

Old whines in new bothers

By Bunn Nagara

THE recent Asean Summit in Manila was the 50th, marking the half-century milestone of what is often considered the world's second-most successful regional organisation after only the EU.

Since looming EU pessimism in Europe and Britain's referendum vote for Brexit however, Asean's standing may have improved even further. Nonetheless, Asean has its share or more of critics.

What appeared as yet another predictable round of regional hand-shaking, perhaps also hand-wringing, was accompanied by equally predictable cynicism by some about Asean's supposed effectiveness.

Reports on the Asean Summit tended to be coloured if not overshadowed by speculation on whether President Donald Trump would attend the linked East Asia Summit. But Asean is more than the sum of its conferences and communiqués.

Perceive Asean wrongly as an Asian Nato, as some have, and it would certainly be a failure. No regional security force has been established or even appears likely.

Mistake Asean as a Cold War instrument by confusing it with Seato (South-East Asia Treaty Organisation) and it would certainly be irrelevant today.

Seato, not Asean, was a misnomer with just two of its eight members in South-East Asia. Thailand and the Philippines had been US allies hosting US military bases, quite unlike other countries in the region.

Asean is unlike all the regional organisations before it, not being simply an enlarged or updated version of Asa (Association of South-East Asia), Maphilindo or Seato.

Asean's way to regional peace and stability is not simply through treaties policed by an armed regional force. Rather, it is by nurturing a regional fraternity of cooperative states through mutual confidence building – the warp and weft critical for weaving the Asean fabric.

Nor is Asean a tool of any external great power against another, devoid of any local sovereignty. The Asean DNA is based on a collective recognition of inherent national sovereignties of all member nations.

This makes Asean's growth and development organic, incremental, consensual and gradual. Such a genetic make-up does not provide for many exciting summits or historic photo opportunities, but the regional geopolitics is as intriguing and exhilarating as ever.

From the very outset, Asean's raison d'être was and remains internal: to minimise or remove bilateral suspicions, irritants, disputes and friction. Asean nations have had enough of being divided, conquered and sidelined.

Thus Asean's building blocks are increasing cooperation, confidence building, consensus and integration towards a more cohesive community. More than ever, each member nation recognises that its own national health hinges on the collective regional health as a sovereign region.

Unfortunately, these Asean fundamentals are enduring because their challenges linger. Centuries-old concerns between neighbours have not faded completely even as new ones enter the fray.

As Malaya moved towards the creation of Malaysia in the early 1960s, Indonesia and the Philippines objected. They proposed the three-member Maphilindo, purportedly to promote mutual relations but instead to delay or obstruct the formation of Malaysia.

Sukarno's Indonesia was influenced by the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI), then the largest communist party in the world. It was obsessed with the notion that Malaysia would be an instrument of the British Empire that would only subdue Indonesia.

With konfrontasi, some Indonesian forces landed in Johor but more violent fighting broke out in Sarawak over the border from Indonesia's Kalimantan province. A rampant Indonesian nationalism, teaming up with PKI leftists, were determined to "crush Malaysia."

Today some elements of Indonesian society are still anti-Malaysia, more so after losing the legal battle over the disputed Sipadan and Ligitan islands. The Philippines technically retains its claim on Sabah, with private armies still hoping to invade following the failed 2013 attempt in Lahad Datu.

After Khmer Rouge Cambodia staged repeated strikes against Vietnam across their border, Vietnam invaded and occupied Cambodia from 1978, toppling the Khmer Rouge. Although neither country was in Asean at the time, member nations were concerned.

A decade later a Thai-Laos border war erupted. In 2008, Cambodian and Thai forces faced off across their border in a bitter dispute over the Preah Vihear temple.

Possibly the deepest and most enduring complex of suspicions and distrust is between Thailand and Myanmar, involving their governments as well as their armies and societies.

A series of wars between Siam and Burma spanned many generations, from the mid-16th to the late-18th centuries. Bitterness lingered between the nations in the inter-war years and thereafter.

King Naresuan in the 16th to the early 17th century fought the Burmese as did his predecessors. Later, King Narai as among the most illustrious Ayutthaya kings did much the same.

Military campaigns across what is now today's 1,000km border between Thailand and Myanmar have determined much of their history and mutual perceptions. Siamese monarchs who so fought to save the nation have been honoured by the government officially with "the Great" appended to their names.

The lowest point in Siamese history came in the Burmese attacks of 1767, resulting in the destruction of Ayutthaya the capital, the dismemberment of Siam and the end of King Ekkathat's rule. Ayutthaya was looted and razed beyond repair and chaos reigned.

Later in 1767, Siamese forces led by General Taksin drove Burmese troops back across the border and restored order in Siam. The country was rebuilt, reunited and returned to normalcy under King Taksin, crowned on Dec 28 that year with the new capital in Thonburi and today's Bangkok.

Last Thursday was the 250th anniversary of King Taksin Memorial Day, with the annual event traditionally officiated by the present king taking on greater significance. Historical differences between Thailand and Myanmar are kept alive, with current concerns from narcotics to Rohingya refugees from Myanmar now troubling Thailand.

When Myanmar's military junta persecuted Aung San Suu Kyi, Thai-Myanmar relations declined with Bangkok's support for her cause. Then she triumphed and there was a respite from cross-border tensions – but now that she serves only as the new face of the old junta, the brief hopes among Thais were dashed.

On the surface, both countries may seem to “share” the characteristic of army generals ultimately running the country. But instead of being a factor for building ties, it is a reminder of how both national armies had confronted each other even as new challenges develop.

Across Asean generally, rival claims to territory and border disputes persist. Asean membership functionally serves to build on common interests, to outweigh though not obscure those differences.

Old concerns now radiate through the prism of new ones. China's rise has presented economic opportunities but also seen renewed tensions in the South China Sea, with uncertainties over any prospective US response beyond its military “pivot to Asia.”

More than their predecessors, Presidents Trump and Xi seem intent on making their countries “great again.” Rumour and speculation abound over what both these major powers will do next in this region.

All of this makes South-East Asia a most watchable part of the world. It should also make Asean a very important entity to ensure a common peace, collective confidence and comprehensive security.

Asean is essential for at least another 50 years.

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