

## Time for Asean to grow some teeth

By Steven CM Wong

### Unqualified non-interference is hampering the grouping

THE Arab League is nothing at all like Asean. Nor is the African Union for that matter. These three regional organisations exist in different places, different political circumstances and are subject to entirely different internal dynamics and processes.

In one important respect, however, they are the same. They have the goal of establishing regional peace and stability. Like it or not, this means not just ensuring peace and stability among member states but, on occasion, also within them.

Last week, the Arab League commanded world headlines when it announced sanctions on one of its senior members, Syria. The sanctions included suspension of commercial flights, freezing of Syrian government assets, cessation of dealings with the Syrian central bank and a travel ban by senior officials.

No doubt, some members of the Arab League would be feeling uncomfortable. Raising sanctions against Syria also raises the possibility of sanctions taken against them if similar events were to happen.

Nevertheless, with the world's attention focused on the blood-letting in Syria, a regional response was demanded. And respond the Arab League did.

The African Union (AU), which the ordinary Asean citizen does not think much of, let alone highly, is even more dominant. Its objectives explicitly promote democracy, good governance and human rights and, in a day-and-night contrast to Asean, it has the legal powers to back this up. More importantly, it uses them.

The AU has deployed peacekeeping forces to member states seven times since 2003. Its roles in South Africa, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Sudan and Somalia, and its influence after last year's Ghanaian elections, have been tangible efforts to realise its goals. It has also suspended members for wilful breaches of membership.

So is Asean, as primarily a talk shop, being surpassed by these regional organisations? Will it lose esteem with its non- or half-hearted dealing with problems?

Asean's conflict-avoidance norms are famously built into its DNA. These were designed to ensure that bigger and more powerful members do not bully smaller ones into submission.

This is fair, especially if you happen to be one of these smaller member states. But the unqualified policy of non-interference also makes the association voiceless and hapless in the affairs of their members.

Yet the members of the Arab League or the African Union are not any more united or, conversely, less disunited, than Asean. It is nevertheless clear that the latter two have a higher level of ambition and preparedness to adopt strong rule-based actions.

Some argue that Asean, unlike the Arab League and the African Union, prefers to work "behind the scenes". But this assumes that the League and the Union do not also do so.

This is inconceivable. As Asean chair, Indonesian attempts to mediate in the Thai-Cambodian conflict

were certainly commendable but ultimately inconclusive.

At the moment, few would be convinced, notwithstanding the the Asean Charter and the ambitious Asean Political Security Community Blueprint, that members could or would take action. The goals are there but not the means to enforce them.

In the aforesaid blueprint, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. But there are no provisions to deal with members who, for one reason or another, simply refuse to abide by their legal treaty obligations.

The well-known lack of a strong Asean Secretariat inhibits quick and unequivocal responses. The Asean secretary-general will, of course, attempt to use his good offices to attempt to mediate but apart from moral suasion will be able to do little without carrots or sticks.

If members reject the secretary-general's efforts, it will be up to leaders to decide. But whether they will be prepared to involve themselves in complex and controversial issues is an open question. Going by long experience, the prospects do not seem even fair.

The widening gap in how Asean operates vis-a-vis other regional institutions is something that should spark discussions of whether its continued lack of ambition and boldness to grow teeth is warranted.

Asean's norms need to evolve and they are evolving. The pace of this evolution, however, appears to be out of sync with global developments.