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Doing it the Asean way

TO THOSE listening, Mr Bill Clinton sounded as if he was speaking on behalf of the international community when announcing the economic sanctions against Myanmar. But the fact is that the US President spoke on Tuesday on behalf of America and not any other country, not even those who called themselves allies of the US. In fact, even the US business community may say that Clinton did not speak on their behalf; some have come out openly upset with the White House decision to go ahead with sanctions against Yangon.

Malaysia and Asean will definitely not subscribe to Washington's sanctions, though. If the US feels that barring new American investment in Myanmar would teach the "repressive" regime in that country a good lesson about democracy, that is the American way of thinking and doing things. Malaysia and Asean have stressed that they will continue to adopt its consultative engagement approach where Yangon is concerned. Asean leaders have argued that for a country that has proven that it could shut out the world and still survive, an economic sanction at this point of time is not likely to change anything. By engaging Myanmar in talks and economic activities, Asean has been hoping to show the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and the Myanmar people that democracy and the free market economy need not necessarily fail. The plan is to allow Myanmar into Asean and help it grow and prosper. Growth and prosperity, after all, have led to sustained peace and harmony in the region.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad spoke at length about this in London, in fact, when asked about Malaysia's prosper-thy-neighbour policy. He said when Vietnam, for example, was poor, Malaysia had a lot of "boat people". Today, all these refugees have been sent back. Vietnam, which has become the seventh and latest member of Asean, is a good example of how prosperity of another country in the region has reduced problems for Malaysia and other members of Asean who are Vietnam's neighbours. Today, Malaysia is one of the largest investors in Vietnam as well as in Cambodia and Laos, two other countries which will join Asean together with Myanmar. In fact, other countries including the US are also benefitting from this more prosperous Vietnam.

Malaysia and Asean will not support the US sanctions against Myanmar simply because there is a better way of dealing with the situation in that country. As a group, Asean would be able to monitor closely and influence the situation in Myanmar better, especially when Myanmar is already a member. It does not mean that the so-called pro-democratic movement in Myanmar will see its objectives realised, nor will Asean lean towards ensuring that the movement prevails over SLORC or whoever governs the country. The Asean way of doing things is to ensure a member country does not lag behind in terms of economic development. There are various programmes and projects to help a more backward member to catch up in the long-term. Vietnam, for example, has been recording GDP growths of over 9 per cent since 1995. There is no reason why Myanmar will not be able to do the same once it comes on board.

After Clinton's announcement on the sanctions, many would expect Asean to come under some pressure from the US to play along. Yesterday, in Washington, State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said the US has urged Asean to delay its planned admission of Myanmar. "We don't support that (membership)," he said. Burns also criticised Asean's policy of

seeking improvement in Myanmar through dialogue. "It's a shame because you would think that budding democracies in South-East Asia would want to stand up for democracy." Such is the narrow mindset about democracy and condescending view about the culture and peoples of this region that have brought about the sanction against Myanmar in the first place. Americans may stand up and listen to Burns, but do not expect the same from the Asean people and member countries, budding democracies or not, if Asean's views are not going to be heard anyway.

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