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ASEAN AS AN ORGANISATION · QUESTION AS01 · DEMO

Origins and founding of ASEAN: the 1967 Bangkok Declaration and post-WWII regional context.

ASEAN was founded on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, when the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines signed the **Bangkok Declaration**. The founders were Adam Malik, S. Rajaratnam, Thanat Khoman, Abdul Razak, and Narciso Ramos. Its goals: economic progress, regional peace and security, and mutual cooperation.

This followed years of failed regionalism. **SEATO** (1954) was a military pact against communist China, but only Thailand and the Philippines were genuinely Southeast Asian among its members; it was dissolved in 1977. ASA and MAPHILINDO later collapsed over Indonesia's policy toward Malaysia, but laid groundwork.

The main obstacle was **Konfrontasi**, the 1963–1966 confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia. Singapore, briefly part of Malaysia, was expelled amid ethnic tension and became independent in 1965. ASEAN became possible only after General Suharto ended Konfrontasi after 1965.

Founders kept ASEAN's mandate economic, not military: the US pushed for a defense-oriented body, but members declined, largely because of the Vietnam War. Sources disagree on the deeper motive — US officials call the founding

anti-communist, while Singapore's Rajaratnam framed the goal as avoiding the **Balkanization** of the region and gaining autonomy.

The organization survived the **Sabah crisis** of 1968–1969, a dispute over the Philippines' territorial claim, and held its first summit in Bali in 1976.

■ EXTENDED GLOSSARY

Bangkok Declaration

the 1967 founding document of ASEAN — *Бангкокская декларация*

Konfrontasi

the 1963–1966 Indonesia–Malaysia confrontation — *Конфронтация Индонезии и Малайзии*

SEATO

a 1954 anti-communist military pact — *СЕАТО*

Balkanization

breakup of a region into hostile parts — *«балканизация»*

Sabah crisis

1968–1969 dispute that stalled ASEAN's first meetings — *кризис Сабаха*

■ EXTENDED ANSWER

■ Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, when the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines signed the Bangkok Declaration. To understand why the organization emerged at that particular moment, one has to trace the region's path from near-simultaneous postwar decolonization, through a series of failed regionalist experiments, to the Declaration itself and its immediate aftermath.

■ The Post-WWII Regional Context

Following Japan's surrender, Southeast Asian states gained independence in a compressed period, roughly 1945–1957. Indonesia proclaimed independence on 17 August 1945, immediately after Japan's capitulation, though full independence came only with the Hague Agreement of 28 January 1949, after Dutch "police actions" in 1947–1948. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was proclaimed on 2 September 1945 in the "August Revolution" led by Ho Chi Minh, but it controlled only the north; French forces occupied the south that same autumn. Laos and Cambodia gained independence de jure in 1949 within the French Union and fully in 1954. Burma became independent in 1948, following elections in April 1947 in which the Anti-Fascist League won an overwhelming majority. The Philippines gained independence in 1946, and Malaya became a federation with autonomy in 1946 before achieving full independence in 1957. Thailand is the only country in the region never to have been a colony.

This near-simultaneity was not coincidental: the war and Japanese occupation accelerated decolonization across the region, creating a structural precondition for later cooperation. The new states shared a common postwar problem — unfinished state-building — and internal conflicts broke out almost everywhere immediately after the colonial powers left, in Burma, Malaya, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines alike. At the same time, nationalist movements largely operated within established colonial boundaries, so territorial disputes in the region were less intense than in Africa, South Asia, or the Middle East. Before any regional institution existed, Southeast Asian states faced three challenges: national consolidation, internal ethnic and political diversity, and polarizing external pressure from the Cold War. ASEAN would later respond primarily to the second and third of these.

■ Failed Regionalism Before 1967

Several earlier attempts at regional organization collapsed before ASEAN emerged.

The Manila Pact of 8 September 1954 created the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (**SEATO**) — a military alliance including the United States, Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Thailand, directed against communist China and including an economic-aid component (600 million dollars in 1957). Yet of its eight members, only Pakistan, Thailand, and the Philippines qualified as "developing" states, and from Southeast Asia itself only Thailand and the Philippines genuinely participated — Indonesia and Burma refused to join, fearing for their independence. No member besides Thailand received real military guarantees, formalized only in the 1962 Rusk–Thanat communiqué. SEATO was dissolved on 30 June 1977. As the scholar Amitav Acharya later argued, SEATO's legitimacy was compromised precisely because the region itself was represented by only two states; India, Indonesia, Burma, and Ceylon saw it as a colonial-style construct led by outside powers.

Two subsequent, purely regional attempts followed: the Association of Southeast Asia (**ASA**, 1961, comprising Malaya, the Philippines, and Thailand) and **MAPHILINDO** (1963, comprising Malaya, the Philippines, and Indonesia). Both collapsed because of Indonesia's policy toward the newly formed Malaysia, but they left an institutional and diplomatic foundation that ASEAN later built upon. In the mid-1960s the administration of US President Lyndon Johnson proposed SEADA, an initiative to bring regional states (excluding Vietnam) into an economic development association with planned aid of roughly 6.4 billion dollars over ten years; it too failed to materialize.

■ Konfrontasi and Its Resolution

The immediate obstacle to regional cooperation in the early-to-mid 1960s was **Konfrontasi**, the 1963–1966 confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia triggered by the formation of Malaysia, which effectively blocked any regional cooperation. Singapore was part of Malaysia in 1963–1965 but was expelled amid ethnic tension and became an independent state in 1965.

ASEAN became possible only after Indonesia changed course: after 1965, General Suharto's "New Order" government abandoned Konfrontasi. This shift removed the central political obstacle and opened the way to the negotiations that produced the Bangkok Declaration.

■ The Bangkok Declaration of 8 August 1967

On 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, five foreign ministers signed the declaration establishing ASEAN: Adam Malik of Indonesia, S. Rajaratnam of Singapore, Thanat Khoman of Thailand, Abdul Razak

of Malaysia, and Narciso Ramos of the Philippines. Its preamble described the "collective will of the nations of South-East Asia to bind themselves together in friendship and cooperation and, through joint efforts and sacrifices, secure for their peoples and for posterity the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity."

The Declaration set out three goals: first, to accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development; second, to promote regional peace and stability grounded in justice and the rule of law; third, to foster cooperation and mutual assistance in economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific, and administrative matters. The organization was designed to be open to other Southeast Asian states.

Notably, the United States sought to steer the new body toward a military-political orientation, but the founding members declined to discuss defense matters — largely because of the ongoing Vietnam War — and deliberately kept the focus economic. This reflected a broader shift in regional thinking: the failure of the military alliance SEATO turned the region toward its own, non-military form of cooperation.

■ Motives: A Divergence in the Sources

Sources disagree on how anti-communist the founders' underlying motives actually were. The Declaration itself spoke only of economic and cultural cooperation and peace based on justice. At the same time, US President Johnson viewed the future organization as a "pro-Western, anti-communist" bulwark against communism in Southeast Asia, and Vice President Hubert Humphrey publicly endorsed ASEAN on that basis in 1967. Some scholars go further, describing ASEAN's founding as explicitly anti-communist and, in large part, anti-Chinese in orientation — a position associated with the Russian historian N. P. Maletin.

A different reading, articulated by Singapore's Rajaratnam, emphasizes not anti-communism but a desire to avoid the "**Balkanization**" of Southeast Asia — its fragmentation into hostile, externally manipulable parts — and to build an effective mechanism for increasing the region's autonomy in international affairs. These readings are not mutually exclusive: before 1967 the region served as an arena for Cold War rivalry among the United States, the Soviet Union, and China, and every institution preceding ASEAN was essentially an extension of East–West blocs rather than an autonomous regional initiative. ASEAN, by contrast, became the first Southeast Asian organization built on a purely Asian basis, without direct US or European participation, oriented toward economic and cultural rather than military goals.

■ Immediate Aftermath

The young organization faced its first crisis in 1968–1969, when the Philippines' claim to Sabah suspended the regularity of ministerial meetings; the dispute was settled by 1969, and ASEAN's activity revived. In November 1971, in Kuala Lumpur, members adopted the Declaration on a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), an initiative proposed by Malaysia's Tun Abdul Razak in Lusaka in September 1970. Finally, in February 1976, on Bali, ASEAN held its first summit of heads of state — nine years after its founding — adopting the Declaration of ASEAN Concord and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, which gave the organization its first formal program of action and institutional structures.

■ Conclusions and Significance

ASEAN's founding resulted from the convergence of several factors: near-simultaneous postwar decolonization, which produced a group of young states facing similar state-building challenges; the failure of earlier regionalist models, from the externally imposed military bloc SEATO to the short-lived ASA and MAPHILINDO; and, critically, the removal of the chief political obstacle — the Indonesia–Malaysia confrontation — once Suharto changed Indonesia's course. The choice of the word "Association" rather than any term implying integration was deliberate: the founders sought cooperation without limiting sovereignty, with no intention of pursuing integration on the Western European model. Unlike the European Community, led by major powers such as France and Germany, regional integration in Southeast Asia was led by small and middle powers. ASEAN outlasted SEATO, which was dissolved in 1977, and came to exemplify a broader shift in the region's international standing — from being an object of an externally imposed Cold War bipolar structure to becoming a subject in its own right, an organization of the region's own states setting its own agenda.

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