

Asean members 'forge ahead together'



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UNITED: *The 10 states are now a formal 'community' and it will have to deliver the promise of a safer, more prosperous future*

FIRST, a big and warm "thank you" to all those who pulled the long and hard hours to successfully carry off the recent 27th Asean summit and related summits. There were some 13 statements; six plans of action, and eight agreements and declarations inked over the five-day period (not counting long hours of preparation), so it was a pretty intense week.

Among the declarations was one that, after the usual (long) preamble, had just a single line - that Asean leaders "do" hereby declare the formal establishment of the Asean Community on Dec 31, 2015". That's it.

Exactly what this means will probably be debated, however, a second declaration adopted the Asean Community Vision 2025, and the associated political-security, economic- and socio-cultural blueprints.

In other words, the 10 Asean member states are now a formal community - with, as yet, still undefined meanings - but with a plan to "forge ahead together" to 2025 along the lines of the three blueprints.

Now, the word community has been debated in Asean circles for a very long time, with member states taking pains to avoid the inevitable comparisons with the (then) European Community, which has now become a union.

The European model is considered too hard and rigidly legalistic for Asean. Members here prefer the organisation and its members doing things in their own way and in their own time. But, community has many meanings. It could just be countries located in a specific- place (in this case, Southeast Asia), having particular characteristics (Aseanness) or common values, interests and goals.

Asean's claim to be a community relies on bits of all three, although governments would like to think that it is grounded in their preferred way of doing things - the so-called Asean Way. Regardless, of whether this is true or a constructed myth, it is evident that they either feel the need to be or have the need to be seen to be - hence; the declaration of a formal community.

More than merely interesting, it is essential to try to understand the motivations for the need to be a formal community.

Could it be just for the purpose of prestige and endorsements of the international community? Or is there a deeper sense of strategic purpose and commitment? Critics of Asean regularly point to the differences in what it says and what it does. Beneath the big sounding words and concepts, they say, there is little real substance.



Asean leaders at their recent summit in Kuala Lumpur where they declared that the formal establishment of the Asean Community on Dec 31, 2015

In their opinion, the glass must be regarded as "half empty" rather than "half full" because of the expectations that member states create with their declarations and statements.

This does not explain, however, why, if member states are merely trying to pull a fast one, essentially faking unity and common purpose when there is none, they do so? And why is there from time to time, real progress?

It is possible to be an ardent Asean idealist or disgruntled critic. But one can also be a sober realist. If after 48 years, cows do not jump over the moon, perhaps they cannot or are not meant to. Asean is what it is: good at some things and not others. More structured and functional organisations also face the problem that the chain is no stronger than its weakest link.

It engages member states in a tight network of meetings and projects, diverting time and energies into constructive rather than destructive inter-state relations. Many issues among Asean members remain unsettled and could be flash points.

The result may be an extremely cumbersome and burdensome schedule of meetings but this is a small price to pay if it lessens the chance of fractious relations and outright conflict. At the same time, there is a burning desire to be taken seriously by others. If Asean were not moving towards greater community, it would be strategically worse off in a region when rising powers could take advantage of them. These latter countries may, in fact, prefer to see a weak Asean simply from the perspective of it being easier to divide-and-conquer and to influence. Uniting makes this difficult, while attracting the attention of others from outside the region.

Asean is now a formal Community but it will have to perform. There should be no mistake about this. If by end-2025, Asean is not safer, more prosperous or united, the game may finally be up.

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