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Asean alive and well at 100?

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It is tempting to consider what Asean would be like in another 50 years, even though some may still not understand it in its first 50.

THE Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) enters its 50th year of operation this year, and many in the region sought to peek into what it would look like in another 50 years.

ISIS Malaysia held two days of brainstorming during the week in an international Track Two (non-governmental) roundtable in Kuala Lumpur titled “Asean in 50 Years” in the context of a rapidly changing world.

The discussions did not lack optimism: despite challenges, there was general agreement that Asean would still be around as a centenarian in 2066-67.

This was not without cause. Evidently Asean today, upon growing steadily towards a formal Community, has stood the test of time.

Asean (1967) has endured and lasted better than its predecessors Seato (South-East Asia Treaty Organisation, 1954), Asa (Association of South-East Asia, 1961) and Maphilindo (Malaya-Philippines-Indonesia, 1963).

Asean achieved this precisely because it was unlike its predecessors. With Asean, the sovereign nations of South-East Asia at last had a regional organisation fit for their purposes.

Seato was a Cold War project of the West alien to South-East Asia. Its members were Australia, Britain, France, New Zealand, Pakistan and the US, with the only South-East Asian countries being US allies Thailand and the Philippines. As a comprised Malaya, the Philippines and Thailand. Although without overwhelming contradictions, its small membership proved too limited for regional needs and it too died a natural death.

Maphilindo began as an emotional pan-regional appeal to ethnic identity, but in coming on the eve of the formation of Malaysia and being promoted by Indonesia and the Philippines which tried to pre-empt Malaysia, it was regarded as subversive to Malaysian territory and identity.

By 1967, Indonesia and the Philippines were under new leadership. Gen. Suharto replaced Sukarno and Marcos succeeded Macapagal, and Malaysia together with Singapore and Thailand worked with them to form Asean.

All member nations would have equal rights and privileges, and none would interfere in the internal affairs of the others including territorial integrity. In time, Asean would take in new members and acquire a higher international profile.

Among the questions raised at the Track Two Asean roundtable was whether Asean would become an integrated regional body or remain an inter-governmental organisation in 50 years.

Related to this was the question of whether it was better to have Asean as a supranational regional “superstate” or have it remain as an agglomeration of sovereign states.

Such discussions risk veering off at an irrelevant tangent, as these artificial dichotomies have little to do with the real world. Such debates make intriguing academic discourses but are unrelated to the here and now.

Even the EU as the most developed regional grouping of states never considered replacing the national with the supranational. It is not a question of either national or regional, but both.

EU member countries, like those of Asean, see advantages in exercising their diplomatic clout and economic potential within a larger regional body – provided it does not preclude their core national prerogatives.

It makes sense to develop common regional propensities to the fullest, or until it begins to compromise national sovereignty or interests. There is often a trade-off, and several EU states are already seeing some limits on certain fronts.

Ultimately, such dualities of national-supranational are false, misleading and distracting. It is like pitting the extreme of the free market against that of state control, when every economic system in the world is a combination of the two where both exist at all.

There was also a roundtable consensus that the nation state will continue to evolve, prevail, and remain significant as an arbiter of national and international policymaking.

Then the question becomes, to what extent would a South-East Asian nation evolve in 50 years? More to the point, what would Asean itself as a grouping of 10 or so countries become by then?

Meanwhile, the identity of the nation state as formally defined continues to be eroded practically everywhere. Erosive factors include the growing influence of NGOs or CSOs, increasing multi-ethnicities and various other diversities, and territorial disputes that tug at the physical character of the state itself.

The operations of all regional institutions are limited and messy, and Asean is no exception. Yet, members choose to remain and non-members wish they could someday join.

Asean continues to experience centripetal forces tending towards coalescing inwards, as well as centrifugal forces pulling it apart. Global markets and major powers in the neighbourhood are responsible.

There are times when a member nation may feel tempted to drift away, thinking that its fortunes are better met outside Asean. Singapore once felt that, followed by Indonesia more lately.

But any (passing) sense of self-importance or regional frustration is soon overcome by the prevailing realities. As a Singapore policymaker once put it privately, it is not as if Singapore can just row away and join another region of its choice.

Beyond all the bubbly talk of a “borderless world,” geography is still important. It remains at the centre of geopolitics and geo-economics.

Beyond the formal state, however, lies the “deep state” said to act as the ultimate determinant of policy direction above and beyond official channels and procedures. On a regional level, it can also apply to a transnational body like Asean.

Thus, a Deep Asean would act much like an Asean state, but on a regional scale and in the common interests of its member states. There are signs that a Deep Asean has taken root after the inclusion of the CLMV countries.

Progress towards the regalia of a Deep Asean however has been slow. It took many years for the Secretary-General to acquire the status of an Asean government minister, then full regional coverage in its membership, then a formal legal identity with a Charter, with more developments set to come.

The extended powers that a Deep Asean offers member nations in representing their shared interests are also an attraction for them to compromise on some aspects of their national sovereignty to join.

Asean must then develop its legitimacy by broadening its internal constituency. This has come with moves towards a people-oriented Asean, then a people-centred Asean, and now with talk of a people-led Asean.

But “people” as an indeterminate mass is quite meaningless without being harnessed and honed into policymaking form. Unless this is done through the appropriate political processes, improved people-to-people exchanges could mean little more than expanded tourism flows and enhanced student exchange programmes.

Another question raised was whether Asean had to include all countries in South-East Asia. The name “Asean” says so, its founding fathers said so, and it serves Asean’s legitimacy to do so.

There was also discussion and confusion over neutrality or non-alignment as an Asean imperative. Asean is, has been, and needs to be neutral or non-aligned in respect of the major powers – but not with the sanctity of international law which it must embrace.

Asean remains a minnow relative to the US, China, Russia and India – all of which have renewed or heightened their interests in this region. Asean members have no choice but to close ranks.

The major powers will keep Asean relevant and important, but only if Asean deals with all equally and impartially.

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