international level by analyzing and discussing its relations with the major powers (The United States, Japan, China and India);
4. to discuss at length the achievements of ASEAN so far;
5. to examine and discuss in detail the various challenges the association is and has been facing since its inception; and
6. to analyse the relevance and future prospects of the association.

### **Methodology of the Study**

The present research being purely doctrinal, the research methods used for the study have been descriptive and analytical. Both primary and secondary sources have been used. Primary sources included ASEAN documents, Reports, Charters, Declarations, Foreign Affairs record, Annual Reports, Statements of Leaders/Ministers. The secondary source material for the study included books, research articles in reputed national and international journals, newspapers, and online available material etc.

### **Conclusion**

ASEAN’s strength lies in solidarity and cohesiveness of its members. ASEAN has to make efforts to make itself stronger to influence the shaping of global economy. ASEAN members have to work as a strong coherent group in the international negotiating forums to exert influence in world politics and economy. ASEAN members need to bind their economies together more tightly so that they could benefit from each other. ASEAN needs to stress upon cultivating amicable and productive strategic and economic relations with all the major powers to gain enormously from them.