

25/07/1997

The Asean way to prosperity and neighbourliness

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IT is indeed a privilege and an honour for me to address this 30th Meeting of Asean Foreign Ministers at the Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel, in Petaling Jaya, Selangor. On Wednesday, we witnessed the official admission of Laos and Myanmar into Asean. We are, therefore, very close now to fulfilling the vision of the Founding Nations of Asean in 1967 to bring together all the 10 Southeast Asian countries into one regional grouping.

While this vision is yet to be fulfilled, nevertheless the addition of Myanmar and Laos is a major milestone in the history of Southeast Asia. Malaysia feels honoured to be the host of this momentous event. Let me take this opportunity to congratulate and welcome our friends from Laos and Myanmar into the Asean community of nations.

We still have cause to celebrate but let us not forget the difficulties faced by the countries of Southeast Asia in their early attempts to form a regional forum, essentially to facilitate problem-solving between newly independent neighbours. After two false starts, five of the Southeast Asian countries managed to launch Asean. It was political necessity rather than economic imperatives which brought these countries together. But almost immediately there was talk about these countries emulating the European Economic Community by becoming a trade bloc.

The level of economic development of these countries was very low then. An Asean economic bloc would have been quite meaningless. Besides, the claims over each other's territories remained to strain relations between various pairs of Asean countries. It is a measure of the pragmatism of these countries that they continued to meet as Asean, even though bilateral relations between certain members were strained.

To this day, the claims remain but they have not prevented Asean from developing into a regional forum with credibility in the world's economic, social and political affairs. Such has been the initial Asean Five's success that the other countries of Southeast Asia and even those outside evinced a keen desire to join it.

Asean's accomplishments are even more remarkable considering that not so long there were wars and conflicts in the region and within many of the Asean countries. It was predicted that if North Vietnam achieved victory, then, like dominoes one by one the other countries in the region would fall to Communism and chaos.

We were told then, as we are told now, that we needed foreign protection against predatory neighbours such as a victorious Vietnam and the other powerful Eastern countries.

Against all odds, Vietnam and its much-derided soldiers in black pyjamas won against the greatest power on earth. But the dominoes did not fall. Instead, they prospered and showed themselves very stable and capable of managing their countries well. They seem prepared to shed the ideological baggage of the past and accept the need for economic reforms in order to give their people a better life. Central planning gave way to market forces and the promotion of international trade and foreign investments.

Aggressive territorial acquisition appears to be the last thing on the minds of Southeast Asian leaders. Peace and good neighbourliness seem to be the preferred creed. And all evinced a desire to work together to build a nuclear weapons-free region of peace, freedom and neutrality.

There cannot be any doubt that membership on the Asean grouping has contributed towards governmental rationality and serious concern for the

well-being and rapid development of member states. The members seem to learn from each other how to administer and develop their countries. They all seem to believe in working for the good of their people, even if their individual styles may differ. Asean has proven that regional co-operation among developing countries is possible and can produce results.

Very recently, the World Bank has acknowledged that good government is the key to the development of poor economies. Conversely, it must be concluded that the poor economies which have now developed are blessed with good government.

The Asean countries have all been poor but are today among the most dynamic economies of the world. It follows that the governments of Asean countries know what is meant by good government and their model should be emulated.

The world should conclude that membership of Asean would have a steadying influence on domestic politics and would help the progress of member countries. The world should welcome the accession to Asean of any country which qualifies. It is regrettable that there are those who would not see the obvious. Instead of encouraging Asean to accept all Southeast Asian countries as soon as possible, Asean has been urged to pass judgment, deny membership and apply pressure on a potential candidate so as to force that country to remain poor and, therefore, unstable. Asean must resist and reject such attempts at coercion. They are not a part of the Asean way. We will resolve our problem in our own way and in our own time. No one, but no one, should assume that only they know the solutions to all problems. They have failed far too often for us to be convinced that only they know what is right and what is wrong.

The countries of Asean, like all countries, need security and peace. We have decided that Asean will not become a military alliance in order to protect themselves, although each one of us is free to have bilateral arrangements with other members for mutual security. Those who are concerned about our safety should support our concept of a Nuclear-Free Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality. We see no enemy and we would not want to label anyone as our potential enemy. If we have problems with non-Asean countries, we will together seek a solution through negotiations using our unity as a lever.

We appreciate the offer to defend us but how can we be sure the promised help will be forthcoming when we see so many countries being abandoned to their fates as soon as they were in trouble? We know that the first priority of the protectors would be to pull out their forces. The pledge to protect human rights, irrespective of borders and sovereignty, has proven empty time and time again. We know we will be left to face the problem and to pay the cost with our lives and our wealth.

In the final analysis, we can rely only on ourselves. Forswearing force as a means of settling problems between ourselves, we can ensure our safety through a willingness to settle problems the Asean way.

For us, our ultimate defence will be our stability and economic strength as well as our willingness to stay together even though we made no promise to fight alongside each other, not being a military bloc.

Economic strength is all-important. In a world dedicated to economic growth through a free market system, territorial acquisition is no longer worthwhile. It is no longer a source of wealth and power. Those who talk of military conquests and colonial territories are living in the past. They know very well that other forms of hegemony is possible.

The threat faced by nations is economic sanctions to impoverish the people and to stir internal strife. Weakened, the unfortunate countries will have to submit as completely as if they are colonies.

We should, therefore, concentrate on economic development and the well-

being of our people. And Asean countries have demonstrated that they know how to do this.

Now, together with our new members, the Southeast Asian countries can co-operate and help each other to prosper economically. That way, we will become internally stable and less susceptible to the kind of outside pressures our detractors like to apply.

Economic prosperity is really the answer to our security problems because with prosperity, Asean will be taken seriously and its views respected. It is for this reason that whenever our Foreign Ministers meet, it is usual for the major economies of the world to have ministerial dialogues with us. Even on matters of security we have devised a regional forum in order to thrash out perceived problems. No other regional organisation has such an arrangement.

Military strength may inspire fear but it will lead to a costly arms race. The benefits will only accrue to the manufacturers and traders in the weapons of war. Economic prosperity inspire respect but at a much lower cost, while the benefits remain with us.

In December of this year, the Heads of Government of all the Asean countries will meet informally in Kuala Lumpur. It will be an epoch-making gathering for the Heads of Government of nine countries of Southeast Asia will be meeting as leaders of one of the world's strongest regional groupings. There will be a lot of serious things to discuss, decisions and stands to be made. They will not be just celebrating 30 years of Asean but also have serious regional and international matters to discuss.

The world now talks glibly of a borderless world, of the Information Age, of open markets and open societies.

Asean, a group of developing countries, will need to know how all these new concepts about international commerce and politics will affect us. It is wonderful to know that all the huge markets of the developed countries will be open to us in exchange for our opening up of our tiny markets. But can we really gain access to these markets?

Or will the removal of borders cause a flow in one direction only?

Presently, we see a well-planned effort to undermine the economies of all the Asean countries by destabilising their currencies. Our economic fundamentals are good yet anyone with a few billion dollars can destroy all the progress that we have made. We are told we must open up, that trade and commerce must be totally free. Free for whom? For rogue speculators. For anarchists wanting to destroy weak countries in their crusade for open societies, to force us to submit to the dictatorship of international manipulators.

We want to embrace borderlessness but we still need to protect ourselves from self-serving rogues and international brigandage.

Already we are seeing giant companies swallowing up chunks of the business in the developing world. They monopolise the services sector through their huge shipping, airlines, insurance, companies and banks. The media - print and electronic - are now controlled by them throughout the world.

We are denied Press freedom by the many people who trumpet it. Only bad news about us are published, the good news are often buried in their archives.

We worry, we should worry about this borderless world of the Information Age and the free market.

We are not rejecting it out of hand. But we should know where we stand. We should know how we are going to handle the problems which will arise.

Already they have formed powerful regional trade blocs. And eight of the most powerful nations have decided that they, and they alone, should determine the fate of every country. When they agree on anything, as for

example the revaluation of the yen, we have to pay the price. And when they quarrel, we will be trampled under.

Alone, none of the Southeast Asian countries will be able to protect itself. But nine Asean countries with half a billion people may be able to do something to help ourselves.

We are glad that when the leaders of the Asean nine meet, there will also be a meeting with the leaders of the three biggest economies in Northeast Asia. We will then have an opportunity to present our views on a whole lot of international issues to them, for their economies are closely linked to ours.

What affects us will affect them too.

We abhor trade blocs but we do need as many countries to understand our problems as we can find. We may be moving towards a borderless world, but we also see greater exclusivity on the part of the rich. More than ever we need to win friends, even from among the exclusive group.

In this region we believe in a Prosper-Thy-Neighbour policy. This is not due to altruism. It is motivated by selfishness.

Prosperous neighbours make good trading partners and give each other less problems. The problems of poor neighbours tend to spill over their borders. It is for this selfish reason that we reject Beggar-Thy-Neighbour policies.

But we must not be passive in the exercise of this Prosper-Thy-Neighbour policy. We should actively help each other. Certainly the newer members of our association are going to need help in order to catch up with the older members.

I believe there is an Asean formula for success, for how else can we explain why every Asean country has shown rapid economic growth and political stability? We must help every country to make use of this formula so that we can all be stable and prosperous.

Once again, I would like to stress the importance of being economically prosperous. Prosperity is essential for the avoidance of internal conflict. A former American Secretary of State, Robert S. McNamara, noted that the incidence of (internal) conflict had been highest in the poorest countries and lowest in the richest. In helping our fellow members to prosper, we are in fact helping to reduce conflict in our countries. With this, we will all prosper and be conflict-free. And we as neighbours will benefit from the wealth and the absence of conflict in our region. Again we see the selfishness in the policy to prosper your neighbours.

There are roughly half a billion people in the Asean member countries now. They are not the richest people but even though per capita income may be low, their total purchasing power is still considerable. Besides, with their high growth rates their economic clout must increase rapidly. Their low cost of production, the skills and the diligence of their people are assets which will make them attractive to investors and traders alike.

The future is indeed bright for the countries of the Asean. We know what we must do collectively. We know what we must do individually. And we have the strength to do what is best for us and to defend ourselves. If we our resolve.

I would like to bid welcome to all the distinguished delegates to the 30th Asean Ministerial Meeting and to all our honoured guests. This meeting is a milestone in the history of Southeast Asia. It is also a milestone in the history of regional co-operation. We believe in strength through unity. We reject exclusivity. We suffered in a bipolar world. We know now that a unipolar world is no better. We know that alone we each will suffer. Only through being together can we maintain and benefit from our hard-won independence.

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