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New voice for Asia gains momentum with inaugural Boao Forum

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IS a new voice for Asia emerging? This was the question asked by many attending what is referred to as the inaugural ceremony for the Boao Forum.

Set amid peaceful surroundings in the southern Chinese island of Hainan, promoters are upbeat that the conference would set the agenda for a new Asia, one that is determined to play an active part in world trade, investment flows and growing inter-dependence.

The forum is intended to be Asia's answer to the Davos Forum, where leading world personalities can shed their official face and engage each other in the pursuit of common goals and objectives.

Malaysia's Tan Sri Ajit Singh, one time Asean secretary general, took pains to explain the forum is a non-political platform driven by the private sector.

Having Ajit as the forum's lynchpin has set some minds believing the conference is a Malaysian initiative.

A Thai journalist who specialises in Asian affairs, particularly Asean, concluded that Malaysia is providing the driving force for such an intellectual gathering.

"Malaysia is THE voice for Asia. Your Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) is Asia's most senior leader, the continent's own spokesman. Asia needs leaders who can articulate its case against unbridled globalisation and yet not allow opportunities provided by it to slip through. At this point in time, your doctor is the voice of Asia," he said.

This point - that Dr Mahathir is the voice of Asia - is readily acknowledged by Ajit, who has spent the last few months in Hainan trying to set up and get the forum going.

Briefing pressmen earlier this week, Ajit said this was partly why Dr Mahathir has been asked to present the keynote address at this inaugural meeting.

The Prime Minister is expected to share his thoughts on Asia and he may have plenty.

One of his oft-repeated philosophies is the "enrich thy neighbour" policy which calls for the sharing of expertise and resources to help each other prosper.

The forum may get a dose of this policy and it would be interesting to see how this idea can best be translated today.

Asean, through its many joint projects and approaches, is actually putting into practice this policy. And if others were to subscribe to it, then Asia can collectively grow and prosper together.

Ajit also emphasised that the forum is a vehicle which can help in "constructive engagement among participants".

This is indeed true. The suspicions which plagued some Asian countries have not been effectively addressed but open, non-inter-governmental discussions between leading personalities from participating countries can prise open the shutters of false pride and enable them to work together for their common good.

"At Boao, we feel that one of our main intentions is to help tear down barriers within Asia so that Asians can work together without fear and growing respect.

"We're private sector driven; our members are companies not countries;

we want to help Asia move to become a cohesive force," said Ajit.

Come to think of it, Boao can be an effective think-tank for Asia, one that can enable Asian personalities to speak their minds freely without being seen as representing Governments or its agencies.

As for the private sector, it is profit-driven. It does look like Boao can marry the business minds with that of public figures so that they can work on the pursuit of a sustained, mutually-benefiting socio-economic endeavours.

Apec is inter-governmental, and not truly Asian; Asem is a dialogue between Asean and Europe; while Asean the larger entity is inter-governmental but with strong private sector involvement.

Against this background, Boao then seems to be the natural vehicle for free-flowing discussions without official embargoes on anything that matters to Asia - from political stability to economic reform; from employment opportunities to capital flows and investments; and from education to human resource development.

Some may argue that a forum such as Boao's is nothing more than a get-together of individuals from various disciplines to "talk shop"; they may not even be like-minded, some detractors may say.

But this is just the thing. A forum such as Boao is intended to get everyone with a view - everyone that matters that is - to share their views and thoughts and perhaps come up with a better perspective to make their jobs more effective, to initiate new plans of action, to look for better and longer-term solutions to their problems.

Yes, one may also argue that a new talk show is taking shape in Asia. But talk shows are not necessarily bad if the promoters, the key players, give it their best shot.

Some may no longer hold the rein of power in their countries, but may still wield considerable influence. The likes of former Philippine president Fidel Ramos, Australia's Bob Hawke and Japan's Y. Nakasone can offer a range of Asian perspectives for today's implementers to chew on.

Is Australia Asia, someone may ask! In fact, Hawke, upon arrival on the island yesterday, enquired why the map of Australia is not shown in all Boao documents and backdrops. It does look like Boao is not short of supporters, but the question everyone is asking is whether this support can be translated into workable plans of action.

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