

ASEAN to form Asian Union?

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Sifting schizoid ASEAN's reality from rhetoric: ASEAN to form Asian Union?

Prepare yourself for a debilitating bout of schizophrenia this week as leaders from across Southeast Asia meet in Singapore to mark the 40th anniversary of their Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

If you believe the summit speeches, the 10-member ASEAN is the world's most successful regional bloc, aside from the European Union, having fostered the stability that fueled the region's phenomenal economic growth in recent decades. It will be a "historic moment" as presidents and prime ministers sign their "landmark" charter – a "bold and visionary regional constitution" committing their nations to democracy, the rule of law and human rights. (ASEAN comprises Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Brunei.)

If you believe the critics, ASEAN is at best a toothless talk shop where diplomats are reduced, literally, to song and dance routines; at worst, an apologist for oppressive regimes because its beloved "ASEAN Way" puts dialogue, consensus and non-interference above decision-making, compliance and adherence to universal rights. The idealistic charter, like ASEAN itself, is made a mockery by the inclusion of monk-crushing Myanmar, not to mention communist Vietnam, military-ruled Thailand and the absolute monarchy of Brunei.

Who to believe? Actually, both – and neither. And perhaps no one knows this better than Surin Pitsuwan, the former Thai foreign minister and ASEAN's next secretary general. "We welcome all and threaten none," he recently told this author in Washington during an exclusive interview. "And therein lies the paradox. ASEAN's weakness and informality is its strength. But to move further, it will need a lot of power and resources."

An ASEAN veteran – the ebullient 58-year-old diplomat was instrumental in securing Asian peacekeepers for East Timor – Surin agrees that the new charter is "what it can be at this moment in time". But citing the "economic pressures" of globalization and "fierce competition" from China and India, he says bluntly, "ASEAN will have to adapt and readjust."

Indeed, comparing the charter's lofty rhetoric against the realities of ASEAN at 40 years old reveals a region that is either experiencing a mid-life crisis or finally coming of age. Culturally, the new charter proclaims Southeast Asia to be a single "community" united by "one vision, one identity". But given the extraordinary diversity of the region's 577 million people – Muslim-majority Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei; Buddhist-majority Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos; Christian-majority Philippines – forging a common sense of community will as ever be no easy task.

People “must develop a dual identity of being a national of a member state and an ASEAN citizen”, says Surin, a Muslim and intellectual from southern Thailand who has called for reconciliation to end his homeland’s separatist Muslim insurgency. “Without a sense of belonging, economic and security cooperation will not get anywhere.”

Politically, the region’s leaders also seem torn between country and community. The “fundamental importance” of “sovereignty” and “non-interference” still comes before any talk of ensuring democracy in their new charter. They pledge to create a “human rights body” and to deal with any “serious breach” of ASEAN rules, but they leave the details of enforcement for later and make no mention of sanctioning or expelling errant members.

And yet ASEAN is evolving, increasingly flexing its diplomatic muscle on one another’s domestic matters – from the Cambodian political crisis a decade ago, to the Indonesian deforestation fires that frequently choke the region in haze, to the recent Myanmar crackdown on street demonstrators, over which it expressed “revulsion”, an unprecedented rebuke to a member state. “ASEAN has abandoned a strict application of the non-interference principle for some time,” says former Indonesian foreign minister Ali Alatas, who helped draft ideas for the new charter, which he says “further recalibrates the non-interference principle”.

Myanmar will remain the litmus test for how much the organization is willing to recalibrate – if and how it can maintain both regional unity and international legitimacy. “[Myanmar] is a drag on ASEAN and they recognize it as such,” a senior American diplomat in the region told this author. “But they have a dilemma. They don’t want to cast [Myanmar] adrift to become a satellite of China.”

Economically, the region needs to get serious about its ambitious goal of an EU-like “single market” by 2015. Most immediately, protectionist tariffs and import duties – which have kept trade among ASEAN members at a fraction of its trade with the rest of the world – must be eliminated.

At the same time, the region must narrow the huge gaps between rich (Singapore per capita income: US\$29,500), poor (Indonesia: \$1,600) and poorest (Myanmar: \$200) and between the manufacturing-heavy economies of Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand and agricultural-based Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. “These gaps are a challenge to a single, integrated community,” says Surin. “We must get serious about helping one another.”

And the stakes couldn’t be higher. “The road to reconciliation between the West and the Muslim world runs through Southeast Asia,” argues Surin, noting that more than half the region’s population will soon be Muslim. “We have to try to keep them moderate, accommodating, progressive and constructively engaged with the outside world.”

And so while the ASEAN way may frustrate its critics, it remains for these diverse countries trying to move forward the only way. “From the outside, you can wish for a lot,” says Surin. “Idealism serves us well as a benchmark to aim at, but realism is the stuff of our daily work. We must make the best of what we have and try to improve it for tomorrow.” Put another way, if life truly begins at 40, then ASEAN is just getting started.

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