

04/08/2002

Re-calibrate the strategic calculus

THE world is said to have left the post-Cold War period behind and entered a new age after the Sept 11 tragedy. But it is an age where the world's security map is still blank for no concrete solutions have been found to eliminate the new element of insecurity brought about by the Sept 11 attacks.

To a certain extent, the ninth Asean Regional Forum meeting in Bandar Seri Begawan served as an opportunity to articulate new positions in the post-Sept 11 political and security framework of Southeast Asia. This is no mean feat considering that it is a forum consisting of the world's biggest economies and security powers such as the United States, China, Japan, Russia and European Union. Needless to say, the need for Asean's engagement with these nations in the forum cannot be stressed enough at a time of growing interdependence among nations and regions.

The most important thing achieved is the consensus to implement quick and decisive measures to combat the financing of terrorists, including their access into the financial system. It is heartening that the ARF recognises the imperative of removing the roots of terrorism. It reinforces the international consensus that the war against terrorism is not a war against any religion or race but a crime against humanity.

Given the importance of ARF's role in the region's security, we feel that the ARF's potential has yet to be realised. Members must explore the possibility of ARF becoming one of the world's preventive diplomacy mechanisms where it can venture into conflict prevention and resolution activities. The test ahead is to flesh out a policy blueprint and establish a comprehensive strategy for such roles.

Yet it is disappointing that Asean's restructuring of diplomacy in the post-Sept 11 period does not include the institutionalisation of Asean Plus Three (Japan, China and South Korea) in the recent Asean Ministerial Meeting. When it comes to putting substance on the bones of Asean Plus Three, members do not seem eager to endorse specific action or to go beyond rhetoric.

The Asean-US anti-terrorism pact is an important development in the region's post-Sept 11 security framework. As US Secretary of State Colin Powell said, it would bring Asean-US in more intimate relations. It does not signal an increase in US military presence in the region. It does, however, reflect America's belated re-discovery of the importance of multilateralism. In short, the US appears to have learned the importance of en-lightened self-interest: Washington is profoundly affected by developments in distant and seemingly unconnected parts of the globe. And while the American epiphany may be the most striking, this is an instructive lesson for the entire world. We can no longer afford the illusion that there is a comfortable distance between "us" and "them". Cultures brush too easily against each other too often, and the friction is mounting.

Sadly, most governments have paid lip service to this notion of inter-connectedness. Such a notion has been belittled by hard-nosed realists who counsel that only military power and crisp calculations of economic cost and benefit can serve as the basis of state power and interests. The growing complexity and volatility in the international situation have placed a premium on the creation of closer multilateral relations. This explains why, for example, Malaysia is relentless in its efforts to bring

nations together and explore various areas of co-operation under programmes such as the Langkawi International Dialogue.

The lesson of Sept 11 is that the intangibles matter. For Asean, it is time to re-calibrate the strategic calculus. It is also time to realise, in Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's words, that "Asean is Asean, Asean Plus Three is different".