

Integration – Yes or No?

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For the Straits Times, Dated 8 August 2007

Asean's 10-member states will have to decide which way to go - integrate like the European

Union, or each country goes its own way, says former European diplomat

Over the last decades, many regional organisations have grown up. They were invented to frame economic cooperation, promote political consultations, improve human security, and help to counteract terrorism and international organised crime. Asean finds its place among these organisations, having earned its own brand.

Three salient features constitute the key to grasp the depth of cooperation or integration: the purpose of the integration, trust and the extent of analogous policies. Asean was established in the harsh climate of the Cold War. Anxiety for repercussions from the Vietnam War reverberated through South-east Asia. The initiative was political more than economic and fear of the unknown was a driving force.

The changed strategic situation has shifted the focus to challenges and opportunities presented by the economic rise of China and India. Asean members must define and improve their comparative advantage. At the same time these new giants offer a unique opportunity to get a share of economic wealth. No individual Asean country can mastermind this process alone. For Asean and its member states, it can be a plus sum game provided they stick together, implement analogous political objectives and take steps to prevent economic clashes inside Asean.

The European Union (EU) has moved faster and created a significantly deeper integration.

The EU has pursued political and economic goals in tandem. It played an indispensable role in restructuring Europe after the end of the Cold War. The single market, single Currency (euro) and the move towards a common foreign and security policy stand as remarkable achievements. Over the last decade, human security has been incorporated in the integration. Trust has been the catalyst for a path-breaking model pooling sovereignty to be exercised in common instead of each member state safeguarding its own interests. A sense of common destiny forged by tradition, history, common interests and analogous policies have been instrumental.

Recently, the EU was on the verge of adopting a Constitution. It was rejected by a majority of voters in two member states, underlining how difficult it is to take the integration to such an advanced stage, but it also shows how far the EU had gone. The philosophy of the EU is reflected in the preamble of the Treaty of Rome on "an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe". It is an ongoing process, setting long-term goals but approaching them step-by-step, overcoming setbacks, failures and disappointments.

There are similarities between the EU and Asean. Adaptation to changed circumstances and an endeavour to take the cooperation beyond pure economics and trade and the pivotal ones.

The main difference is found in institutional structure and decision-making. Presently, Asean does not contemplate a pooling of sovereignty. As long as this is not the case, integration can be pursued but it will spread to fewer issues and be less deep than the European one. This approach limits the depth and width of the integration.

But Asean looks more lively and determined to move ahead than most other regional integration. NAFTA – the free trade agreement between North American countries - is confined to free trade and does not augur further integration and consultations among the member states. Judged by critical voices about benefits for the members, it is highly doubtful whether they feel the same degree or idea of commonality that Asean is striving to create.

The same observation catches the eye, looking at regional integration in South Asia (for example, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and in South America (for example, Mercosur). These are useful organisations, but they find it difficult to move beyond economic and trade issues.

The idea of a charter for Asean points to a rising sentiment of shared challenges, problems and common solutions to meet the preoccupation of all members - a feeling that together we may overcome the problems, alone we fail. The problems are not confined to economics and trade even if those are the most important. They touch on the whole spectrum of security, human security and large parts of social life.

This singles out Asean from many other regional organisations. It remains to be seen whether some of the basic principles from the EU model will be modified to suit Asean's purpose or whether another edition of integration will emerge in Asia. The Asean countries can opt for distinctive, even in some cases singular, economic systems or strong economic integration. Both are legitimate political goals with advantages and disadvantages, but both cannot be pursued simultaneously.

The Europeans chose economic integration leading to common, even single, rules for economic life.

Somewhere down the road, Asean countries have to choose where to go - integrate or be on your own? Maybe the degree of mutual trust and a feeling of sharing the same destiny will determine the outcome.

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