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Asean finds strength in unity

MANY will agree that the biggest achievement of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) Summit in Hanoi was the ability of its leaders to ultimately put the grouping's interests before their own and speak with one voice. Since the start of the regional crises - which affected all the Asean economies - the values which had held the Asean process together for decades seemed to be in danger of being ignored. There were cracks in the wall of Asean unity and perhaps even seeds of discontent within some of the region's new leaders such as President Joseph Estrada of the Phillipines and Indonesian President B.J. Habibie.

In the run-up to last month's Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum's Economic Leaders Meeting, for example, Estrada and Habibie's threats to boycott the Kuala Lumpur meeting hosted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad offered early and disturbing signs of an untypically, uneasy relationship among the neighbours. Personal preferences and ideological differences had never until now been a thorn in Asean's side; in fact, the foundations of this grouping had been built on a solid determination by the founders to make the region neutral, free and peaceful. The domestic affairs of a member country have always been left to the Government of that country to resolve. What the fellow members of Asean would do was to always express their opinions behind closed doors, never to the world press or the television stations.

Had there been a departure of the traditional Asean values at Hanoi, it would have been sensational news for the international media. After the downfall of the oldest Asean Government as a result of the regional currency crisis, a lot of parties outside this region were clamouring for more. In short, another kind of domino theory was being anticipated, except in this case it is not the communist ideology that will conquer South-East Asia but the might of the new capitalists in the form of currency speculators and hedge funds. A divisive Asean will make this conquest that much easier. A united Asean - like the united front formed by Asean's founding countries had ended the communist threat in the South-East Asian region - is a definite stumbling block.

Unity prevailed at the sixth summit in the Vietnamese capital. Despite differences in views on some issues, the leaders agreed on major issues affecting them as a group. Malaysia's proposal for the use of regional currencies in Asean trade was adopted by the summit and this should be crucial to the region which has seen its baht, ringgit, rupiah and peso lose so much ground against the US dollar in the last 18 months. The mechanics of this arrangement will have to be worked out by the ministers and officials, but at least the major hurdle of getting the governments to agree to it has been overcome. In addition, the leaders also agreed on flexibility in adopting the Asean Free Trade Area (Afta) plan and a surveillance mechanism to provide early warning to economies of cracks in their systems. Asean also spoke up once again on the need for the global community to prove their seriousness in wanting to undertake reforms of the international monetary system.

Important, too, is the seemingly new closeness that has been forged at the Hanoi summit between Asean and Japan. For years, Tokyo has been more of an outsider in the Asean process. In the last few days, however, Japan's voice in Asean was heard loud and clear. Finance Minister Kiichi Miyazawa's call for an Asian Fund to tackle speculative attacks was a

complete departure from Japan's back-seat position in past Asean meetings. The Miyazawa Plan, which sets aside US\$30 billion (US\$1 = RM3.80) to help out South Korea and four other Asean economies, is proof of Japan's newfound commitment to this region. A united Asean can pursue such ties with the second most powerful economy in the world. And judging from what the leaders have achieved in Hanoi and their ability to unite when faced with domestic, regional and global pressures, the prospects for South-East Asia and Asia are looking good, indeed.

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