

09/03/2002

Speak up, stand up

EVEN at the height of its combined economic prestige in the last decade, East Asia was a wallflower on the international scene. Since the 1997/98 financial crisis, the notion that it is big and brave enough to hold its own opinions has retreated further into the brickwork. The Prime Minister's urging of East Asia to speak its mind and attempt to solve its own problems, in its own way, has been tirelessly repeated over many years. The possibility exists, as it always has, for these countries to look after themselves without needing the counsel and ideas of others, especially when history has proven some of these ideas to be fallacious.

Furthermore, it cannot be presumed that the world's one power and its allies will bend to the interests of East Asia as a region, nor that of its individual countries. East Asia has the means to hedge its dependence on distant external markets by increasing trade within itself.

And by being less vulnerable to external pressures it can also slow those aspects of globalisation that press the advantage for Western firms. A concerted regional effort can achieve some turning of the tables - it can, for example, influence Western and international legislators to tighten banking laws against dirty money. Yet even a discussion group such as the East Asia Economic Caucus has got off to an uncertain start.

In the face of global uncertainty and one-sidedness, the greater self-sufficiency advocated by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for East Asia is not only plausible but necessary. East Asia can make a great leap forward if it gives collaborative mechanisms a chance to work.

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