

## 9 A Diplomatic Image and Its Afterlife Bangkok 1967 and ASEAN's Creation Myth

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### **Bangkok 1967: A Photograph and a Painting**

The unveiling of the ASEAN mural was set to be a stirring moment in an otherwise placid ceremony to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As chair of ASEAN for 2017, the Philippines' Foreign Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano delivered a welcome speech to an audience of diplomats packed in the front rows of the Leandro Locsin-designed Philippines International Convention Centre in Manila. With the speech over, Cayetano was joined by Le Luong Minh – ASEAN's first Vietnamese Secretary General – with each taking opposite ends of a movable board veiled under a curtain of red velvet. An emcee with an Americanized accent cued the significance of the impending act: 'Ladies and gentlemen, we are pleased to present to you the painting depicting *the exact moment when ASEAN was born*, the signing of the ASEAN Declaration on August 8, 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand' (emphasis added).

As they unveiled the painting (Fig. 9.1), an operatic 'ASEAN anthem' filled the hall and spotlights swept from the corners of the stage to the centre, momentarily flooding the painting in light. Cayetano and Minh clapped from the corners, and the audience joined in too.<sup>1</sup> And so a painting was unveiled that depicted the birth of ASEAN in 1967 in Bangkok – at a time when ASEAN was viewed not with triumph but uncertainty as *yet another* initiative in a region littered with failed diplomatic experiments. But returning to the dramatized diplomatic stage in Manila, there was – perhaps unbeknown and unacknowledged – something odd, even perplexing, about the act that had just unfolded.

For one, there was the quirky gendered quality of the creation act: of men giving birth to a painting about 'founding fathers' who were in turn giving birth to ASEAN. Two, there was the odd thing about the painting itself – it was almost entirely based on a black and white photograph taken on the day of the

<sup>1</sup> Video footage of this moment can be viewed at '50th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) – Opening Ceremony and Group Photo 8/5/2017', YouTube, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCfVLIetbYQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCfVLIetbYQ) (accessed 23 June 2020).



Figure 9.1 The Philippines' Foreign Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano (R) and ASEAN Secretary-General Le Luong Minh unveil a painting of the 'founding fathers' of ASEAN during the opening ceremony of the fiftieth ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Manila, 5 August 2017. MOHD RASFAN/AFP via Getty Images.

1967 signing ceremony in Bangkok (Fig. 9.2). This is a photo of five signatories from newly independent Southeast Asian states seated along a rectangular table, captured in the act of putting their signatures to ASEAN's founding document, called the ASEAN Declaration or Bangkok Declaration. The photographer behind this image is unknown, and the image has been attributed to multiple sources over the years.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the painter – the Filipino artist Peter Paul Blanco – expressly used the black and white photo as the basis for his commemorative painting. Approaching it as a 'historical painting', Blanco conducted research for nearly a year to accurately represent this photograph on canvas and in colour.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It is unlikely this was a 'hand-out image', and more likely taken by one of the Thai journalists assembled at the event. Over the years the image has been attributed to the *Bangkok Post*, the ASEAN Secretariat, the Agence France-Presse (AFP), CFP Foto (an Italian agency), the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITI) in Singapore, and the Singapore *Straits Times*, among others.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Peter Paul Blanco, 26 May 2020. Blanco was selected in a competitive process by the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs in 2016.



Figure 9.2 The iconic photograph of the signing of the Bangkok Declaration, 8 August 1967.  
Reproduced with the permission of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand.

The painting, then, is a stylized reproduction of the photograph. It is a reproduction in that it *shares* with the photograph the same side-angle perspective on the unfolding moment, the same protagonists in the exact order of seating, the same dramatic act (of signing), and the material props of the stage (tables, clothes, microphones). It is *stylized* in that it renders the historical moment in colour – in fact, the painter Peter Paul Blanco interviewed retired ASEAN diplomats for information on the colour of business suits worn that day. It also differs from the photograph in its calculated effort to expunge the banality and everydayness that lurked in the corners of the diplomatic moment in Bangkok in 1967. The four male diplomats standing dutifully in the background of the photograph disappear from the painting; the unruly and overlapping country flags in the photograph are disciplined under the painter's gaze with their national symbols abutting in no uncertain terms; and the painter heightens the 'seriousness' – as he puts it – of the moment by directing the viewer's gaze to the foreground where the protagonists shine in the painter's glow while the background recedes in monochrome darkness.

This takes me to a third aspect of the painting, which was not just odd but also perplexing: with its birth in a secular ritual (an unveiling ceremony) the

commissioned *painting* entered into an ambivalent relationship with the *photograph* on which it was based. Which is the original? Which is authentic? Which is the authoritative representation of the diplomatic moment of 1967? (As the emcee declared, the painting 'depicts the exact moment ASEAN was born'.) Let me explain.

In his 1935 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', the Marxist cultural theorist Walter Benjamin observed that the mechanical reproduction of traditional art (photographic reproductions of famous paintings, for instance) could reproduce the content of an original artwork but not its *aura*.<sup>4</sup> The aura denotes the singular uniqueness of the original, a quality that emerges from its presence in time and space as a witness to history (bearing deteriorating physical conditions, changes in ownership, societal upheavals), and what John Berger notes as its embodiment of the 'silence and stillness [that] permeate the actual material, the paint, in which one follows the traces of the painter's immediate gestures'.<sup>5</sup> The aura, then, *is that which cannot be copied*. While a chemically produced (now digitally disseminated) black and white photograph of ASEAN's 1967 birth may have appeared first in chronological time, to speak of this as the 'original' and 'authentic' is meaningless. As Benjamin observed – 'from a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense'.<sup>6</sup> Unsurprisingly, this is also why there is no preserved, framed, and memorialized physical copy of an 'original' photograph of the signing of the Bangkok Declaration. Instead, what we have is a circulation of chemical and digital copies capturing a diplomatic moment, mostly uncredited or credited to multiple sources, and raising the intractable, somewhat absurd question: Which among *these copies* is the original?

But the painting pulls a fast one. Even though it is a *copy* of a photographic image, it is being gradually endowed with the aura of the *original* and authentic. Indeed, this new commissioned painting promises to steer Benjamin's early twentieth-century thesis in reverse. If the revolution of mechanical reproduction by photographs made images 'ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free',<sup>7</sup> then this painting appears to *rein in*

<sup>4</sup> See Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Hannah Arendt's *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1935/1968), pp. 217–52. Also see Nick Piem, 'Walter Benjamin in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Aura in Education: A Rereading of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 41 (2007), and Jillian M. Rickly-Boyd, 'Authenticity & Aura: A Benjaminian Approach to Tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39 (2012), 269–89.

<sup>5</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972/2008), p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p. 222.

<sup>7</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 32.

the restlessness of the photographic reproduction and fix it within its gilded frame. Similarly, if the revolutionary quality of the photograph was to detach artwork (like paintings and sculpture) from the realm of religious or secular ritual, then the painting's unveiling is the *first act* of anchoring this *photographic image* in secular ritual and tradition – from an opening ceremony where it was unveiled by high representatives of the state (Figure 9.1), and its subsequent display in the lobby of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs on Roxas Avenue in Manila,<sup>8</sup> to its final installation with an official reception at the 'ASEAN Gallery' of the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. Note the making of tradition: a painting originally unveiled to commemorate a diplomatic event (ASEAN's fiftieth anniversary in Manila) now secured a celebratory reception *of its own*.

Only time will tell how this ambivalence is resolved. But the winds are blowing favourably for the painting. While the ASEAN Secretariat's official Twitter (now X) handle posted the black and white *photograph* to publicize ASEAN's founding-day celebrations in 2015, the same official Twitter handle posted a digitized image of the colour *painting* to observe 'ASEAN Day' a few years later in 2019. Similarly, the painting and the painter have come to attract some celebratory attention and commentary: the Philippines Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta produced a special video chronicling the painting and the painter titled 'Peter Paul Blanco and His Tribute to ASEAN's Founding Fathers'.<sup>9</sup> Beyond this, if the painting emerges as a fecund artefact for ASEAN's secular rituals and tradition (visits by state dignitaries to view the painting at the 'ASEAN Gallery' inside the Secretariat; prints and postcards sold at the 'ASEAN gift shop'), then one should not be surprised if the painting acquires the aura of 'original' and 'authentic', eclipsing the photograph it sought to reproduce.

Notwithstanding this, the unveiling of the commissioned painting in Manila is testament to the remarkable afterlife of the black and white diplomatic photograph that memorialized ASEAN's birth. Despite plenty of subsequent stock photos of ASEAN – of the (in)famous ASEAN Way handshake of plaited, interlaced hands; of playing golf; and singing karaoke – it is this particular image of signing the Bangkok Declaration that has enjoyed a thriving afterlife and has emerged as a pre-eminent visual symbol to convey the 'ASEAN story' to a new generation of audiences in Southeast Asia and beyond.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Peter Paul Blanco, 26 May 2020.

<sup>9</sup> 'Peter Paul Blanco and His Tribute to ASEAN's Founding Fathers', YouTube, 20 April 2018, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3Nr4TbNbQ4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3Nr4TbNbQ4) (accessed 7 November 2022).

It is possible to suggest this image as the closest<sup>10</sup> ASEAN has to an image that is 'iconic'.<sup>11</sup> The image has also become a 'primary marker' insofar as 'an event is recognized publicly not by its political content but by its photographic representation'.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, like other iconic images, this image is elevated, detached from context, transposable, and movable.<sup>13</sup> The image can signify the specific episode of the birth of ASEAN but can also just stand in for 'ASEAN' (hence its easy dissemination).

Importantly – and like other iconic images – this image is serviceable for multiple agendas and *raison d'état*. This is where this chapter intervenes. While it traces the busy afterlife of this diplomatic image, it also examines the narratives attached to its reproduction and dissemination. It isolates one trope accompanying the image's dissemination which, in particular, has emerged as salient and influential in representations of ASEAN. This is a trope that packages ASEAN's birth (and ASEAN writ large) as an *act of heroic reconciliation* among Southeast Asian actors in *the face of astounding cultural diversity*. I take issue with this narrative and demonstrate how this diplomatic image of ASEAN's birth – memorialized first in the photograph and now in the commissioned painting – contains within it the seeds of an alternative reading that defies this creation myth. I argue that rather than embodying exceptional and heroic diversity, the image tells us what was profoundly (and problematically) *similar* among these diplomatic performers. The diplomatic image enables a critique of ASEAN's creation myth and opens a door to reconsider ASEAN's founding story.

I proceed in three steps. First, 'reading' the image, I discuss the (international) politics of the moment captured and represented in both the photo and painting. Second, I examine the afterlife of this image and the meanings that have accompanied its thriving reproduction over the decades. Third, I will return to the image to recover an alternative reading of ASEAN and its origins.

<sup>10</sup> Note the caveat 'closest'. Robert Hariman and John Lucaites suggest that iconic photographic images represent 'historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics'. Taking this definition as a yardstick one can see how the Bangkok image approximates but also falls short of each criterion. This image is recognized and remembered (but not widely); it represents a historically significant event (not globally but in Southeast Asian political history); activates an emotional response ('seriousness', albeit more successfully with the message of rousing anthems and voiceovers); and it is reproduced in multiple kinds of media. See Robert Hariman and John Lucaites, 'Icons', in Roland Bleiker (ed.), *Visual Global Politics* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Lene Hansen, 'How Images Make World Politics: International Icons and the Case of Abu Ghraib', *Review of International Studies*, 41 (2015), 263–88.

<sup>12</sup> Bleiker (ed.), *Visual Global Politics*, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Katrine Emile Andersen, and Lene Hansen, 'Images, Emotions, and International Politics: The Death of Alan Kurdi', *Review of International Studies*, 46:1 (2020), 75–95.

### The Image in Context

To understand why this image remains popular, serviceable, and (as I suggest later) disruptive for the thriving discourse on ASEAN, some forensic work on the image and the moment it captures is essential. Who are the subjects? Why are they here? And what are they doing?

#### *A Diplomatic Gathering to Mediate Estrangement*

The thickset table-top microphones and sprawling cables in the image instantly take one to an older era of diplomacy in post-war and Cold War Southeast Asia. The broader – but not so distant – backdrop to this gathering of foreign ministers in 1967 was the low-level military conflict between states in Island Southeast Asia known as Confrontation (1963–66). Britain’s plan to exit colonial administration in Southeast Asia by cobbling together a federation of its territories including Malaya, Singapore, and parts of Borneo was viewed with suspicion by Sukarno’s Indonesia. ‘Malaysia’ was seen as a neo-colonial plan that would secure British interests in the region despite formal decolonization. While Sukarno and his Foreign Minister Subandrio initially went along with the Malaysia plan, differences remained over procedure and timing. The premature declaration of Malaysia’s creation by Tunku Abdul Rahman in September 1963 – without consultation and feelers to Sukarno – antagonized Jakarta and Manila, and escalated Indonesia’s policy of Confrontation against Malaysia.

‘Confrontation’ was a campaign of coercive diplomacy against Malaysia that fell short of a full-fledged war.<sup>14</sup> It was ultimately unsuccessful – partly because the Malaysians were backed by the still formidable British and – more fatefully – because of regime change in Indonesia. Following an abortive coup on 30 September 1965, the Indonesian army led by Major-General Suharto staged a counter coup that gradually displaced Sukarno from power. With this takeover, elements in the military hastened an ongoing process of secret diplomacy with the Malaysians to end Confrontation. The outreach was secret because even though Sukarno was marginalized, the army leadership had to proceed without undermining the Sukarnoist discourse of anti-colonialism and

<sup>14</sup> For a more complete account on the lead up to and the end of Confrontation, see Harold Crouch, *The Army and Politics in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), and Michael Leifer (ed.), *Indonesia’s Foreign Policy* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1983). On how the end of Confrontation served as a backdrop to the formation of ASEAN, see Dewi Fortuna Anwar (ed.), *Indonesia in ASEAN: Foreign Policy and Regionalism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), and Deepak Nair, ‘Spooks, Goons, “Intellectuals”: The Military-Catholic Network in the Cold War Diplomacy of Suharto’s Indonesia’, *History and Anthropology* 33:3 (2021), 372–90.

national independence shared among elements within the military and public. With a mix of secret and quiet diplomacy, Indonesia and Malaysia formally ended Confrontation in 1966 with peace accords signed in Bangkok and Jakarta.

This brings us closer to the proximate backdrop of the diplomatic image. It was at the sidelines of meetings to negotiate the end of Confrontation in 1966 that the idea for a new regional organization was mooted. The venue for these talks was Bangkok, with a key mediating role played by Thai Foreign Minister Dr Thanat Khoman. Several biographical and scholarly accounts suggest that it was during these talks that Thanat Khoman suggested the idea of a regional association to the Indonesian representative Adam Malik. Malik is said to have responded positively to the idea but asked for time to first stabilize relations with Malaysia. This set into motion a series of consultations that lasted a year, leading to the Bangkok meeting where ASEAN was established in 1967.

There was also an alternative idea circulating at this stage. Favoured by the Tunku Abdul Rahman of Malaysia, this plan was to revive the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) and to incorporate Indonesia. However, with the Tunku seen as champion, ASA was not going to be Indonesia's vehicle of choice to re-enter regional diplomacy. For Indonesia, ASA was tainted by its proximity with Western bloc agendas, while Maphilindo – yet another experiment in regional diplomacy, this time organized around racial lines – was tainted by its association with the domestic Indonesian Left and figures of the Guided Democracy (Maphilindo was a brainchild of the now incarcerated left-wing Foreign Minister Dr Subandrio).<sup>15</sup>

A new diplomatic platform had to be created. This is why dignitaries arrived in Bangkok in August 1967 to discuss a Thai- and Indonesian-drafted proposal to create a 'Southeast Asian Association for Regional Cooperation' (SEAARC). Thailand was the natural venue for this gathering. Thanat Khoman enjoyed a reputation for mediation given his role in hosting the talks that ended Confrontation. Thailand was also the only state not embroiled in fractious bilateral disputes with other invitees. This was no small consideration. At this point, Malaysia-Indonesia relations were just turning the corner from the diplomatic vilification and military campaigns of the Confrontation; Malaysia-Philippine relations were strained by the Sabah dispute; Singapore had fractiously broken off from Malaysia in 1965; while Singapore-Indonesia

<sup>15</sup> That said, it is worth noting the significance of the ASA as an existing diplomatic arrangement in this intervening period immediately after the Confrontation. The ASA provided a platform for players like Thanat Khoman to activate consultations on regional diplomacy suspended during the Confrontation and offered a blueprint of what this regional diplomacy could look like in discursive and institutional terms. Its contribution, then, was to keep the notion of regional diplomacy alive.

relations were clouded by Singapore's decision to convict two Indonesian marines for acts of terror committed during the Confrontation (they would be hanged in 1968).

Ministers and their delegations arrived in Thailand on 3 and 4 August. The first to arrive was Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, the foreign minister of Singapore. Archival video footage shows Rajaratnam received in person by Thanat Khoman at the Bangkok airport.<sup>16</sup> Rajaratnam was subsequently led to a waiting lounge where he spoke with assembled officials with a cigar in his hands. He is then seen relaxing in a lounge chair, speaking to journalists huddled around him. The next to arrive was Narciso Ramos, the foreign secretary of the Philippines, who was similarly welcomed, garlanded, and ushered in by Thanat Khoman. Arriving the following day were the Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik and Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia Tun Abdul Razak (for the Tunku was both prime minister and foreign minister). Underscoring the significance of these two delegations for the fate of the gathering is an image of Thanat Khoman clasping the hands of the Malaysian and Indonesian representatives by his side upon their arrival in Bangkok.

After the welcome, these representatives and their delegations were driven a hundred kilometres southeast to the beach town of Bangsaen, a popular tourist destination facing the Gulf of Thailand. The sprawling former residence of the military dictator Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram at Laem Thaen was the venue for the talks. As they interacted over nearly four days, the ministers played golf in the mornings, and carried this golf camaraderie to the bungalow in Lam Thaen, where they held discussions in the afternoon. The airy sea-facing villa was furnished in the latest fashions of the space-age 1960s: tables, sofas, and lounge chairs with sharp geometric edges and pencil legs. With its large halls, rooms, and balconies, this villa provided the five delegations ample space to hold collective plenary discussions and to break out into smaller groups when required. During these discussions, representatives insisted on informality and quiet diplomacy – from their casual clothing to one-to-one chats without their aides. In short, they were giving form to the practices that would become the core stock of the so-called ASEAN way of doing diplomacy. This style is

<sup>16</sup> The footage can be viewed in a Thai-produced video titled 'The Birth of ASEAN'. This video has exceptional archival material on the first ASEAN gatherings in Bangsaen and Bangkok. The fifty-four-minute long video, alongside available primary and secondary writings, are the main sources for the reconstruction of these meetings presented here. The video states that it was produced by a certain Dr Tommy Sungkum, the 'Director of Foreign Relations and ASEAN and Project Manager of NOE Plaza'. While the voiceover is by a male speaking in an oddly American accent, the video includes long interviews with Thai officials, including an older Thanat Khoman and the seasoned Thai diplomat Tej Bunnag. See Trakoonsak Singk, 'The Birth of ASEAN,' YouTube, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzeL0ToM2WA&t=2530s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzeL0ToM2WA&t=2530s), 15 September 2012 (accessed 7 November 2022).

also recounted in first-hand recollections of the event. Writing on ASEAN's twentieth anniversary, Thanat Khoman recalled,

After a brief official welcome, we moved to Bangsae, a small seaside resort on the Gulf of Thailand, to work out the Charter for the new regional body. After a few days of discussions over the draft prepared by the Thai Foreign Office, interspersed by tasty repasts and a few games of golf which unfailingly produced beneficial effects, agreement was reached.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, the former ASEAN Secretary General Rodolfo Severino – then a junior diplomat in the Philippine Foreign Services – writes,

On the golf course in Bangsae and tie-less on easy chairs, the five men engaged in the convivial banter, the jocular repartee and the warm give-and-take that have characterized multilateral diplomacy in Southeast Asia ever since. As Thanat Khoman described it almost 37 years later, they played golf in the morning, had meetings in the afternoon and gathered for informal dinner in the evening.<sup>18</sup>

The conviviality of these interactions lubricated some difficult discussions. The most serious disagreement was over the Indonesian insistence that the new body convey a corporate position towards the status of foreign bases in Southeast Asia. On the Indonesian side, the newly consolidating military regime was under domestic pressure to retain the Sukarnoist accent on non-alignment and a free and independent foreign policy. This raised challenges in achieving reconciliation with neighbours who until recently had been viewed as instruments of neo-colonial influence owing to their security relationships with external powers – Thailand and the Philippines were formal treaty allies of the United States, while Singapore and Malaysia retained military ties with Britain, Australia, and New Zealand under the Anglo-Malayan Defence Arrangement (reformulated as the Five Power Defence Arrangements [FPDA] in 1971). Indonesia's position regarding foreign bases caused disquiet among others, especially Singapore and the Philippines. The issue was resolved by way of tempered wording in the draft declaration that embodied the spirit of Indonesia's proposal but did not cause any practical disadvantage to others. Indeed, the wording on foreign bases drew on a previous formulation in the Sukarno-era Maphilindo agreement, and had three elements: that 'foreign bases were temporary', would remain only with the 'expressed concurrence of the countries concerned', and would 'not be used directly or indirectly to subvert the national independence and freedom of states in the area'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Thanat Khoman, 'Reminiscences', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 10 (1988), 211–17.

<sup>18</sup> Rodolfo Severino (ed.), *Southeast Asia in Search of an ASEAN Community: Insights from the Former ASEAN Secretary-General* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2006), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> ASEAN, 1967, Bangkok Declaration/ASEAN Declaration, Centre for International Law Database, National University of Singapore, <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/database/cil/1967-asean-declaration/> (accessed 25 June 2020).

*Signing ASEAN into Existence*

After nearly four days of what local newspapers called ‘family talks’ in the sea-side town of Bangsae,<sup>20</sup> the delegations left for Bangkok on 7 August for a final meeting at the Thai foreign ministry to iron out sticking points. It was here that Adam Malik came up with ‘Association of Southeast Asian Nations’, or ‘ASEAN’, as the name for this new body. This allayed concerns aired by the Philippines that the earlier acronym ‘SEAARC’ sounded like the word ‘shark’, which the *Bangkok Post* observed ‘may have an unhappy connotation’.<sup>21</sup> The same night, delegates attended a dinner function at the invitation of the Thai prime minister and military dictator Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn. Toasts were raised to the ministers and the new regional project.

The next day, 8 August, the five representatives convened once again at the Thai Foreign Ministry for the official signing ceremony of the two-page ‘ASEAN Declaration’, also called the Bangkok Declaration. The informality of the preceding days now turned to ceremony. The golf course made way for the stately gilded rooms of the Saranrom Palace (home to the Thai Foreign Ministry); sleeveless shirts and golf attire gave way to lounge suits; and the secluded interactions at the beach resort now gave way to the glare of an audience of international press and diplomats.

Visual footage shows the material and symbolic organization of the stage for this signing ceremony.<sup>22</sup> At the centre of this stage was a long, rectangular table with place cards indicating the names of the five participating countries. The table was not on an elevated platform but was casually placed at the same level as the audience. The order of seating was not by alphabetical order (as would become the ASEAN protocol from this moment onwards) but was arranged in a way that placed the host country, Thailand (and Thanat Khoman), at the centre. Radiating from this centre, as it were, were the seats for Indonesia and Malaysia, and at the outer flanks of this table were the seats for the Philippines and Singapore (it is not difficult to infer the hierarchy informing this order of seating). Besides the country place cards on the table, the identity of states was symbolically presented by the flags planted behind each chair.

The climactic moment came late morning (around 11:30 am). The video shows the reception hall in Saranrom Palace packed with journalists and diplomats waiting for the impending act, with the five signatories standing to the side of the table. Signalling the start of the ceremony, Thanat Khoman extends an arm courteously in the direction of the table and asks the ministers to take their place. Narciso Ramos and Adam Malik file past him and take their

<sup>20</sup> Theh Chongkhadikij, ‘New Grouping Named “ASEAN”: Delegates to Sign Declaration Today’, *Bangkok Post*, 8 August 1967.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>22</sup> See ‘The Birth of ASEAN’, 42:08–43:30.

seats. Thanat Khoman is next, followed by Tun Razak and S. Rajaratnam. They momentarily stand in file as a photographer darts to the side to take a picture. Tun Razak nearly sits down, as does Rajaratnam by his side, but they retract immediately, seeing that the others are still standing. With a smile, Thanat Khoman motions them to sit down. Soon, they are grappling with the printed textual artefact before them – the two-page declaration bound in hard copy. The signing is brief, perhaps a few minutes at most, and it is at some point here that the famous photograph is taken.

Archival video adds texture to the image frozen in the photograph. While the photograph captures our ministers gazing intently at the document and adding their signatures imperturbably, with singular focus – an intensity that is further heightened in the painting – the video reveals the kinetic quality of this moment. In quick and brief moves spanning a few seconds, we find the delegates eyeing the document, uncapping pens placed next to them, donning glasses, glancing quickly at their neighbours to see how they were going about this business (at one point, Thanat Khoman leans into Adam Malik to say where to sign the document), and finally gripping the document with their left hand and bringing pen to paper with the right hand (they were all right-handed).

The signing protocol in play here is different from other such ceremonies of their time. Rather than signatories taking turns to sign one document (as with the SEATO treaty) the assembled five delegates sign *five* copies of the Declaration, with each delegation presumably taking a copy back to their capitals. Upon signing a copy before them, they pass the hard-bound folder to whoever is seated to their left. Junior male diplomats in the background (who are cropped out in the painting) circulate the copy from one end of the table to the other. With this brief performative act, ASEAN is signed into existence, and the signing ceremony is followed by a reception where the delegates are photographed standing before their country flags and, later, huddled affably in conversation. These other images are also part of the visual archive of this moment.

## **An Image and Its Afterlife**

### *An Image Forgotten and Revived*

Images from the Saranrom Palace of the five figures chatting, standing, and signing the Declaration made it to the next day's English-language newspapers in the region.<sup>23</sup> Thereafter, the image faded into the background for nearly

<sup>23</sup> Besides the *Bangkok Post*, whose reporter Theh Chongkhadikij covered the story closely, the news and image appeared in 'The ASEAN Aims: First 7-Point Accord Signed', *Straits Times*, 9 August 1967, and 'A Joint Action Call to Block Alien Meddling', *Straits Times*, 9 August 1967.

three decades. There is a simple reason for this. In contrast to the contemporary lionizing account of ASEAN's creation in 1967, actors in their time had little reason to have monumental expectations from this new organization. As noted earlier, Southeast Asia was littered with such experiments, and three recent projects (with their now forgotten signing ceremonies) had run aground in the tide of turbulent regional relations and schisms of the Cold War (SEATO, ASA, and Maphilindo).

The image bided its time, as it were, waiting for ASEAN as a body to consolidate over several decades. And consolidate it did. ASEAN emerged as a key diplomatic platform for capitalist Southeast Asian states to cohere against communist victories in Indochina in 1975.<sup>24</sup> Subsequently, it served as *the* vehicle to mount a diplomatic offensive against Vietnam during the Third Indochina conflict.<sup>25</sup>

In the span of three decades (1967–97), ASEAN came to be viewed as a foreign policy 'cornerstone' in its member states and was widely recognized in international diplomatic circles. Indeed, it was now talked about as the most successful regional project outside Europe.<sup>26</sup> With its Cold War successes and post-Cold War expansion (with erstwhile foes lining up to join the association, starting with Vietnam in 1995), the time was right for ASEAN's policy elites to fashion an ASEAN story for international and domestic audiences. The time was also right for scholarly appraisals of the Association's diplomacy. It was in this post-Cold War narrativizing and evaluating that the image became a handy visual marker. In the 1990s, the image was featured in a blown-up poster cast in a gilded frame at the entrance of the ASEAN Secretariat library in Jakarta. It featured in celebratory memoirs on ASEAN, such as the *Know Your ASEAN* booklet and an 'ASEAN for Dummies' account of the association.<sup>27</sup> It also appeared on the front cover of serious scholarly explorations of this diplomacy, notably, the cover of Jurgen Haacke's 2003 book on the organization.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Michael Leifer (ed.), *ASEAN and the Security of Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge 1989).

<sup>25</sup> For an appraisal of this success, see Yuen Foong Khong, 'The Elusiveness of Regional Order: Leifer, the English School and Southeast Asia', *The Pacific Review*, 18 (2005), 23–41. For a critique, see Lee Jones (ed.), *ASEAN, Sovereignty and Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 79–91.

<sup>26</sup> Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffrey Sng (eds.), *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2017), p. 6; Barry Desker, 'The 1976 Bali Summit: ASEAN Shifts Gears', in T. Koh, S. L. Seah, and L. L. Chang (eds.), *50 Years of ASEAN and Singapore* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2017), p. 33; Amitav Acharya (ed.), *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 208.

<sup>27</sup> ISEAS (ed.), *Know Your ASEAN* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), p. 53.

<sup>28</sup> Jurgen Haacke (ed.), *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture: Origins, Development and Prospects* (London: RoutledgeCurzon), 2003.

However, the image truly took off in the era of social media and online digital reproduction where it emerged as *the* stock photo for ASEAN. By the time of ASEAN's fiftieth anniversary in 2017, the image was being actively reproduced across multiple media platforms to commemorate ASEAN's birth and to showcase the association's 'founding fathers' – those five signatories who had golfed and confabulated back in Bangsaen and Bangkok in 1967.<sup>29</sup>

An overview of some of these reproductions from ASEAN's fiftieth anniversary commemoration is in order. The image appeared in several op-eds and commemorative stories published on the online websites of leading regional media (*Straits Times*, *Bangkok Post*, etc.).<sup>30</sup> It featured in the historical timeline of a fiftieth-anniversary commemorative book on Singapore-ASEAN relations.<sup>31</sup> The image and the signing ceremony from 1967 were featured in various social media platforms. On Facebook, the ASEAN Foundation headquartered in Jakarta produced an e-poster with thumbnail images of the five signatories under the banner 'Founding Fathers of ASEAN'. The Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs (as ASEAN chair for 2017) produced five digital posters, each carrying a black and white image of ASEAN's 'founding fathers' accompanied with quotes from their remarks made right after the signing ceremony.<sup>32</sup> In one poster we find Thanat Khoman looking into the distance, with the adjoining text, 'What we have decided today is only a small beginning . . . of accomplishments.' In another, a smiling Tun Razak is seen alongside his words: 'The idea and desire for regional cooperation . . . a happy augury for the future'. S. Rajaratnam is seen saying, 'We have approached ASEAN as standing for something, not against anything.' These posters were shared by the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs on their Facebook and Twitter accounts and subsequently shared by other ASEAN agencies on their online platforms.

<sup>29</sup> Katerina Francesco, 'Who Are ASEAN's Five Founding Fathers?', Rappler.com (Philippines), [www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/177220-asean-founding-fathers](http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/177220-asean-founding-fathers); Termsak Chalermplanupap and Tang Siew Mun, 'The Spirit of ASEAN's Founding Fathers Lives On', *Today Online* (Singapore), 11 March 2016; '1967: ASEAN Berdiri', *Media Indonesia*, 8 August 2017, <https://mediaindonesia.com/read/detail/116535-1967-asean-berdiri-1>; Khairy Jamaluddin, 'Continue to Build on the Dreams of ASEAN's Founding Fathers', *Straits Times*, 8 August 2017, [www.straitstimes.com/opinion/continue-to-build-on-the-dreams-of-aseans-founding-fathers](http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/continue-to-build-on-the-dreams-of-aseans-founding-fathers); 'In Honor of the Last of ASEAN's Founding Fathers', *Bangkok Post*, 7 March 2016, [www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/888672/in-honor-of-the-last-of-asean-founding-fathers](http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/888672/in-honor-of-the-last-of-asean-founding-fathers).

<sup>30</sup> Roberto F. de Ocampo, 'Time for an Asian-ASEAN Century', *Straits Times*, 8 August 2017, [www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/time-for-an-asian-asean-century](http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/time-for-an-asian-asean-century); Mahathir bin Mohammad, 'ASEAN Is More than It May Seem', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 8 August 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Features/ASEAN-AT-50/ASEAN-is-more-than-it-may-seem>; Francesco, 'Who Are ASEAN's Five Founding Fathers?'.

<sup>31</sup> Koh et al. (eds.), *50 Years of ASEAN and Singapore*.

<sup>32</sup> These can be viewed on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/dfaphl/status/892173192038690816> and also on Facebook: [www.facebook.com/dfaphl/photos/a.858261067662062/858720147616154/?type=1&theater](http://www.facebook.com/dfaphl/photos/a.858261067662062/858720147616154/?type=1&theater) (accessed 7 November 2022).

Also in 2017, the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta produced a video titled ‘Tribute to the Founding Fathers,’ which begins with images from Saranrom palace in 1967 – an image of signatories standing against country flags, which segues to the image of them seated and signing the Bangkok Declaration.<sup>33</sup> A male voiceover narrates (perhaps with some exaggeration) that ‘fifty years ago, five visionaries came together to sign the Bangkok Declaration, an agreement that would change the course of history’. The speaker asks in falsetto, ‘Who were they?’ After listing the names of the five signatories, the video introduces us to the children, grandchildren, and nephews of the (now deceased) signatories, each of whom shares their memories of these ‘founding fathers’ and speculates what their ancestors would have thought of ASEAN had they been alive.

Besides op-eds, digital posters, and videos, in 2017, Singapore’s postal service Singpost issued a stamp commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of ASEAN. The stamp is set against a collector’s sheet depicting ‘ASEAN’s five founding fathers’. This sheet is a watercolour rendition of the five signatories huddled convivially in conversation at Saranrom Palace right after they had signed the Bangkok Declaration.<sup>34</sup> The climax of these commemorative events on ASEAN’s fiftieth anniversary was the painting of the five ‘founding fathers’ (Fig. 9.1) signing ASEAN into existence, which I recounted in the opening of this chapter.

In short, the otherwise unexceptional image of the signing ceremony at Saranrom Palace in 1967 has enjoyed a remarkable afterlife. While other images from this diplomatic moment have also shared the spotlight, it is this image that has emerged as the single most recognizable visual signifier for ASEAN.

### *Image and Discourse: Weaving an Origin Myth*

Images don’t merely *depict* a moment, as the emcee at the signing ceremony asserted in an American accent. They also carry meanings and narratives – often partial and partisan – that advance a particular interpretation of the moment being remembered. Such is the case with this image. As it was being hurriedly reproduced across online articles, op-eds, Twitter, and Facebook, we were being told something about ASEAN’s creation and the ASEAN story in general. This story – a creation myth no less – portrays the association’s birth as a heroic moment of reconciliation in the context of astounding cultural diversity and difference. Perhaps the clearest distillation of this creation myth

<sup>33</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, ‘Tribute to Founding Fathers Full’, YouTube, 23 August 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3EU3cw-CkU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3EU3cw-CkU) (accessed 7 November 2022).

<sup>34</sup> Collectors Sheet CSK17CS. The stamp and sheet can be viewed at the Singapore Post website: [www.singpost.com/shop/stamp-collectibles/50th-anniversary-asean-collectors%E2%80%99-sheet](http://www.singpost.com/shop/stamp-collectibles/50th-anniversary-asean-collectors%E2%80%99-sheet) (accessed 7 November 2022).

comes in the writings of the veteran Singapore diplomat and writer Kishore Mahbubani. In an opinion piece in the *Straits Times* featuring the black and white Bangkok photo, Mahbubani reflects on how ASEAN can serve as a model to the European and American intelligentsia for managing societal difference and inter-state peace. He writes that

[T]he story of Asean can bring some hope to our troubled times. The five brave men who came together to sign the founding Asean declaration on 8 August 1967 were a Buddhist Thai, a Christian Filipino, two Muslims and a lapsed Hindu. They *could not have come from more diverse cultural universes* [emphasis mine]. If one had to put together a cast of characters to launch the second-most successful regional organisation in the world, one would not have started with this cast of five characters from five countries... . *Yet the political divisions among the five founding fathers of Asean were equally great, if not greater* [emphasis mine]. If we remember the organisation's 1967 starting point, Asean's achievements are nothing less than spectacular.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, Mahbubani suggests that ASEAN deserves no less than a Noble Peace Prize for embodying this heroic bridging of 'vastly different cultural universes', a suggestion declared unambiguously in the title of the piece. Mahbubani is not alone in this view of ASEAN's creation story. Writing on the fiftieth anniversary in an op-ed flanked with the same black and white photo, the former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad observes, 'The countries of Southeast Asia may be close to each other geographically. But they have very different backgrounds, particularly in terms of their divergent experiences in the colonial era.'<sup>36</sup> This trope of ASEAN's creation, despite astounding cultural differences, political divisions, colonial histories, and so on, finds purchase in the memoirs of diplomats too. The former secretary general of ASEAN, Rodolfo Severino, underscores the 'arduous' nature of the Bangsaen and Bangkok talks as they unfolded in the backdrop of great diversity among its member states. He writes,

Southeast Asia was, and is, indeed, extremely diverse, much more than is Europe – diverse in race and ethnicity, diverse in the role of religion in political as well as social life, diverse in legal and political systems and modes of governance, diverse in levels of economic development and in approaches to development, diverse in values as well as historical experiences, culture, the practice of religion, and strategic outlook.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, 'Why ASEAN Deserves a Nobel Peace Prize', *Straits Times*, 26 March 2017, [www.straitstimes.com/opinion/why-asean-deserves-a-nobel-peace-prize](http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/why-asean-deserves-a-nobel-peace-prize).

<sup>36</sup> Mahathir Bin Mohammad, 'ASEAN Is More than It May Seem'. To be sure, Mahathir rightly points to the diversity of colonial experiences, but as I suggest below, ASEAN effectively excluded this register of political diversity with its band of accommodationist independent regimes.

<sup>37</sup> Rodolfo Severino (ed.), *Southeast Asia in Search of an ASEAN Community: Insights from the Former ASEAN Secretary-General* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2006), p. 8.

Similarly, the former Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa writes of ASEAN's formation in the context of 'rich diversity', which lay not only in the histories and political systems of its member states but also in their foreign policy orientations given the split between pro-west and non-aligned states (such as Indonesia).<sup>38</sup>

This trope of near-insuperable diversity is buttressed by scholarly accounts of ASEAN's creation. In a book-length appraisal of ASEAN's history, Donald Weatherbee writes of the 'great political and cultural diversity among the five [founding] countries' as he proceeds to outline these differences in the familiar registers of religion (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism), ethnicity (Chinese, Malay, etc.), and political regimes (constitutional monarchy, parliamentary democracy, military dictatorship, etc.).<sup>39</sup> Amitav Acharya argues that unlike countries in the trans-Atlantic area, with the shared political culture of liberal democracy, 'ASEAN lacked such background conditions at the time of its inception and continues to lack them today.'<sup>40</sup> He adds that 'the sheer diversity among the ASEAN members in terms of size, populations, cultural and linguistic differences, and political systems predisposes Southeast Asia against a viable form of regionalism'. Writing on the limited levels of trust among Southeast Asian elites, Ralf Emmers observes that 'historical animosities – combined with diversity in the cultural, ethnic, religious, and economic spheres – continues to affect regional relations'.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Alice Ba explains ASEAN's dialogue-driven process as starting from an acknowledgement of its diversity: 'if there is one point that most observers of Southeast Asia . . . would seem to agree on, it is Southeast Asia's diversity'.<sup>42</sup>

### *The Origin Myth Revisited*

I suggest that the humble black and white photo contains within it the seeds for an alternative reading of ASEAN's creation. The assertions regarding 'different cultural universes' and remarkable diversity sit somewhat uncomfortably with the striking uniformity captured in this diplomatic image. The five

<sup>38</sup> Marty Natalegawa, *Does ASEAN Matter? A View from Within* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), pp. 59, 71. Also see the collection of essays on ASEAN by practitioners and think-tankers in Y. Lee (ed.), *ASEAN Matters: Reflecting on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Donald Weatherbee (ed.), *ASEAN's Half Century: A Political History of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Acharya (ed.), *Constructing a Security Community*, p. 254.

<sup>41</sup> Ralf Emmers, *ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> Alice D. Ba (ed.), *Renegotiating East and Southeast Asia: Region, Regionalism, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 5.

signatories are bespectacled old men, although this deeply gendered dimension to post-war diplomacy should be unsurprising. They are seen wearing western business suits with ties and pocket squares. While this choice of western formal wear should also be unsurprising given the European aristocratic and bourgeois heritage of diplomacy, what makes this surprising is how this (ASEAN) diplomatic encounter differed from the sartorial choices of the Bandung conference a decade earlier, where western business clothing mingled with deliberate and assertive displays of national clothing to register a new postcolonial moment in international diplomacy.

The photograph also suppresses differences in what Erving Goffman would call the 'fixed' aspects of their personal front – in this case, the racial features of the participants.<sup>43</sup> Awash in the blinding flash of cameras, the five signatories in the photograph appear uniformly fair-skinned, despite the considerable diversity in racial tone between the Sino-Thai Thanat Khoman on the one end and S. Rajaratnam of ethnic Tamil ancestry on the other end. Indeed, this suppression of racial diversity carries onwards into the painting where all figures appear uniformly in ochre-yellow shades. This was deliberate. The painter explains that 'we are really brothers here in Asia so . . . in a way I would like to have an idea of "we are all the same" regardless of the complexion of the skin, the physical features'.<sup>44</sup>

The similarities that appear in this diplomatic image are not merely accidental, individual, or biographical. They point to a story that is patterned and structural. The *maleness* of this formative diplomatic moment prefigured the deep male homosociality that would be fostered over golf courses and meeting rooms and would lubricate the formula for conflict avoidance in ASEAN.<sup>45</sup> The western clothing (business suits) was less an instance of 'masking difference'<sup>46</sup> than representing the newfound valorization of western cultural capital among these sociologically similar Anglophone elites. These apparent similarities captured in the image also direct our attention to perhaps the most important axis of convergence that definitively belies ASEAN's diversity trope: the extraordinary likeness of social and political orders among the five signatories on that table in Bangkok. As I discuss in detail elsewhere, ASEAN's creation epitomized and indeed was made possible by the triumph

<sup>43</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1959), p. 34.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Peter Paul Blanco, 26 May 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Deepak Nair, 'Sociability in International Politics: Golf and ASEAN's Cold War Diplomacy', *International Political Sociology*, 14 (2020), 196–214.

<sup>46</sup> A functionalist reading of diplomatic dressing would suggest that participants wear similar clothing to a diplomatic encounter precisely to mask and suppress their differences. This may well hold in some instances but, I would suggest, not here. I thank Naoko Shimazu for this point.

of counter-revolutionary political forces in Cold War Southeast Asia.<sup>47</sup> The five signatories in Bangkok represented regimes that were politically conservative, were to the right of the political spectrum, were staunchly anti-communist, had sided with the western camp of the Cold War, and had embarked on projects of authoritarian state-building at home. The five signatories also represented conservative political social groups that had triumphed during domestic struggles for decolonization.

These individuals were bearers of this convergent political complexion in more ways than one. The Philippines Foreign Secretary Narciso Ramos was the father of Fidel Ramos – the future president of the Philippines – who at that time was deployed in the Vietnam War. The Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman led the Foreign Ministry during two US-backed military dictatorships in Thailand. S. Rajaratnam had been a key figure of the British-backed Anglophone faction of the People's Action Party (PAP), led by Lee Kuan Yew, which had politically defeated and marginalized a more left-wing, anti-colonial, and Sinophone faction that split from the PAP and became the Barisan Socialis. Tun Razak hailed from the upper echelons of the same Malay nobility that had collaborated with the British during decolonization and would become the architect of a new era of one-party dominance in Malaysia after the 1969 race riots. And Adam Malik was the civilian face of a new right-wing military regime in Indonesia, which was consolidating its power on the back of the destruction of the Indonesian communist party and the mass killings of nearly a million suspected communists. It is essential to underscore that ASEAN's birth was possible only because Indonesia – the region's largest and most populous member – had politically fallen in line with the other conservative pro-west and anti-communist regimes of Southeast Asia.

To be sure, Southeast Asia *is astoundingly diverse*. In his sociology of knowledge of 'Southeast Asia' as a representation for the region, Donald Emmerson argues that it was precisely the diversity in linguistic, ecological, topographical, religious, and cultural terms that historically complicated efforts to demarcate a neat region.<sup>48</sup> So, while Southeast Asia was and remains remarkably diverse, ASEAN's diplomatic project is not. The conformity in the black and white image is mirrored (indeed, was made possible) by the wider structural convergence among five deeply anti-communist and increasingly authoritarian regimes that sought to collectively bolster regime security.

<sup>47</sup> Deepak Nair, 'Saving Face in Diplomacy: A Political Sociology of Face-to-Face Interactions in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25 (2019), 672–97.

<sup>48</sup> Donald K. Emmerson, 'Southeast Asia: What's in a Name', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 15 (1984), 1–21.

## Conclusion

I have been guided by two aims in this chapter. The first is to account for a diplomatic image from Cold War Southeast Asia that is unexceptional compared with other striking and evocative images featured in this edited volume but is exceptional in its thriving afterlife. Second, I have demonstrated how diplomatic images are not mere visual archives of past encounters, but are complicit in how the past is framed, memorialized, and reproduced in the service of contemporary *raison d'état*. As the editors note in the Introduction, diplomatic historians and scholars of international relations have traditionally used images for illustrative purposes, as visual markers for a lineal recounting of the past. But images encourage – even insist upon – a raft of interpretations. Unsurprising, then, that this image from Bangkok 1967 is reproduced not merely to illustrate ASEAN's birth, but also to tell a story about ASEAN, a story that involves a selective interpretation of the wider Cold War (geo) political moment the image captures. I have shown how this very humble and somewhat boring image allows us to recover a different story of ASEAN's origins. This alternative reading helps us destabilize the creation myth of ASEAN's founding as an act of heroic reconciliation in the context of great Southeast Asian diversity. Instead, the image points to what was deeply (and problematically) similar about these regimes and political orders embodied by the five signatories assembled in Bangkok.

The image and the myth promise to thrive if ASEAN endures and expands. There is a wry parallel here. Just as the painting discussed at the start of this chapter promises to obscure and displace the black and white photographic image as the 'original' and 'authentic' depiction of ASEAN's founding moment, the ASEAN creation myth too quietly obscures the striking (and problematic) uniformity that accompanied the Association's birth in 1967. The image is a quiet witness to these acts of suppression and displacement but – as I have suggested – it remains a resource for recovering counter-narratives and thinking of alternative political possibilities. In these effects and opportunities – actualized and exploited, unrealized and latent – we are reminded again of the power of images.