

Need to instil a sense of Asean-ness



Ushers waiting to receive guests at

the 26th Asean Summit at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre recently. Consideration ought to be taken regarding the long-term need to inculcate a sense of common identity among Asean citizens.



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INTEGRATION: *Impact of Asean is seldom felt in tangible terms by ordinary people*

Last week, I found myself addressing the topic of Asean integration and multilateralism at two separate venues: firstly, at Kuala Lumpur's Institute for Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR), along with Indonesia's ambassador to Malaysia, Herman Prayitno, and secondly, at Singapore's Civil Servants College (CSC), addressing members of the Foreign Ministries of Singapore and Malaysia. That such discussions are being organised with such frequency highlights the fact that for some of the countries of Asean, bilateral and multilateral ties are of crucial importance and remain the main bonds through which the Asean flotilla of nations is, held together. Unbeknown to millions of other Southeast Asian citizens, the ties that bind our countries and economy together are sustained thus: through regular contact, interaction, bridge-building, and the sharing of ideas and experiences. That more than 600 million Asean citizens may not be aware of this is not surprising, for the world of policymakers and technocrats is a world in itself, but it remains a world that is alive and dynamic, nonetheless.

I do, however, have one lingering concern, and it is this: of late, there has been talk of the relevance of Asean and its effectiveness as a body that brings the region together. Sceptics of Asean point to its apparent absence in the public domain, and the fact that millions of people in the region may not even know what the Asean logo looks like, what its anthem sounds like or what it stands for. Some of this criticism is valid, I have to say; for from anecdotal evidence alone, I can testify that in the meetings, discussions and interviews I have done with ordinary folk from Myanmar to the Philippines, the impact of Asean on their daily lives is seldom felt in tangible terms. Worse still is the fact that Asean, vital though it is, has been badly branded and marketed, and I was not surprised to meet young people who can recognise the emblems of Nike, Kentucky Fried Chicken or Prada, but have no idea what the Asean logo might be.

It would, however, be wrong for us to assume that: Asean's apparent invisibility in the public domain suggests that it is non-existent, for the fact is that in real-life terms, Asean's impact and achievements are real and can be seen. For starters, it has managed to avert the threat of war for decades and has bestowed upon the region a peace dividend that is immeasurable in value. Today, the young people of Southeast Asia take so many things for granted; from being able to go to school to being able to go to the mall afterwards. Yet, writing as an academic who studies political conflict and whose work has taken me to war zones, I can say that the peace we have had in the region is not something we can take for granted, and is something that we ought to value more. In some of the war-torn countries I have researched in, even the most basic opportunity of going to primary school and having access to school books is a luxury few can afford. Peace is most valued in times of war, and it is doubly ironic that societies that have never seen or felt war are the ones that value peace the least.

Another concern I have about the future of Asean is whether the regular contact between technocrats and policymakers can be replicated on a larger and more meaningful scale among the 600 million citizens of the region to give them a sense of common belonging, homeliness and destiny as part of a wider and more inclusive Asean family. This is a question that pops up every time I find myself discussing the topic of Asean integration with technocrats from the region, and the concern grows louder with every passing year, as we in Southeast Asia grow increasingly aware of the rapidly changing geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economics realities of the globalised world we live in, witnessing from close up the rise of China and the growing economic clout of some Asian economies. Even if the world's economic epicentre is slowly shifting to the East, it does not necessarily mean that a sense of the Southeast Asian identity will materialise any time soon.

Here, I believe a cursory look at the emergence of the European Union (EU) and a sense of European identity is instructive. Let us not forget that when the EU began, it was envisaged as a European Economic Community first and foremost. As in the case of Asean, the driver of this process was a realist assessment of the state of post-World War 2 politics and the anxieties of the Cold War.

But in time, and as a result of the aggregate, macro-level decisions made in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, a range of different - and, sometimes, conflicting - processes have brought Europe to where it is now. Ease of mobility, both in terms of capital and human beings, capital driven communicative infrastructure and even pop culture have all contributed, in dribs and drabs, to the slow development of a sense of European-ness that is not anchored on any essentialist or primordial moorings. Being "European" does not mean belonging to a particular ethnic group, for, indeed, there is no such thing as a European ethnicity. But in time, it has come to mean being part of a complex and dynamic socio-cultural-economic political experience that is common to those who live in that part of the world

The technocrats and policymakers of Asean would do well to take note of this process - or processes - and appreciate the fact that their technocratic endeavours ought to also take into consideration the long-term need to inculcate a sense of common identity among us in Southeast Asia. As in the case of being European, being Southeast Asian also does not mean belonging to a specific ethnic-cultural linguistic community, but is rather a complex layer of identity that complements (rather than negates) our national identities, too.

We do not know what the future Southeast Asian community may look like, but if policymakers, educationists, technocrats and state builders can orient their social policies (especially education policies) in the direction of closer people-to people Asean cooperation, such a community may emerge at one stage in the future.

This would not necessarily resolve all the economic, legal or territorial problems that bedevil Asean at the moment, but it would at least bring us one step closer to a sense of common homeliness and belonging where we - Asean citizens - feel that this is our common, shared region together and a home for all.

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