

Is Asean the cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy?

The short answer to this question is that Asean is important but not the most essential or overriding pillar of Malaysia's foreign policy. Despite the rhetoric, Asean has not been the cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy since the inception of the association in 1967. That should not alter any time soon.

Realising Malaysia's national goals — among others, becoming a developed country; building a cohesive nation; constructing a strong, effective, transparent and accountable state that is responsive to its citizens; deepening the democratic form of government; transforming the economy into a human-capital intensive, high-income one to achieve global competitiveness and recognition; and ensuring national security and regional stability — require that we use all approaches, mechanisms and instruments at the national, regional and global levels.

Malaysia's foreign policy portfolio would certainly include Asean but it is not the central or foundational pillar. Asean has several strengths — collective diplomatic weight, convening and organising power, and collegiality — that should be harnessed to advance our national interests.

Asean can help enhance national security and regional stability as well as facilitate cooperation to deal with transnational problems and natural disasters. Cooperation through grouping facilitates the construction of a Southeast Asian economic base to enable member countries to compete with rising China, India and others in attracting trade, investment and financial flows, and in the setting up of production bases and networks.

It can also facilitate regional crisis response mechanisms like the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI). Its collective diplomatic weight augments the political,



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Cambodia's PM Hun Sen speaks during the opening ceremony of the 30th ASEAN Energy Ministers meeting in Phnom Penh

diplomatic and economic voice of member states. It enables Asean countries to interact with major powers on favourable terms and to play a central role in the construction and institutionalisation of order in Southeast Asia and the broader Asian region.

In sum, Asean is a force multiplier on some issues. It must be nurtured and selectively deployed in the pursuit of Malaysia's national goals and aspirations.

At the same time, it is important to recognise its limitations. It is an intergovernmental association. Despite its aspirations, Asean is not a community and will not become one in the foreseeable future. Lack of understanding of the concept of community has led to unnecessary and unrealistic aspirations, goals, strategies and timetables. Community entails the delegation of power to a central authority to make authoritative allocation of values affecting

all member states and their citizens.

National governments in theory are vested with such power and authority with regard to their citizens. Delegating decision-making power to a central authority is not the goal of Asean member governments.

They envision a more limited form of regional community in which member states live in peace with each other but one that leaves effective power and authority in the hands of member states. Most Asean countries are still not cohesive nations and effective states.

Building cohesive national communities and constructing legitimate national political, economic and socio-cultural identities and systems will continue to be key priorities for member countries. At best, regionalism can play a supportive role in realising those crucial national goals.

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This does not imply Asean should abandon its community-building goal. However, that should be subordinate to building strong national communities. Also, the idea and meaning of a regional community should be rethought without firm timetables.

Malaysia can and should play a lead role in rethinking regional community in Southeast Asia and in making the association more relevant to contemporary challenges and opportunities. Rethinking must take due account of the fact that building national and regional communities may take decades and possibly centuries, and that setbacks and reversals are an ever-present possibility.

A further point to observe is that without the endowment of decision-making power, it is difficult if not impossible for Asean to become a people-centered organisation except on the margins. Only when it makes authoritative allocation of values that affects their livelihood will people turn to Asean.

Otherwise it will remain an organisation peripheral to their lives. For the foreseeable future, Asean will remain an intergovernmental organisation dedicated to supporting the realisation of national goals. That is an important role not to be sneered at.

However, that also implies that Asean and regionalism will remain one of several approaches to Malaysia's national well-being, and often not the most important. For example an important goal in the next decade or two is to become a developed country. Here, Asean is of limited value.

Comprising 10 member states with disparate levels of development, Asean will move at a pace comfortable to all or the majority of its member states. Malaysia must rely on national efforts and policies, key bilateral relationships, and important multilateral forums and regimes at the regional and

global levels to realise the aspiration of becoming a developed country.

Although Asean and regionalism may be important on some issues, others demand a global perspective and approach. Malaysia must develop perspectives, policies, tools and human capital to be an effective player on the global stage. The goal of becoming a developed country would also require Malaysia to assume commitments and obligations that may not sit comfortably with other member states of the association.

Our foremost priority in the coming years would continue to be building a cohesive national community, constructing a legitimate political system, growing the economy to sustain and elevate the material well-being of all citizens and constructing a socio-cultural identity that enables citizens to live their lives in a harmonious environment.

Building a united, prosperous, just and peaceful national community characterised by the rule of law and which ranks in the category of developed countries with pride of place in regional and global affairs is the key task of national policy, including foreign policy.

Asean can play an important supportive role but it can also be confining or limiting. We must seek to realise our full potential. Asean is a means, not an end in itself.

We should begin to down play the widespread notion in policy circles and the media that Asean is the cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy lest we buy into our own rhetoric. **E**

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