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When will Asia get organised?

ASIA is disorganised, fragmented, and without a clear leadership. It has always been, except that it was not that obvious before the financial crisis of 1997. The market turbulence then showed how vulnerable Asia is. While Europe has had a fortress built in the form of the European Union and the US has the North America Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) to bring the Americas together, Asia still subscribes to each unto its own. Asia has the Association of South-East Asian (Asean), a gathering of former "miracle" economies and battered emerging markets, and Asean has Afta (Asean Free Trade Area, a poor distant cousin of Nafta). There are other sub-regional associations within Asia but there has yet to be a platform that can claim to represent the interests of all countries and governments in the region. Perhaps Africa is in even greater disarray but that is no consolation.

Which is why an Asian organisation should have made sense. But like the Asian Monetary Fund propagated by many, including Japan, and which became the theme for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's latest article in the Mainichi Shimbun, every attempt at forming an Asian union or grouping in the last years of the old millennium were swiftly met with stubborn opposition and over-reaction from within as well as outside the continent. Remember how strong Washington came down on the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) idea? And how terribly shocked the International Monetary Fund was when several governments in Asia wanted to set up an Asian version of the IMF? It was possible for China, Japan and other dynamic Asian countries to group together as long as countries outside of the continent are also present. The Apec forum and the European Union-Asia Meeting are two perfect examples.

Asia should not have entertained any of the opposition against what it was doing for the collective good of its own states and peoples. But, somehow, it always did. In some of these failed attempts to unite Asia, governments of the region themselves were to blame. Japan, for instance, never officially said yes to the EAEC because of an illogical fear of incurring the wrath of the US. And when Tokyo itself took the initiative to propose the establishment of an Asian Monetary Fund, the idea never came close to fruition because the move was seen as an attempt to undermine the authority of the IMF. On the other hand, the Apec forum was formed with only Malaysia standing in the way until Kuala Lumpur received the assurance that the forum would only concern itself with economic issues. It became clear only later that it was too much to expect some member countries not to cross the line and politicise Apec to its core.

When the Asian financial crisis happened, countries affected had no one to turn to except the IMF and the so-called "international community". Malaysian and Thai authorities cooperated to deal with the attacks on their currencies but could not sustain the bilateral exercise when things got worse so quickly. Asean had neither the experience nor the resources to effectively deal with such a crisis. Japan had the money and wanted to pump it into the affected countries but once again this was the kind of initiative that would undermine the IMF and, therefore, was not something the US would want to encourage. And Asia did not have much say in the IMF's decisions, just as it does not have much say in the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation and other international bodies. Thailand, South Korea and Indonesia had no choice but to seek IMF aid. Malaysia

created a choice for itself, introduced capital controls, and was instantly branded a free-market outcast.

If there had been EAEC and if an Asian Monetary Fund had been formed by then, things would have turned out differently and the crisis might have been handled better. It is really up to Asian governments to decide where they want to take Asia. As Dr Mahathir said, Asia has the capacity and enough experience to prevent countries from going under. But Asians will never know for sure unless they take up the challenge.

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