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ASEAN as 'One Community, One Destiny': Really?

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ASEAN turned 45 on August 8th in typical low-key style. One news service may have hit the proverbial nail on the head by using the word 'observed' rather than 'celebrated'. Attempts have been made in the past to get engage the public and inject hype and emotion into the event but ASEAN has proved remarkably resistant as a non-elitist enterprise. As a consequence, anniversaries have been relatively somber affairs, to be observed, more as a stuffy political artifact rather than celebrated as a truly dynamic mass movement.

In recent years, even this political construct has become frayed and close to outright fracturing. Clashes between member states have broken out and with ASEAN efforts at peaceful reconciliation rebuffed. And with the dysfunctional 45th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia almost exactly one month earlier, still fresh in everyone's minds, one could be forgiven for thinking that the chosen theme of 'One Community, One Destiny' was a plaintive cry rather than a firm common aspiration.

Indeed, at 45 years of age, ASEAN appears to be a middle age organization that can no longer be excused not so much from acts of rash youthful indiscretions - for there have been very few - but indolent indifference. Expectations have been building, and for quite some time, that the organization become substantive and substantial, a hope that perked in 2007 when the ASEAN Charter was adopted to give the Association a legal personality. (Naturally, if observers only knew the true extent to which the Charter had been compromised and watered-down, they might not have held out such high hopes.)

In the five years since the ASEAN Charter what exactly has been achieved? Has the hitherto glacial pace of organisational evolution and renewal quickened in any way? Are decisions made today of a more relevant, timely and cohesive nature? Have ASEAN countries moved away from concocting ever grander visions, goals and statements of purpose and begun to show that it is prepared to act on any of these purposefully? Or has there been the usual tinkering around of the system, half-hearted attempts at establishing at least moral even if not administrative legitimacy?

In economic and business circles, two 'C's' that have drawn attention to the region are Community and Connectivity. Are we closer to either of these in our lifetimes, never mind as we edge towards 2015? In diplomatic and security circles, there also two 'C's': viz. the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea. Despite the fact that ASEAN is an organization that sees a constant changing of the guard, from the Secretary General down to the ministers and ASEAN director generals of member states, it needs to be borne in mind (by someone) that these are likely to make-or-break ASEAN's reputation and credibility, possibly beyond repair.

More immediately on ASEAN's plate is the Rohingya refugee problem and developments in Rakhine State in Myanmar. If ASEAN cannot bring its collective influence and good offices to bear on this humanitarian crisis, one might well see yet another pillar pulled away from its so-called 'destiny'.

Of course throwing brickbats in ASEAN's direction is an easy spectator sport. Over the years, ASEAN officials have grown virtually immune to criticisms, citing a lack of understanding about the organization and the environment in which it exists and/or a lack of knowledge of new and 'important' measures and initiatives taken. Some have even a more taciturn response: Would the region be any more cohesive, safer or prosperous without the ASEAN that we have at the moment, warts-and-all?

The obvious implication is that the answer is 'no' – no matter how badly it functions, the ASEAN we have is better than no ASEAN at all. But whether this will remain the 'reality' – if it is one – by 2017, when ASEAN turns 50 years old, remains to be seen. One might well find a region of disparate coalesced interests even greater than today. No doubt there will be a great deal more of deep reflection, angst and hand wringing on display until then.