The founding of ASEAN

Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland and Germany),
Solicitor (England & Wales and Hong Kong)
Of Counsel, KGP Legal LLC
alexander.ressos@kgplegal.com.sg
www.ressos.com.sg

Independence without security

Singapore did not seek independence on its own. It entered the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 and left it two years later after political and communal tensions that Chapter C.II describes. The proclamation of independence, signed by Lee Kuan Yew, was broadcast on 9 August 1965 and published in the Government Gazette.[1] The new state was admitted to the United Nations on 21 September 1965 as its 117th member and joined the Commonwealth on 15 October 1965.[2]

Recognition did not bring security. Indonesia was still waging its *Konfrontasi* against Malaysia, a campaign of infiltration and sabotage that had begun in January 1963 and formally ended only in August 1966.[3] On 10 March 1965, two Indonesian marines had detonated a bomb at MacDonald House on Orchard Road, killing three people and injuring 33.[4] Relations with Malaysia, from which Singapore drew most of its water, were raw. The British bases that provided the island's defence and a significant share of its employment were soon to be withdrawn.

From these first years the founding generation drew a lesson that has never left Singapore's diplomacy: a small state cannot choose its neighbourhood and cannot assume the goodwill of larger powers. It must therefore make itself useful to as many

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

of them as possible, give none of them a reason to see it as a threat and build regional structures that make conflict costly. The founding of ASEAN two years after independence was the first application of that lesson.

The Bangkok Declaration of 1967

On 8 August 1967, the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand signed the ASEAN Declaration in Bangkok. The signatories were Adam Malik, Tun Abdul Razak, Narciso Ramos, S. Rajaratnam and Thanat Khoman.[5] The document was short and called for regional cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, technical and administrative fields and for peace and stability grounded in respect for justice and the rule of law. It created no secretariat, no court and no binding obligations.

The modesty of the text was deliberate, since the five states had just emerged from a confrontation, several of them faced communist insurgencies and none was prepared to surrender sovereignty to a regional body. What mattered was the signal that Indonesia, by far the largest of them, would henceforth settle its differences with its neighbours by consultation. For Singapore, the declaration placed its independence inside a regional framework accepted by Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. In his statement at the signing, Rajaratnam argued that regionalism had to complement national thinking and warned of the dangers of a balkanised Southeast Asia.[6] The full text of his statement is preserved by the National Archives of Singapore, which also hold Singapore's copy of the declaration.[7]

Reconciliation as a precondition

ASEAN's early value lay less in its programmes than in the habits of consultation it created. Singapore tested those habits soon after the founding. On 17 October 1968 it hanged the two marines convicted of the MacDonald House murders, despite a plea for clemency from President Suharto, which plunged relations with Indonesia into a severe crisis.[8] Five years later, Lee Kuan Yew scattered flowers on their graves during a visit to Indonesia, a gesture that helped to close the episode.[9] The episode

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

shows a pattern that recurs in Singapore's diplomacy: firmness on the application of its own law, combined with a readiness to repair relations once the principle is established.

The first ASEAN summit, held in Bali in 1976, gave the organisation a legal charter of conduct. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, signed on 24 February 1976, bound its parties to mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful settlement of disputes and the renunciation of the threat or use of force.[10] The treaty later became the entry ticket for outside powers wishing to take part in ASEAN-centred diplomacy. China acceded in 2003 and the United States in 2009.[11]

Cambodia and the diplomacy of the 1980s

ASEAN acquired its international profile through the crisis that followed Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December 1978. Thailand, the front-line state, demanded the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops with the backing of the other members.[12] For more than a decade the five worked at the United Nations to deny the Vietnamese-installed government Cambodia's seat and to keep the issue on the international agenda. They helped to assemble the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea in 1982, an uneasy alliance of three Cambodian factions, until the Paris agreements of 1991 opened the way to a settlement under United Nations supervision.[13]

Singapore's diplomats played a prominent part in that campaign. The argument they made at the United Nations was the one that would recur in 2022: a larger state may not invade a smaller neighbour and install a government of its choice. For a city-state, that principle is a matter of survival. The Cambodian decade also gave Singapore's foreign service a generation of experience in coalition-building at the United Nations, which it later turned to economic and legal questions.[14]

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

From declaration to economic community

The end of the Cold War allowed ASEAN to expand and to turn towards economics. Brunei had joined in January 1984. Vietnam followed in July 1995, Laos and Myanmar in July 1997 and Cambodia in April 1999.[15] Timor-Leste became the eleventh member in October 2025, at the 47th ASEAN Summit.[16]

The economic agenda began in Singapore. The framework agreement on the ASEAN Free Trade Area was signed there on 28 January 1992, with the free trade area beginning to operate from 1 January 1993.[17] The ASEAN Charter, also signed in Singapore on 20 November 2007, gave the organisation legal personality and entered into force in December 2008.[18] The ASEAN Economic Community followed on 31 December 2015.[19] By the mid-2020s the organisation covered some 683 million people and a nominal output estimated at about US$4.5 trillion.[20]

For Singapore, the economic community is both market and hinterland. Its banks lend across the region, its asset managers invest in regional equities and bonds, and its family offices hold assets throughout Southeast Asia. The regional headquarters of multinational groups, examined in Chapter I.I, choose Singapore because it gives access to a region that ASEAN holds together. ASEAN integration remains shallower than European integration, while its principle of consensus slows decisions. Even so, the organisation has kept the peace among its members for nearly six decades, which is the condition on which every other service of the financial centre depends.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, “Proclamation of Singapore” (accessed November 2026): proclamation dated 9 August 1965, drafted by E. W. Barker and signed by Lee Kuan Yew, broadcast by Radio Singapore that day and published in the Government Gazette. ↩
2. Wikipedia, “Foreign relations of Singapore” (accessed November 2026): admission to the United Nations on 21 September 1965 as the 117th member

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

by acclamation; membership of the Commonwealth from 15 October 1965 as its 22nd member. ↩

3. Wikipedia, “Indonesia–Malaysia confrontation” (accessed November 2026): infobox dating the conflict from 20 January 1963 to 11 August 1966. ↩
4. Wikipedia, “MacDonald House bombing” (accessed November 2026): explosion on 10 March 1965 at 3.07 pm, two killed instantly and a third victim who died two days later, 33 injured; perpetrators Harun bin Said and Osman bin Haji Mohamed Ali. ↩
5. Wikipedia, “ASEAN Declaration” (accessed November 2026): declaration signed on 8 August 1967 in the main hall of Saranrom Palace, Bangkok, by Adam Malik (Indonesia), Tun Abdul Razak (Malaysia), Narciso Ramos (Philippines), S. Rajaratnam (Singapore) and Thanat Khoman (Thailand). ↩
6. Wikipedia, “ASEAN Declaration” (accessed November 2026), section on the statements of the founding ministers: Rajaratnam's argument that regional thinking must complement nationalism, his warning against “balkanisation” and the economic proposals of the Singapore delegation (joint shipping line, industrial rationalisation, cooperation among rice producers). ↩
7. National Archives of Singapore, “Statement by S. Rajaratnam, Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the Signing of the ASEAN Declaration, Bangkok, 8 August 1967”, Archives Online (speech record); NAS, Memory of the World entry on the Singapore copy of the Bangkok Declaration. ↩
8. Wikipedia, “MacDonald House bombing” (accessed November 2026): execution of the two marines at Changi Prison on 17 October 1968 despite appeals and a clemency plea from President Suharto. ↩
9. Wikipedia, “MacDonald House bombing” (accessed November 2026): Lee Kuan Yew's visit to the graves in Indonesia in 1973, where he “scattered flowers on them”, helped to repair relations. ↩
10. Wikipedia, “Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia” (accessed November 2026): signed on 24 February 1976 by the leaders of the original members; principles of mutual respect for independence and sovereignty,

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

non-interference, peaceful settlement of disputes, renunciation of the threat or use of force and effective cooperation. ↩

11. Wikipedia, “Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia” (accessed November 2026): accession of China on 8 October 2003 and of the United States on 23 July 2009; party table with 62 entries including the European Union. ↩
12. Wikipedia, “Cambodian–Vietnamese War” (accessed November 2026): Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore supported Thailand's demand for the immediate withdrawal of Vietnamese troops; ASEAN regarded the occupation as an “intolerable threat to the region's security and stability”. ↩
13. Wikipedia, “Cambodian–Vietnamese War” (accessed November 2026): seating of Democratic Kampuchea by the UN Credentials Committee in 1979, formation of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea in 1982, Paris Peace Agreements of 1991 and the UN-led transition. ↩
14. On Singapore's role in ASEAN diplomacy over Cambodia, see Michael Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability*, London, Routledge, 2000, chapter 4, and the memoirs and essays of Tommy Koh and Kishore Mahbubani on the United Nations campaign. ↩
15. Wikipedia, “ASEAN” (accessed November 2026): accession of Brunei on 7 January 1984, Vietnam on 28 July 1995, Laos and Myanmar on 23 July 1997 and Cambodia on 30 April 1999. ↩
16. Wikipedia, “ASEAN” (accessed November 2026): Timor-Leste joined on 26 October 2025 at the 47th ASEAN Summit; Wikipedia, “ASEAN Charter”: Timor-Leste deposited its instrument of ratification in October 2025. ↩
17. Wikipedia, “ASEAN” (accessed November 2026): AFTA agreement signed in Singapore on 28 January 1992; infobox dating the Free Trade Area from 1 January 1993. ↩
18. Wikipedia, “ASEAN Charter” (accessed November 2026): signed on 20 November 2007 in Singapore at the 13th ASEAN Summit, entry into force in

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

December 2008 thirty days after the last ratification, launched in Jakarta on 15 December 2008; ASEAN described by Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan as "a rules-based and people-oriented organisation with its own legal personality". ↩

19. Wikipedia, "ASEAN" (accessed November 2026): AEC blueprint adopted on 20 November 2007, community brought forward to begin by 31 December 2015. ↩

20. Wikipedia, "ASEAN" (accessed November 2026), infobox: population 683,290,000 (2023 estimate); nominal GDP US$4.51 trillion (2026 estimate). ↩

Disclaimer

This article is provided for general information only. It is based on publicly available sources as at its date of publication. These sources have not been independently verified against licences, regulatory registers or the records of the entities concerned. It is not legal, tax, financial or investment advice. Nor is it a recommendation to invest in, transact with or use the services of any entity mentioned. Law and regulation change frequently, so the content may be incomplete or outdated. To the fullest extent permitted by law, Dr Alexander Ressos and the publisher of SingaporeIQ exclude all liability for loss or damage arising from the use of or reliance on this article. Readers should obtain advice on their specific circumstances before acting or refraining from action.

Names and trademarks of the entities discussed belong to their owners and are used for identification only. Their mention implies no endorsement, affiliation or allegation of wrongdoing. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. Corrections and updates: contact@ressos.com.

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. This article may be quoted with attribution to SingaporeIQ (SingaporeIQ.com). Reproduction in full and any commercial use require prior written consent. The Legal Terms at https://singaporeiq.com/legal-terms apply.

Author contact: Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP · contact@ressos.com