

The meanings behind the words

By Bunn Nagara

AUG 8 this year is the 50th anniversary of Asean.

Asean season is already upon us, with member nations busily hosting international seminars, workshops and conferences about the regional organisation.

Some of these events were held in close succession in Kuala Lumpur recently. As a prime mover and founding member of Asean, how can Malaysia and Malaysians do any less?

Chief among these was IS Malaysia's Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR), the largest annual event of its kind in the world: a Track Two (non-official conference on official security matters) convention on current regional concerns.

Anything concerning Asean would involve concepts, terminology and inevitable layers of diplomatic nuances behind and between them. It is an established Asean sub-culture.

Thus, the first APR session saw two former Asean secretaries-general on the panel concluding by looking back on the term "constructive engagement." One of them denied a suggestion that he had coined the term.

Participants seemed to have forgotten that "constructive engagement" was the positive spin President Ronald Reagan gave to continued US dealings with apartheid South Africa, in the face of international criticism and calls for a boycott.

Later, when Western criticism was aimed at Asean members for dealing with the pariah nation of military-ruled Myanmar, Asean leaders replied by calling it constructive engagement too. Verbal jousting runs both ways.

However, this did not sit well with a younger and more idealistic generation of Asean leaders at the time. A cabal of younger ministers then, including the one on the recent panel, cast around for another term.

One called for Asean's "constructive intervention" in Cambodia which seemed then to have a disintegrating coalition government. It was a bit much for Asean's Old Guard, strictly abiding by the principle of non-intervention.

Another Asean leader called instead for "constructive interactions," which would soften the interventionist element. However, it did not seem to go anywhere.

Yet another Asean leader advocated "flexible engagement." But then it seemed too wobbly to be effective.

Finally, Asean and its leaders settled on "enhanced interaction," which contained all the right positive notes without any conceivable setbacks. And so the work of regional diplomatic wordplay was done.

However, the situation on the ground in Myanmar, Cambodia and elsewhere remained much the same. The problems abated only with time, and with these countries' eventual accession to Asean membership.

More Asean terminology arose from attempts to bring Asean to the people of south-east Asia. Asean's albatross had long been the closed intergovernmental nature of its being, operating essentially for elites to sustain the status quo.

In time, a sense of Asean's mortality prompted efforts to make Asean "people-oriented" or "people-centred." Unfortunately, undue confusion reigned.

A view persists that "people-oriented" came first, which then developed progressively with Malaysia's urging into the more substantive "people-centred." Another view presumes the opposite.

These terms originated in the recommendations of two separate panels appointed by Asean to provide inputs for the prospective Asean Charter: the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) and the High-Level Task Force (HLTF).

Some academic references add to the confusion by tracing these terms only to 2008. Others cite how several hopeful civil society groups responded positively by offering their views, but found the EPG indifferent and only the HLTF was encouraging.

A closer examination would reveal the opposite. The HLTF seemed officious while the EPG, chaired by former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tun Musa Hitam, was more positive.

The result was the 2006 EPG document "Report of the Eminent Persons Group on the Asean Charter." This 49-page report contains one reference to "a people-oriented Asean" and three subsequent references to "a people-centred organisation."

This may have served to credit Malaysia for spearheading a humanistic approach to a new improved Asean. But it was also enough to worry undemocratic Asean regimes, only too mindful that their leaders were occupying positions that were not the will of the people.

These leaders could just about tolerate "people-oriented," which would still mean top-down changes they could control, but "people-centred" would be too much for them. Ordinary citizens could well get the idea that they could choose their government.

Upon closer inspection, however, a serious tussle within Asean between the two terms did not develop into a full-blown affair. Documents such as the 2015 "Kuala Lumpur Declaration on a People-oriented and People-centred Asean" contain both terms.

The terms that would unite all Asean leaders, whether budding democrats, residual autocrats or hybrids somewhere between, relate to Asean's "centrality" in occupying the "driving seat."

This involves Asean's aspirations to exert an influence outside its immediate region. Such Asean-led institutions as the 18-member East Asia Summit and the 27-member Asean Regional Forum already exist for this purpose, even when sometimes seeming rudderless.

The problem may not be in the choice of metaphors, but in what the metaphors unwittingly imply, reveal or foretell.

Centrality (leadership) may not come with being in the driving seat, and driving the vehicle may not mean deciding on the destination. This is as true of a chauffeured VIP limousine as of a common taxi or a bus.

Passengers who pay decide where they wish to go, and passengers who pay more also decide on how to get there. Not least among Asean's concerns is whether member nations have sufficient economic clout to decide on the region's destiny.

South-East Asia as a region is a subset of the larger East Asia, where major global powers roam. How do Asean members measure up in a time of growing interest from China, Russia, India and Japan, besides the US?

Then came a term for this region not unique to Asean: "arms race." Typically, it was from conference participants unfamiliar with the region's security situation.

Government officials everywhere dislike the term either because it calls undue attention to their arms trade, with or without shady deals, or it alarms and scares off investors for fear of regional instability.

But seriously, is there an arms race in this region? There are clearly increased defence budgets for several countries, but does that necessarily amount to an "arms race"?

The same question had been asked some 25 years before with even greater intensity. And the answer, from the late Australian security specialist Prof Des Ball, was a firm no.

I then published a paper in Singapore explaining why there was no arms race here. There is still none today, not even after half a century of Asean – perhaps partly because of Asean.

As some conference participants explained, increased defence budgets do not equate squarely to increased arms purchases. The bulk of defence expenditures typically pay for the salaries, allowances and benefits of personnel.

A "race" is a competitive relationship between two or more players. Even when arms purchases grow, the motivation could just be having more to spend, or some threat perception or contingency – whether justified or not.

Unless and until the sole or primary motivation is to outdo the other country or countries in arms acquisitions, there is no race to speak of. There is still no reason for such a race.

Even if all the 10 Asean countries can put their military strength together, and double it, that would still be no match for the major global powers in East Asia.

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