

**Winning Hearts and Minds: Public Diplomacy in ASEAN,  
edited by Sue-Ann Chia, Singapore, Singapore  
International Foundation, 2021, 128 pp.,  
ISBN 9789811817076**

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It is not often that one is able to find a succinct yet rich anthology of essays on public diplomacy in Southeast Asia in a single book. *Winning Hearts and Minds: Public Diplomacy in ASEAN*, edited by Sue-Ann Chia and published by the Singapore International Foundation, includes chapters on each of the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The ASEAN member states are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Starting with an introduction and concluding with an “afterword,” the collection offers unique narratives about how member states in ASEAN countries practice public diplomacy.

Devoid of the academic jargon found in most literature on international relations, the book offers a refreshing take on the weighty topic of public diplomacy. Although concise and brief, each chapter contains profound analyses of the significant periods in each country’s history, as readers are guided seamlessly through the important decisions and policy changes. This depth of inquiry will help explain both the current state and future trajectory of public diplomacy in ASEAN member states.

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## **Diplomacy informed by history and diversity**

The ASEAN region includes small- and medium-sized countries and has a culturally diverse population of over 660 million people. Like in most parts of the world, history plays an important role in shaping public diplomacy in ASEAN countries. Indeed, some chapters highlight how the history of non-alignment, non-confrontation, and accommodation remains salient in both the philosophy and practice of public diplomacy.

An integral pillar of ASEAN public diplomacy is cultural diplomacy, highlighting the rich cultural traditions of multi-ethnic societies in Southeast Asia. This is evident from the range of cultural exchange programs found in every ASEAN state. Such exchanges have become significant means of fostering trust and promoting deeper understanding within and among ASEAN states, as well as the wider international community.

## **Public Diplomacy at home and abroad**

A common theme that runs through all the chapters is that public diplomacy caters to both foreign and domestic audiences. As noted by Vu Lam in the chapter on Vietnam, public diplomacy is an “intermestic” exercise. As such, the drafting and implementation of policies and programs inevitably includes the engagement, participation, and contribution of the public and other stakeholders at home and abroad. Thus, public diplomacy, as emphasized by Alan Chong in the chapter on Singapore, is increasingly about “people’s diplomacy.”

In a highly connected region like ASEAN, people-to-people ties extend beyond borders. These ties foster trust and strengthen bonds among individuals, groups, and communities across the region. Civil society organizations in ASEAN countries, such as the Singapore International Foundation, and Malaysia’s and Indonesia’s Youth Diplomacy associations, among others, play a significant role in advancing public diplomacy. Their work in sharing knowledge and skills, promoting cultural exchanges, and providing humanitarian assistance during disasters and other emergencies leaves a real impact on people’s lives and experiences. Their active involvement also gives them ownership of multifaceted endeavors in the field of public diplomacy.

## **Evolving agendas and adaptive strategies**

Public diplomacy continually evolves over time. Every ASEAN country is careful to manage the shifts in their foreign policy agendas to promote economic development and maintain stable relationships within and outside of the region. In this context, the chapters on Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar offer interesting snippets of the history of public diplomacy.

Thailand's well-known policy in the late 1980s of "Turning Indochina from a Battleground into a Marketplace" offers an interesting glimpse into how the country deftly managed to re-invent its foreign policy and make it more outward-looking at a time when the Cambodian crisis was still raging. This diplomatic shift was executed to make Thai foreign policy more business-friendly and attract foreign direct investments. Similarly, carefully calibrated shifts could be observed in Laos and Vietnam in the 1980s and early 1990s when they started to transition their economies to become more market-based and integrate them with regional and global markets. These significant changes helped spur regional efforts in terms of promoting and deepening ASEAN nations' economic integration, which culminated in the adoption of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2003.

Cambodia's dramatic transformation from a war-torn country in the early 1990s to an active contributing country in the United Nations peacekeeping forces from 2006 to present day is another compelling example of how one can turn a tragic experience into a diplomatic asset. As noted by Chheang Vannarith, small countries with less material power should aim for "smart" diplomacy.

In 1998, Myanmar joined ASEAN and opened up after decades of diplomatic isolation. In 2014, it held the chairmanship of ASEAN, which was heralded as a highlight of the country's democratic transition. The military coup of February 2021, however, brought an abrupt end to what would have been a success story of public diplomacy ushered in by the country's incremental transition to democracy.

### **Social media public diplomacy**

As ASEAN countries respond to new challenges brought about by rapid changes in the geo-strategic and economic environment, we see how public diplomacy strategies have quickly adapted to use digital technology, particularly social media, which has become a powerful communication medium. The chapters on Indonesia and the Philippines describe how political leaders extensively use Twitter and Facebook to connect directly with their citizens as well as foreign audiences. There are also accounts of how the respective Ministers of Foreign Affairs use Twitter, and even Instagram, to announce and explain their countries' foreign policies.

As noted by Julio Amador, social media in the Philippines has now become a "tool for accountability and feedback" for the country's foreign affairs department. Netizens use social media to express concerns, from passport issues to the protection needs of foreign migrant workers. Social media platforms, therefore, have merged domestic and international audiences. This inevitably increases the demand for more transparency and accountability in public diplomacy.

To conclude, this book is a timely and important contribution to the growing literature on public diplomacy in ASEAN countries. Its reader-friendly format complements the weighty tomes published on ASEAN countries and will attract a wider readership from students, media personnel, and budding diplomats.

## ■ Mely Caballero-Anthony

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