
ASEAN in the Midst of Global Polycrisis: A Reflection

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Abstract: Currently, the global world, including ASEAN, is facing various crises or polycrisis. This article tries to explain what ASEAN needs to do to get out of the polycrisis. The article is arranged in the form of a reflection on the dynamics of ASEAN in facing polycrisis. This article shows some input for ASEAN to get out of the polycrisis, namely maintaining stability amidst turmoil; maintaining ASEAN as the epicenter of economic growth; preventing erosion of social cohesion and polarization of society and implementing extraordinary tactical strategies, namely 'the way forward, the way of collaboration'. This article also emphasizes the importance of cultural aspects in maintaining friendship between ASEAN communities and countries in facing global polycrisis.

Keywords: ASEAN, Polycrisis, Regional, Cultural Aspect, Friendship

Introduction

We currently live in the midst of a polycrisis, a world filled with catastrophic events such as war, economic uncertainty, inflation, recession, climate crisis, and so on. This polycrisis is present in the midst of world globalization which is marked by the circulation of goods, the rapid and intense exchange of ideas, and the rapid and dynamic movement of people (Steger, 2013). The words 'fast' and 'dynamic' are intertwined with global 'uncertainty'. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, for example, sees that the speed and global interconnection are inseparable from five streams, namely ethnoscapescapes, technoscapes, ideoscapes, financescapes, and mediascapes (Griffith & Marion, 2020). These streams are intertwined with each other. Therefore, what was considered established in the past is now easy to move and change, which requires a new perspective in viewing these changes.

At the World Economic Forum Annual Assembly panel (Davos, May 22-26, 2022), Columbia University History Professor Adam Tooze described polycrisis as a simultaneous 'collective confusion', "If you feel confused, and as if everything is affecting you all at the same time, this is not a personal experience; it is actually a collective

experience" (WEC, 2023b). What the author of *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World and Shutdown: How Covid Shook the World's Economy* refers to is relevant to the explanation of The Global Risks Report 2023, that currently there is an increase in crises everywhere, and the 'accumulation of crises' is not as simple as one might imagine.

Globally, The Global Risks Report 2023 sees interconnections between existing crises such as the cost of living crisis, geoeconomic confrontation, natural disasters and extreme weather, erosion of social cohesion, inter-state conflicts, cybercrime, and the use of weapons of mass destruction—to name the predicted global crises in the next two years (WEC, 2023a). At the 42nd ASEAN Summit in Labuan Bajo, East Nusa Tenggara (10-11 May 2023), ASEAN has produced 125 points related to community development, economic growth, views on the Indo-Pacific, integration, connectivity, and so on (ASEAN, 2023), and it is hoped that at the 43rd Summit at the Jakarta Convention Center, Jakarta (5-7 September 2023) the previous agreement can be implemented more concretely. The agreement is part of the 'ASEAN way' to respond to polycrisis based on the three pillars of ASEAN cooperation: politics and security, economy, and socio-culture. This article will discuss the polycrisis and what ASEAN must face in order to emerge from the polycrisis.

Methodology

As a reflection, this article begins by combining two approaches, namely literature study and reflection. As a literature study, I started by reading various publications related to the issue of ASEAN and the polycrisis, then I reflected on the various readings in several points of thought on how ASEAN can get out of the polycrisis. An important context that needs to be conveyed in making this article is that this article was initially written in order to make Indonesia's presidency in ASEAN 2023 a success. In that context, the spirit of the article is solely to 'find a way out' of the polycrisis. Furthermore, this article is reflected again along with the unresolved several global crises such as the Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine conflicts. Through literature study and reflection, this article finally gave birth to several points of thought that were expressed in the results and discussions.

Result and Discussion

To get out of the global polycrisis, there are several things that ASEAN can do as follows.

1. Maintaining stability amidst turmoil

Geoeconomic confrontation or geoeconomic war is included in The Global Risks Report 2023 as one of the global problems for the next two years. The war is not only between big countries (say America versus China) but also between alliance and non-alliance countries (say Germany and Russia). To secure its energy supply, Germany, for example, seized shares of the Russian energy company in Germany, Rosneft, which contributed around 12% of the country's oil refining capacity (DW, September 16, 2022). This fact explains that the geoeconomic war between big countries also has an impact on

the extra-territorial politics of other countries. Geographical position seems to be intertwined with economic and political dynamics in one breath.

The Global Risks Report 2023 predicts that if this geoeconomic war becomes a trend, the risk is that a circle of distrust will be created between countries. Furthermore, it has the potential to stop interdependence, stall economic growth, and encourage a wider escalation of war. The Global Risks Report 2023 reports that in the next 10 years, confrontation between countries will remain related to the economy, but the phenomenon of increasing military budgets in several countries and the spread of the latest sophisticated technology can encourage countries to engage in an arms race that if not managed will result in open conflict.

On the ASEAN scale, heads of state have seen the 'potential instability', so since 1979 they have agreed to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) to create peace, stability and cooperation. Until now, ASEAN countries located at an important strategic crossroads - bordering the two most populous economic powers in the world (China and India) - remain what Professor Ishtiaq Pasha Mahmood of the National University of Singapore calls "a focal point for regional and global powers" (Mahmood, 2018). Thus, the South China Sea dispute between China and the claimant countries (Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam) can be minimized. The dispute is not only about borders but also means geo-economic warfare as well as China's 'defense mechanism' in anticipation of an open conflict in the Pacific, a strategy to anticipate the future.

At the ASEAN Summit in Labuan Bajo, ASEAN heads of state actually conveyed their concerns—including land reclamation and its derivative incidents, including damage to the marine environment that erodes trust, increases tensions, and has the potential to damage regional peace, security, and stability. ASEAN then emphasized the need for mutual trust and confidence, as well as an attitude of self-restraint from activities that have the potential to complicate or escalate disputes that affect peace and stability. The ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting (ADMM), a platform for cooperation between ASEAN Defense Ministers that aims to improve Confidence Building Measures (CBM) is very important for maintaining peace and security stability in the region through dialogue and practical cooperation. The ADMM has been expanded through ADMM-Plus and involves 8 dialogue partner countries, namely the United States, Australia, China, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, India, and Russia with expert groups in seven important areas: disaster management and humanitarian assistance, military medicine, counter-terrorism, maritime security, peacekeeping operations, landmine countermeasures and cyber security. On the issue of conflict, the 'ASEAN way' tends more towards peaceful and sustainable dialogue. Including the issue of tensions on the Korean Peninsula which needs to be addressed seriously with 'denuclearization' efforts for lasting peace and stability.

On the Middle East, for example the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which has not been resolved (since the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948), ASEAN emphasized the need for a 'comprehensive, just and sustainable solution' to achieve peace and stability by fully

supporting the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people to a Palestinian state with the realization of two states, Palestine and Israel, living side by side in peace and security based on the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Dialogue is the best way to achieve peace. The first point conveyed by ASEAN regarding the Ukrainian war is as follows, “The ASEAN Foreign Ministers are deeply concerned over the evolving situation and armed hostilities in Ukraine. We call on all relevant parties to exercise maximum restraint and make utmost efforts to pursue dialogues through all channels, including diplomatic means to contain the situation, to de-escalate tensions, and to seek peaceful resolution in accordance with international law, the principles of the United Nations Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia.” (ASEAN, 2022).

On Ukraine, ASEAN emphasized the importance of respect for sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity. In this regard, according to ASEAN, compliance with the UN Charter and international law is important, in addition to immediately ceasing hostilities and creating an enabling environment for a peaceful resolution. The unresolved war situation (since Putin announced a ‘special military operation’ against Ukraine, 24 February 2022) has also had a negative impact on ASEAN and therefore the leaders of ASEAN countries are committed to reducing its impact and ensuring that ASEAN remains the center of growth in the region and the world. Along with the escalation of the conflict between Israel and ‘Iranian proxies’ or axis of resistance, namely Hamas, Hezbollah and Houthis to the escalation since US President Joe Biden “allowed Kyiv to use those systems to conduct deeper strikes” to Russia, namely allowing US-made missiles in November 2024 to be used to attack Russia (Kullab, 2024), ASEAN continues to show a ‘middle’ attitude and maintain stability in the region. ASEAN’s position is important to maintain regional stability because if it is not managed properly, the conflict can spread to the ASEAN region, something that ASEAN countries do not expect.

In addition to Ukraine, another issue that is not easy to resolve is Myanmar, even becoming a ‘burden of Indonesia’s chairmanship in ASEAN.’ ASEAN remains focused on the Five-Point Consensus in supporting Myanmar out of its political crisis. In short, the five-point consensus calls for an end to violence, dialogue with all stakeholders, appointing a special envoy to facilitate mediation and dialogue, allowing ASEAN to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Myanmar, and allowing the ASEAN special envoy to visit and meet with stakeholders in Myanmar. ASEAN also supports the continued engagement of the ASEAN chair—in this case Indonesia in 2023—with all stakeholders in Myanmar to find a peaceful and lasting solution through an inclusive national dialogue.

In the context of anthropology, dialogue is an important element in human friendship, not only in the interpersonal context but also between communities and nations. Dialogue is a ‘common asset’ in friendship in which actors can carry out what Social Anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1928-2016) calls a ‘relationship of incorporation’ where high asset compatibility leads to the presence of shared value commitments sought

by actors (Paine, 1969). Combining 'cultural assets' in the form of dialogue is an important cultural aspect to maintain synergy and collaboration between ASEAN countries.

2. Maintaining ASEAN as the epicenter of economic growth

The agreement of the ASEAN heads of state in Labuan Bajo emphasized to strengthen ASEAN as a strong-agile organization, equipped with strong-effective institutional capacity in overcoming various challenges, and to make ASEAN remain relevant to its people, the region, and the world, while continuing to function as a center for regional growth and prosperity. Data shows that currently the ASEAN economy continues to grow and has the potential to be a center of world growth. This is also supported by the population in the ASEAN region which reached more than 660 million people in 2021 or 8.4% of the total global population. ASEAN also has an important role in global trade.

Having rich natural resources and potential for the tourism industry makes the ASEAN region an investment destination. Quoting Aseanstats.org, ASEAN is recorded to have a total gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$ 3.3 trillion in 2021, a value that places it in fifth place compared to the strongest economic countries such as the United States, China, Japan, and Germany. According to the IMF, ASEAN's economic growth is also quite good, namely 4% -5% per year. This value is above the global average of 2.5%-3% (Dihni, 2023).

Currently, we see various startups growing in various countries. Indonesia is even called "fertile ground for startup growth." Indonesia ranks fifth in the world with 2,193 startups in 2019 after the US, India, UK, and Canada. Not only superior in quantity, the quality of startups in Indonesia is also increasingly strong with the emergence of four unicorns (valuation of more than 1 million US dollars) and one decacorn (valuation of more than 10 million US dollars). The market valuation of unicorns and decacorns also dominates the Southeast Asian startup world. Some of them are Gojek (11 billion US dollars), Tokopedia (7 billion US dollars), Traveloka (4.5 billion US dollars), OVO (2.9 billion US dollars), and Bukalapak (12 billion US dollars) (Kominfo, 2020).

Based on Startup Ranking data, the number of startups in Southeast Asia was recorded at 4,603 startups as of May 26, 2023. Indonesia is the largest with the number of startups reaching 2,479 companies. Singapore is in second place with 1,098 startups. After that is the Philippines with the number of startups as many as 330 companies. Malaysia has 315 startups, Thailand and Vietnam each have 171 companies and 134 companies respectively. The number of startups in Myanmar is 48 companies, and Cambodia has 16 companies. There are also nine startups in Brunei Darussalam. Meanwhile, Laos and Timor Leste have two startups and one startup respectively. Meanwhile, globally, Indonesia is in sixth place as of May 26, 2023. The United States is still in first place with 77,554 startups. This data shows that the spirit of growth is developing significantly in the ASEAN region.

3. Preventing erosion of social cohesion and societal polarization

The release of The Global Risks Report 2023 wrote that erosion of social cohesion and societal polarization in the next two years will increase. This erosion is caused by the loss or depletion of social capital and community rifts that have implications for declining social stability, economic productivity, and individual and collective well-being. The worsening gap can lead to political turmoil, especially if there is an intertwining of erosion and polarization factors with various issues of inequality based on ethnicity, religion, and even because of general elections. This gap is also actually exacerbated by the increasing frustration of citizens over various things—especially basic daily needs.

Youth cooperation is carried out by ASEAN because one third of the ASEAN population consists of young people. The youth population in the ASEAN region is projected to peak in 2038 with a number of approximately 220 million people. As future leaders, changemakers, innovators and influencers in the region, ASEAN youth are assets and hopes for the future that need to be given meaningful opportunities to influence policies that have a direct impact on their lives. Youth development in the ASEAN region is carried out through youth exchanges, leadership programs, volunteerism, and skills training and social entrepreneurship. ASEAN seeks to prepare its young generation to become a “future-ready” generation through skills development and increasing their participation in various ASEAN and world events.

Narratives related to ASEAN identity as part of ongoing efforts to raise awareness are also being developed. Through culture and the arts, ASEAN is committed to advancing culture as an important foundation for building the ASEAN Community. The cultural sector works with various dialogue partners and stakeholders to raise awareness and appreciate the rich history, culture, arts, traditions, and values of the ASEAN region. The ASEAN National Secretariat or *Setnas ASEAN* (2023) wrote that based on the 2016-2025 Strategic Plan for Culture and the Arts, ASEAN’s main priorities in the cultural sector include two things: deepening the ASEAN mindset and identity (to increase appreciation of ASEAN history, culture, arts, traditions, and values) and promoting ASEAN cultural diversity (to encourage intercultural understanding). ASEAN also leverages culture for inclusive and sustainable development, including for creativity, innovation and livelihood creation and how to promote regional cooperation to enhance cultural and heritage management capabilities.

In addition, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is part of the three important pillars of ASEAN which aims to improve the quality of life through a series of activities that focus on the community (people-centered and people-oriented approach), are environmentally friendly, and sustainable. As a socio-cultural community, the ASEAN community together overcomes various challenges in the fields of poverty, employment, and community welfare. Among the ways are by strengthening regional competitiveness and improving the quality of human resources and the quality of the environment. ASEAN even opens up access as widely as possible for all residents in its member countries by paying attention to gender equality in various fields, for example in education, culture, health, and the environment (*Setnas ASEAN*, 2023). Society, in

addition, needs to have a kind of global awareness to engage in continuous and meaningful dialogue, carry out synergies across communities and nations, and a willingness to live together in a global culture (Ikeda, 2001).

To realize the integration of ASEAN society, a “we feeling” towards ASEAN is needed. In addition, ASEAN society needs to foster a sense of mutual respect and high social solidarity so that ASEAN citizens will develop into a society that cares for and shares with each other. Thus, citing the ASEAN National Secretariat (2023), ASEAN society can better understand the cultural diversity of member countries, respect each other’s national identities, and pass on a safe, peaceful, and prosperous Southeast Asian region to the next generation. ASEAN has the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 as a guideline for ASEAN member countries in realizing an ASEAN society that involves and benefits its people, is inclusive, sustainable, resilient, and dynamic (Setnas ASEAN, 2023).

Friendship between ASEAN societies is an important relationship to enhance cooperation. Friendship can even “manifest structures, strategies and principles”, which means that if friendship between societies is maintained, then various structures, alliances, collaborations with ‘mutual agreements’ can be realized (Paine, 1969). The presence of ASEAN is a manifestation of friendship between countries in Southeast Asia that has been going on for a long time. In my opinion, cultural relations between communities should be maintained with various adaptive strategies. Relations between communities are inseparable from good friendship at the state level. Therefore, the ‘shared feeling’ as ASEAN citizens should be maintained at the state and community levels in order to be able to face the global polycrisis collaboratively.

4. Implementing extraordinary tactical strategies: the way forward, the way of collaboration

The global polycrisis needs to be approached collaboratively. For the 2023 ASEAN chairmanships, the word ‘collaboration’ is important to produce breakthroughs to resolve global, regional, and national polycrisis in their respective countries. Indonesian President Joko Widodo often uses the words ‘collaboration, cooperation, and synergy’ as a way to solve problems. We have gone through the Covid-19 pandemic collaboratively, but as President Jokowi said, “the challenges ahead are still very tough”, therefore it requires cooperation to make ASEAN the epicenter of world economic growth and resolve various crises.

The 7th President of Indonesia Joko Widodo sees that our world is now ‘not doing well’. Therefore, according to Jokowi, “ASEAN needs an extraordinary tactical strategy to face current global challenges, while also realizing ASEAN as a center of growth or the epicenter of growth,” as conveyed when opening the 2023 ASEAN Business Investment Summit, at the State Palace, Jakarta (September 1, 2023). “In the midst of the current world conditions that are not good, ASEAN’s strategy cannot be just ordinary, it can’t be. ASEAN needs an extraordinary tactical strategy, so the strategy is not a grand strategy, but an extraordinary tactical strategy,” said the President. This extraordinary tactical

strategy requires a breakthrough. For that, various efforts to find a breakthrough are needed. In line with that, these efforts also require many extraordinary innovative-applicable ideas from across stakeholders and across components of society to resolve the polycrisis that has hit the world in general and ASEAN in particular.

Conclusion

The above article has explained several inputs for ASEAN to get out of the polycrisis, namely maintaining stability amidst turmoil; maintaining ASEAN as the epicenter of economic growth; preventing erosion of social cohesion and polarization of society and implementing extraordinary tactical strategies, namely 'the way forward, the way of collaboration'. Practically, ASEAN needs to do several of these things to get out of the polycrisis. An important path that needs to be taken by the world community to get out of the polycrisis, as the great spirit of ASEAN is dialogue and collaboration. Dialogue is an important element to bring together various thoughts, interests and dynamics that exist. Without dialogue, the possibility of misinterpretation is very likely to occur if not managed properly can lead to further conflict. ASEAN focuses on the cultural aspect in the form of dialogue and collaboration, namely an approach that places countries in an equal and sovereign position, and therefore it is important to synergize and collaborate, especially since the current global crisis cannot be carried out by only one country, but requires many countries.

Note: an earlier version of this article was published in a review by the Center for Strategic and Policy Studies SKSG UI and the 'editor's introduction' to the book ASEAN Episentrum Pertumbuhan Dunia edited by Yanuardi Syukur.

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