

ASEAN Ponders A New Regional Structure

The Nation Kavi Chongkittavorn 12 April 2010 After nearly two years of soul searching and sometimes emotional outbursts among concerned countries, Asean members have begun serious discussions on the shape of the regional architecture in East Asia that they would like to see evolving. (...)

The consultative process has placed Asean in an awkward position - a kind of wake-up call - as the grouping continues to stress its centrality in the overall scheme of things without providing its own initiative other than entrenched positions. Changes came last week at the just-concluded Asean Summit in Hanoi. Singapore proposed three variables of the new regional architecture that would maintain the centrality of Asean. But myriad questions remain unanswered.

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(...) The other plan is the expansion of the five-year-old East Asian Summit (EAS) launched in Kuala Lumpur in 2005. Again, the US and Russia would be invited as dialogue partners with the EAS founding members. Their meeting could be more flexible. The so-called EAS+2 could be held every two or three years. Obviously, such an arrangement would not be welcomed in Washington and Moscow as it would downgrade their status in meeting the bloc's leaders, even though such a two- or three-year interval makes possible their leaders' participation.

The final variable is to keep the EAS-plus formula with an open end. This would enable Asean to form a new regional architecture using its own existing institution. In all the frameworks, the US and Russia would feature in them. (...)

Throughout its 43-year history, Asean members have rarely shared common views on political and security issues, mainly due to different security perceptions and concerns over national sovereignty and integrity. During the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s, Asean did hold a common position. So does it on the current struggle of the Palestinians for self-determination. On non-security issues, for instance, Asean is more inclined to stand together.

As Asean takes on a larger role and engages in transnational challenges such as climate change, non-proliferation, disaster management, oil and food security, international peacekeeping and terrorism, common Asean positions are necessary. Otherwise, Asean's future cohesiveness would be further eroded and its credibility threatened.

It remains to be seen how each member will define or in many cases readjust their positions on key issues to be identified as common Asean positions. For instance, both Singapore and Indonesia are more active in the field of climate change and wish to have their Asean colleagues on board. But there was no consensus. In peacekeeping, Indonesia and Thailand

are pushing for a common Asean platform and policies as almost all members have already contributed to the UN operation. But they have never discussed or acted jointly. The two countries are also strong advocates of the principle of **responsibility to protect**.

Internationally, all Asean members are linked to the UN Human Rights Council and subjected to the universal peer reviews on human rights in their countries. Sad but true, the Asean Intergovernmental Commission for Human Rights has not adopted this practice. Furthermore, the ongoing turf war between AICHR and the newly establish Asean Commission to Protect the Rights of Women and Children over which body can best protect human rights in Asean is another case in point. This kind of double standard is a mockery of the high-standard rule-based principles set forth by Asean.

Among the old Asean members, this realisation is getting stronger and more visible. They know full well that Asean centrality depends on actions, not verbal repetitions - something the other half of Asean is capable of doing. Asean has come a long way and has to deliver before it can proudly remain central in the larger scheme of things to come - such as the building of a new regional architecture.

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