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Can Malaysia catalyse Asean's Four Reinvention?

The Star, Malaysia



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ASEAN has never been static. Since its foundation in 1967 via the Bangkok Declaration, our regional grouping has been through several reinventions.

The First Reinvention, circa 1976 was, expectedly, on regional security, given the ongoing Cold War then.

The grouping successfully maintained peace and stability for most of the region through frameworks like the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South-East Asia (1976) and the Declaration of Asean Concord (1976).

Interestingly, the first Asean Summit only took place nine years after Asean's establishment, in February 1976, in Bali, Indonesia.

Asean's Second Reinvention occurred in the 90s, where, post-Cold War, it focused on integration.

Besides the accessions of Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999), the major development in this period was the Asean Free Trade Area (Afta), the groundwork for the Asean Economic Community (AEC).

Notably, both the AEC and the Asean Community mark their 10th anniversary this year.

This Second Reinvention period also "mothered" the Asean Economic Ministers (AEM) Retreat, with its 31st edition to be hosted by the International Trade and Industry Ministry (Miti) in Desaru, Johor, from Feb 27 to 28.

The AEM's scope has evolved from reducing tariffs and trade barriers to other major economic undertakings like advancing the AEC and digital integration. At this upcoming AEM Retreat, Malaysia looks forward to presenting the 18 Priority Economic Deliverables (PEDs) to drive regional economic integration, inclusivity, sustainability and digital trade under Asean's Economic Pillar.

The Third Reinvention came in 2007, when we adopted the Asean Charter, the legal basis for the establishment of the Asean Community in 2015.

There was a growing recognition that Asean was more potent as a bloc, whose value is more than the sum of its parts, akin to the European Union (EU). While our circumstances are different from the EU's, the common theme for more integration was never in doubt.

This lengthy historical discourse is to show that Asean has



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■ Malaysia plans to unveil the Asean Community Vision 2045

evolved with the times, identifying challenges and responding appropriately on the regional international order and intra-regional relations.

Why a Fourth Reinvention matters

In 2025, my take is that Asean is on the cusp of a Fourth Reinvention.

Among the region's current challenges is navigating the US-China rivalry, particularly over international trade/supply chains and the South China Sea. Additionally, there is the continuing quest to make Asean relevant for ordinary South-East Asians in an increasingly uncertain world.

Globally, incidents like the brief TikTok ban may unfortunately be the norm moving forward.

The sudden rise of DeepSeek-R1 shows that the West's technological advantage may have a shelf life, reinforcing the fact that this is a space

Malaysia and Asean must be in if we want to progress digitally.

For Asean to maintain its centrality as a driving force in the regional security architecture, Malaysia, as the 2025 chair, should engineer the Fourth Reinvention, although its final shape must, of course, be the consensus of all member states.

Malaysia laying the groundwork

I would argue that Malaysia's 2025 Asean agenda is laying the groundwork for the region's next Reinvention.

To cite just Miti's end of things, the beefing up of the Asean Trade in Goods Agreement that we are pursuing will boost intra-regional trade, which is a very effective, necessary hedge against the ongoing global trade wars.

Meanwhile, the completion of the Asean Digital Economy Framework Agreement is not only about enhancing regional

eCommerce, but strengthening cybersecurity and data governance through common standards and principles.

This is crucial to not only enshrine the credibility of our region's online economy, but also protect its populace.

Progress on the Asean Power Grid, plus the stronger regional cooperation on electric vehicles and semiconductors that we are seeking will ensure South-East Asia becomes a hub for these crucial future economic activities.

The upcoming Asean-GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) Summit and several of our members joining the BRICS grouping reinforce our region's willingness to not only engage across the political/geographical spectrum, but indeed, to diversify our economic relations.

We are also planning to unveil the Asean Community Vision (ACV) 2045, which is meant to succeed the current Asean Vision 2025.

The ACV 2045 is a longer, 20-year undertaking containing several strategic plans touching on political security, economy, socio-culture and connectivity.

The ACV will provide the building blocks for the region's future – and perhaps prepare it for its Fifth Reinvention.

In short, Asean's Fourth Reinvention ought to focus on deepening regional integration, preparing its economies for technological shifts, while maintaining strategic autonomy, and ensuring its relevance to its people.

I see this as totally compatible with our 2025 tagline of "Inclusivity and Sustainability."

Asean must be strategic

This approach may take time to be accepted by all Asean member states, but it goes to show that South-East Asia matters.

Perhaps, this is also why so many people have their own visions for what it should do. This debate should be welcomed.

Still, for all the criticism of the body through the years, it says a lot that Asean has continued to grow.

And rather than see our expansion as a threat or provocation, most major powers are eager to engage with us.

Maybe this means that, like running, there's something to be said for working at one's own time and pace.

Asean has never let itself be forced into making zero-sum choices, whether politically or economically, no matter how loud or pressing either extreme may be.

We must be what is in South-East Asia's best interests – not what others want.

I am confident that if we focus on the essentials, as laid out by our PEDs, while never losing sight of what Asean Centrality really is about, the Fourth Reinvention, whatever shape it takes, will keep our region open, free and prosperous, thriving and contributing positively to the global order.



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SUMMARIES

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