

Can Asean step up?

BY BUNN NAGARA



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Going with the flow: Like practically

Security in the region continues to be a serious concern for all, not least because of the antics of major powers beyond the control of Asean countries.

THE “regional security architecture” of East Asia is often said to be in need of refurbishment.

The decades-long balance of forces deriving from the distinct national interests now being pursued by the major powers is thought to be out of kilter. At the very least, it is unlike what it had been in the postwar period since 1945.

In recent years, the key factors contributing to this perceived strategic disequilibrium have been the rise of China, and US and other countries’ reactions to it.

The “Pax Americana” of regional order, peace and security imposed through US dominance is now more than 70 years old.

It is an order that began when the US had both economic and military supremacy. Now that its economic prowess is being matched and possibly later overtaken by China, what next?

Thus, at an East Asian Institute workshop in Singapore on Friday to sketch some updates on these themes, more than a few views were aired and debated. And that was how it should be.

Germany’s Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung as sponsors invited international security specialists to discuss the issues as these continue to be played out in the region, particularly in the South China Sea.

The standard narrative is heard often enough: China’s economic rise has been complemented by its enlarged strategic presence, further enhanced by the US military “pivot/rebalancing” of deploying more firepower to East Asia.

The worrisome tit-for-tat, back-and-forth of pouting and posturing between these giants, or “G2”, has been a main event for this region and will remain so for some time.

For many, the US and China seemed destined for a showdown of sorts. But such an alarming outcome is unlikely, given several realities.

Unlike with the Soviet Union before, the US is not in bitter ideological contention with China today.

The US and Chinese economies are also deeply intertwined; damage to one also means damage to the other.

Washington now also needs China's help in playing vital strategic roles: fighting terrorism, and keeping North Korea contained.

For more than half a century, all countries including China had accepted a US-led position of military pre-eminence. All these countries including China may still feel the same.

Nonetheless, China's rise has been so steep, so rapid and so relentless as to set off multiple reactions to it. How will South-East Asia in particular be impacted by it all?

For decades, South-East Asia has informally been taken to be synonymous with Asean. Pundits often still talk about South-East Asia as “the Asean region”.

Asean for many is so broad in scope and implications as to be somewhat imprecise. There are at least three other levels of Asean's state of being.

From the Informal Asean regarded as another name for South-East Asia, there is the Intuitive Asean: the motif or Zeitgeist of time (now) and place (South-East Asia).

Another Asean is the Formal Asean: the active transnational agency that had given rise to its founding treaties and declarations, along with Asean Plus Three, the Asean Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, besides regular defence ministers' meetings, Bali Concord documents and others.

The fourth Asean is the Bureaucratic Asean: comprising principles, processes and procedures, as well as values, norms and conventions.

Then there are the multiple points at which Asean engages with principal players in the region: the US, China, Japan, and increasingly also India and Russia. The EU would also want to relate more and better with Asean.

Like practically everything else, Asean evolves according to the circumstances of the time. And since Asean is amenable to change, it may be time to consider some timely changes.

The first follows from Asean's nature of reaching out beyond its own region of South-East Asia. Thus the many multilateral extra-Asean institutions that Asean had initiated or are Asean-centred.

Asean can begin by doing more, and on a regular basis, most naturally with its formally designated Dialogue Partners. From there it can prepare to expand its engagements with other countries and regions.

Asean understood that rising global competitiveness meant that it could be decimated, so it decided to reach out beyond South-East Asia early. If Asean were to survive in an Asia-Pacific crowded with major powers it had to be consequential; the alternative would be to become inconsequential, fade and perish.

The second area of change involves a multilayered Asean Security Regime whose time has surely come. With Total or Comprehensive Security for the region as the goal, Asean can move for a regime spanning traditional and non-traditional threats.

The third area is a review of some established norms in the “Asean Way,” notably such principles as “non-intervention” and “consensus”.

There is nothing wrong with these universal and uncontroversial principles, which are practised elsewhere and which predate Asean. The problem lies only in Asean’s peculiar interpretation of them.

In Aseanspeak, non-intervention is stretched to cover refraining from even voicing any disapproval or criticism, in whatever form, of another country’s conduct or character, however deplorable.

So long as there is no malice shown or intended, and no attempt to humiliate or offend, there should be no taboo against passing honest and due judgment on an erring fellow Asean member. To ignore troubling faults is to be irresponsible.

But Asean’s standing “code” is to treat all commentary, however well-intentioned or diplomatic, as unpardonable sin. That is hardly the way forward in the 21st century.

This inventive, indiscriminate but ultimately self-defeating interpretation is a hindrance and an obstacle to greater candour. It further disables Asean countries’ natural communicability among themselves.

It would help if Asean developed a clearer, more disciplined and more consistent application of these principles to render them more realistic. It would certainly help Asean and its own credibility.

For example, when member nations agree to the text of a joint statement, the original statement should be released even if one or two countries retract their assent. Their late dissent should be recorded as a footnote in the statement, and not become a reason for blocking the statement.

Consensus is fine, but it has to be handled with care, maturity and intelligence to facilitate rather than to obstruct the order of business.

If a country or a minority of some countries succeed in holding up the release of a statement, their identities and their reasons for doing so should likewise be released in place of the statement.

And if any member state were to commit a serious wrong, a simple majority of the remaining nine may decide if action is to be taken. A two-thirds majority of the nine may then decide on the type of penalty.

Any organisation, even Asean, is free to develop such codes or practices to improve its functions. To insist on not even considering any of these options regardless is regressive.

More tough-minded actions in place of woolly fumbling are just as important as benchmarks to help Asean achieve Community status. But can Asean rise to the occasion?

The time of dithering, muddling through, hoping for the best and spinning for a favourable effect by “massaging” the news media must surely be over.

But that assumes Asean is serious about real Community status, and not just talking about it.

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