

COMMENT

There's much for Asean to tend to

WORK IN PROGRESS: Conflict management and resolution mechanisms top the list

ASEAN marked the end of a tumultuous year with a collective sigh of relief. Indeed, 2012 was a difficult year for the 10-member organisation.

To recap, it came as a surprise to many that Asean's carefully orchestrated procedures and norms became unhinged at the Phnom Penh Ministerial Meeting in July. For the first time since its inception in 1967, Asean failed to issue a joint communiqué. Cambodia's deputy prime minister and foreign minister, Hor Namhong, was roundly criticised for his mismanagement of the meeting.

The Phnom Penh debacle is also notable in that Beijing has allegedly "shown its hand". Has the "Trojan Horse" finally revealed itself? In light of these developments, will Asean stay united?

It is far-fetched to ring in the demise of Asean based on one anomaly, no matter how serious. Rather than viewing 2012 as an abysmal year which highlighted, above all, the extent of disagreement within Asean, we should wel-

come the flaring up of nationalism and entrenched national interests as a reflection of reality.

Notwithstanding the tensions and the ensuing embarrassment to Asean, it is better to allow the airing of disagreements out in the open rather than sweeping it under the carpet for the sake of niceties and "saving face".

Ultimately, Asean will be judged by how well it manages and resolves problems and not how well it hides them. This point was one of outgoing secretary-general Dr Surin Pitsuwan's many suggestions to rejuvenate and strengthen Asean.

When Surin signed off for the last time last month, he handed over to Vietnam's Deputy Foreign Minister Le Luong Minh an organisation that is riding high internationally. Through his untiring efforts, Surin put Asean on the world map and improved its international standing.

But there is much work that

needs tending to.

FIRST, with the deadline of Dec 31, 2015 looming on the horizon, Asean needs to step up its efforts to realise its vision of a community. It must be mindful that the community rests on three pillars — political-security, economics and socio-cultural — and each must be given due consideration and resources. Advances in economic integration and connectivity will be in vain if not substantiated by cor-

responding efforts to improve the political-security and socio-cultural domains;

SECOND, Asean can ill-afford to neglect the South China Sea disputes. The management of these disputes will take centre stage as it has the potential to undermine peace and prosperity in the region and heighten tensions between the major powers.

It will also test Asean diplomacy to the limit in convincing a sceptical and suspicious China to commence discussions on a binding Code of Conduct. All eyes will be on Thailand, who as the designated coordinator for Asean's relations with China, must endeavour to get Beijing on board;



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Dr Surin Pitsuwan speaking at the Global Movement of Moderates Distinguished Lecture in Kuala Lumpur. The former secretary-general has put Asean on the world map. **Bernama pic**

THIRD, while critical, Asean must not allow the South China Sea disputes to overshadow other priority issues, which include addressing the growing violence and instability in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. If the plight of the Rohingya people does not substantially improve in the next 12 months, it may be untenable for Myanmar to lead the regional organisation which proclaimed its Declaration on Human Rights on Nov 19;

FOURTH, Asean must maintain the momentum to engage and convince the four members of the P5 — France, Russia, Britain and the United States — to accede to the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaty. Among the P5, the elite grouping of recognised nuclear weapon states, China leads the way with its unequivocal commitment to signing onto the treaty. But without the concurrence of the other P5 states, the ideal of a nuclear weapons-free Southeast Asia will remain aspirational; and,

FIFTH, Asean must take owner-

ship and give its full support to the newly announced Asean Institute of Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR). Launched at the 21st Asean Summit in Phnom Penh, AIPR is mandated to undertake research to foster and strengthen peace and stability in the region. The Asean states must now back up its words with funding and resources for AIPR to take flight.

Last but not least, I take the liberty to hope that Asean will take meaningful steps towards establishing substantive conflict management and resolution mechanisms so that when disputes such as the Cambodian-Thailand clashes over the Preah Vihear temple grounds do occur, the organisation is adequately prepared to manage these incidents.

To be sure, Asean is a work in progress. Many challenges, as well as opportunities lie ahead. Surin and his able team have put Asean on a solid foundation, and now the baton has passed on to Le.

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