ASEAN was formed after the failure of a number of attempts to foster cooperation with the view that the nations that formed ASEAN were intellectually and conceptually prepared to cooperate with each other. It was assumed that national resilience could be achieved through economic development resulting in political stability.

During the Cold War in the Sixties, the major concern of these states, the one that proved to be the rallying point was the threat posed by Communist China. Dominant security concerns were of an internal nature since most of the member states during the period were in the early stages of nation-building. Their governments were being challenged by armed Communist and separatist movements. External threats perceived as indirect, and mainly in the form of a revolutionary China, provided stimuli to the existing destabilizing domestic elements.

The political structures in most of these countries was very fragile. There was an apparent stalemate due to the Vietnamese Communist forces battling US and South Vietnamese forces. Malaysia and Indonesia were locked in a bitter political and military struggle. There was very slow progress in Burma as well as periodic coups in Thailand. In the Philippines there was intra-elite scramble for power following the dynamic Magsaysay era. Maoism was triumphant in China and revolutionary contagion appeared ready to spread in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN was formed in 1967 due to the belief that local disputes were wasteful and self-defeating. Although each nation was anti-Communist, ASEAN was not conceived as yet another anti-Communist organisation. Rather, from the very beginning, ASEAN was self-consciously inward-looking and regional and devoted to individual and regional self-
reliance and resilience. It was assumed that national resilience could be achieved through economic development leading to social and political stability.

Although not a security organisation, ASEAN’s presence was conceived as a security buffer by the member states. To tackle insurgency emanating from Communist and religious fundamentalism, they decided to discuss among themselves and evolve cooperation to cope with such challenges. Countries in the region realised that internal problems in many instances could be solved only through cooperation from neighbours; domestic sources of threat often assumed a cross-border nature and hence the need for bilateral cooperation. Bilateral cooperation assumed importance for these countries also because of the fact that the authoritarian regimes in these countries needed legitimacy.

For regime consolidation and in order to crush any sort of opposition, or insurgency, which threatened their new governments, it was important for these countries to garner support from the neighbouring countries. Hence they took resort to bilateral cooperation. In addition, they realised that the only way to put down internal insurgencies which sometimes received both moral and material support from neighbouring countries was through bilateral cooperation. For example, Indonesia suspected Malaysia to be offering material and moral support to the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka rebels in Aceh. Similarly, Thailand suspected Malaysia of extending support to the Muslim-Malay rebels in the Pattani rebels in the Pattani province of Thailand. Subsequently, most of the countries in the region found cooperation amongst themselves easy and conducive. Hence, bilateral cooperation seemed to be the solution to internal security problems, while on the other hand, external security would be taken care of by defence pacts which existed with external powers, including, the presence of the US security umbrella in the region.
Dispute management constituted the backbone of regional order. It was a collective effort to stabilise the fragile political system while managing intra-regional conflict, in the process reducing vulnerability.

In the post Cold War period, conflicts emerged more on ethnic and religious lines resulting in occasional suspicion towards each other in encouraging separatist tendencies. As a result bilateral cooperation, which was one of the major concerns of these countries during the Cold War, became increasingly difficult.

Yet, over the years, bilateral approaches to peace and conflict management have given way to greater regional coordination over security issues. The ARF emerged as ASEAN’s own distinctive political approach to regional security problems. Thus conspicuously absent from the ARF is any robust provision for addressing the use of force in conflict and conflict resolution. Earlier efforts at security cooperation had definitely helped to keep confrontations at bay. This cooperation which earlier developed in the form of bilateral military exercises later evolved into multilateral efforts at cooperation through preventive diplomacy and confidence building measures.

The long period of peace and stability enjoyed by ASEAN states before the crisis was to a great extent through the efforts of ASEAN which was conducive to economic growth. By promoting political cooperation and playing down conflicts, the association made a vital contribution to the national economic development and domestic stability of its member states.

Since a stable domestic, regional and international environment is a pre-requisite for economic development, ASEAN states should aim at a peaceful resolution conflicts since
both underdevelopment and unsustainable development are a primary source of conflict within and between states as maintained by a majority of scholars.

This work is an attempt to analyse the role of ASEAN in promoting security in the region in spite of the fact that the founding members never perceived it as a security organization. It traces the growth of ASEAN over the years and its role in playing down conflict in the region to provide a conducive atmosphere for economic growth and prosperity.

The first chapter traces the evolutionary process of ASEAN and the security concerns in the region as well as how the concerns for security have changed over the years.

The second chapter is an analysis of the various conflicts in Southeast Asia and the challenges faced by ASEAN. It discusses how ASEAN has aided in the promotion of goodwill, trust and confidence among its member states in the past, thus facilitating the transformation of a sub-region of turmoil into a more stable and peaceful one, in which the use of force was minimized.

The third chapter explains the different levels at which bilateral cooperation evolved among the Southeast Asian countries for the promotion of security in the region.

The fourth chapter is a discussion on the recent developments in defence cooperation especially, the multilateral efforts of ASEAN. It traces the emergence of the ARF and ASEAN’s attempt at the multilateralisation of security within the framework of common and cooperative security — an attempt to seek security with other states rather than against them in which major and lesser powers come together and discuss security issues of common concern and interest.
The fifth chapter examines the increase in defence expenditure of the ASEAN countries before the economic crisis. It also attempts to analyse whether the large scale acquisition of weapons of mass destruction can in any way be regarded as an arms race in the region.

Chapter six is an analysis of the new dimensions of security in the region in view of the recent economic crisis.

The last chapter attempts at arriving at certain conclusions based on the study of the bilateral and multilateral security cooperation under the aegis of ASEAN.