

A platform to tackle Asean issues

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New institute to be set by year's end must be free of political interference

ASEAN is steadily but surely moving towards tackling the "hard issues" of security. The adoption of the Asean Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint at the 14th Asean Summit in 2009 was a watershed in the regional organisation's history.

The blueprint embodies the resolve to tackle heretofore seemingly intractable and highly sensitive issues such as peace and security. To date, there has been some progress, most notably, the ongoing effort to establish the Asean Institute of Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR). To recap, Asean leaders agreed to establish AIPR in May last year and tasked the foreign ministers to submit recommendations to the Asean Summit for consideration.

The terms of reference (TOR) are now being negotiated and it is hoped that the institution will be set up by year's end. Notwithstanding the Asean leaders' approval, the process is still fraught with challenges.

If AIPR were to function as an effective mechanism to "provide recommendations on promoting peace, conflict management and conflict resolution", it should not be tied down by the Asean shackle of non-interference.

Conceptualised as a mechanism that would provide timely and objective policy input and recommendations, AIPR must be given the space and freedom to conduct research unimpeded, and more importantly free from political interference.

AIPR is a test case on how far member states are willing to embrace the idea of "community". It would be all too easy to hide behind the protective aegis of the non-interference principle but doing so will also signal one's disregard for the well-being of others.

Peace is indivisible. A conflict in one part of Southeast Asia will impact the stability of the region. The Cambodia-Thai border dispute is a case in point. The ostensibly bilateral issue has ramifications for Asean, especially when it marked the first instance of an armed confrontation between two member states.

The use of force also undermined the sanctity of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. When family members engage in a squabble, it is normal, and indeed a duty, for other kin to mediate and to restore amicable relations.

To be sure, AIPR is not tasked to engage in mediation or preventive diplomacy. As a research institute, its role is to provide information and recommendations to support and assist Asean. Its prescribed status as a non-governmental institution may also lend itself to be more effective in conducting informal dialogues and other confidence-building measures.

Understandably, Asean member states may want to limit AIPR's scope and mandate to protect their national interests. This would be a mistake.

AIPR should not be perceived as meddlesome. Parties involved in negotiating the TOR, including our Foreign Affairs Ministry, should be mindful that the rationale for the establishment of AIPR is to provide support and assistance to Asean. AIPR works for Asean and not against it! The specification of the scope and mandate of institution will be the utmost consideration for the Senior Officials Meeting tasked with drafting the TOR.

However, given the member states' endemic unease for AIPR to move beyond research, the TOR would most probably mirror the consensus outlined in the APSC Blueprint, including:

COMPILE Asean's experiences and best practices on peace, conflict management and conflict resolution;

IDENTIFY priority research topics, with a view to providing recommendations on promoting peace, conflict management and conflict resolution;

ENHANCE existing cooperation among Asean think tanks to study peace, conflict management and conflict resolution;

HOLD workshops on peace, conflict management and conflict resolution with relevant regional and international organisations, including the United Nations;

UNDERTAKE studies to promote gender mainstreaming in peace building, peace process and conflict resolution; and,

DEVELOP a pool of experts from Asean member states as resource persons to assist in conflict management and conflict resolution activities.

Additionally, four considerations will be critical to the future work and prospects of AIPR. Firstly, the institution requires adequate funding to sustain its operations. Ideally, it should have an endowment fund that will provide long-term financial stability and independence.

Secondly, AIPR must be accorded a degree of independence for it to carry out its functions objectively and free from external interference.

Thirdly, researchers should be recruited through an open process based on their expertise and on merit.

Fourthly, AIPR should have a direct line of communication to Asean policymakers so that recommendations and input could be acted upon if deemed useful by the stakeholders. AIPR should be embraced as a meaningful step towards the consolidation of the APSC and Malaysia should take an active and central role in the realisation of the institution.