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Asia-Europe relations face yet another test

Anita Gabriel in Bangkok

BANGKOK: The Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) was designed to build a "bridge" that will enhance ties between the two regions. But when Asem finance ministers meet for the first time tomorrow, they might have to go back to the drawing board to take stock of the situation.

Since July, ties between Europe and Asia have become somewhat "choppy". Myanmar's admission into Asean proved to be the first significant standoff the newly-expanded Asean has had with the European Union (EU) since the formation of Asem.

The wedge was further driven between the two regions following recent remarks by British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook who was reported condemning the Myanmar Government for "conniving" with drug barons, and that the EU would bar it from the forthcoming Asem summit in London.

Asem is a forum between the 15 EU members and Asia's Asean, Japan, China and South Korea.

In any case, Europe's recent decision to deny visas to senior Myanmar officials made the country's inclusion at the Asem next April "impossible."

Myanmar's military government in response lashed out at Britain's accusation, referring to it as the "century's greatest hypocritical statement." A senior Myanmar official said the EU's decision not to invite his country to the Asem as part of a "divide-and-conquer" policy.

Subsequently, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed said that if Myanmar was barred from the summit, he might decide to "opt out".

"If there is discrimination against Myanmar, it is a discrimination against Asean," he had said.

Thailand, which is hosting the inaugural Asem finance ministers' meeting, concurs that Myanmar should not be isolated. "We want to bring Myanmar into the world community," said Deputy Premier Korn Dabbaransi.

Myanmar has been receiving flak from the West over its human rights record, with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi having received widespread support in the developed countries which also saw her being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Asean brought Myanmar into its fold in July, together with Laos, despite Western criticism of the decision on the grounds that Yangon was maintaining a "repressive" regime. The constructive engagement approach assumed by Asean to deal with Myanmar has been attacked by the West as being counter-productive.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas said the question of who will and will not attend the upcoming Asem should be dealt with individually.

On that note, he said, Asem should not be seen as a meeting among Asean on one side and the EU on the other. Rather, it will be a meeting among individual countries.

Meanwhile, Myanmar is anxiously awaiting a regional response, which is expected to be discussed extensively by the finance ministers during their two-day meeting here.

Asem was proposed as a forum for dialogue and cooperation to strengthen common understanding between Asian countries and the EU. The partnership aims to foster keener links between the two regions thereby contributing to peace, global stability and prosperity.

These ties have stood up to previous tests before, both regions having held their ground on many issues with no apparent adverse effects on the

relationship. Whether, the new test will be similarly handled is left to be seen.

Asian finance ministers are also expected to take the opportunity in Bangkok to thrash out the issue of currency and equity speculation that has plagued their economies in recent months.

They have already held discussions on the waves of speculative attack on their currencies, and while it is recognised that part of the cause lies back home in view of some weaknesses in their respective economies, the affected countries are of the view that it is unfair for speculators and manipulators to wipe out years of hard work in a matter of weeks.

Asean, which was expected to hold its own meeting in Bangkok on the currency and share market turmoil, has postponed it to December. With the Commonwealth finance ministers who met in Mauritius this week having discussed the issue and the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings in Hong Kong next week expected to be dominated by the issue, the postponement will allow Asean ministers to review the international consensus before decision on a common position.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who will attend the Asem finance ministers meeting here, said Malaysia will push for a common stand against currency speculation and its detrimental effects on developing nations.

He had done this in Mauritius and is also expected to extend the same message to the IMF/World Bank in Hong Kong next week.

These developments aside, progress reports on the objectives of Asem remain on the agenda, including on cooperation in the financial sector and in customs administration.

Since the summit in Bangkok, many initiatives have been launched in recognition of the great potential for synergy between Asia and Europe on account of the economic dynamism and diversity of the two regions.

Asia's emergence as an immense market has spawned voluminous demand for consumer goods, capital equipment, financing and infrastructure. Europe, on the other hand, is also a major source as well as market for goods, investments and services; even more so now that the single market is in place.

Substantive progress in cooperation has been made, with economic and social links being spurred by private sector organisations such as the Asia-Europe Business Forum and Asia-Europe Business Conference and also the Asia-Europe Foundation.

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