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Nurturing the Asean Community

ASEAN has come a long way since it was founded, with the simple objective of bringing the countries of the region closer together to build peace and prosperity. The world's geo-political situation has changed over the years, and so has the region, but Asean's basic objective remains as relevant today as when it was first formed. The founding members, along with the new members, must continue to work together to build the peace and bring greater prosperity to their people, but to do so in ways they are accustomed to and that are unique to the region. In the words of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the regional grouping must stay faithful to the principle of non-interference and respect for national sovereignty and abjure the use or threat of force in the settlement of differences and disputes.

These principles are symbolic of the underlying cultural and social values that bind traditional families together in the region. Consensus should remain the norm of the Asean family of nations although such an approach can be frustrating when gentle persuasion is ignored and appeals to a fellow member seem to fall on deaf ears. At times like this, questions are inevitably raised, especially by those outside the region, that a more aggressive, confrontational and intrusive approach be adopted. But Asean must resist the temptation to go down this road, because it could undermine the very character of the grouping and even weaken it over the longer term.

The grouping's family spirit was abundantly and poignantly displayed at the Ninth Asean Summit in Bali where tears were shed at an emotional farewell ceremony to pay tribute to Dr Mahathir for his unstinting contributions to Asean and his statesmanship in helping to steer the grouping through many a difficult passage. Asean, despite political and ideological differences among member countries, treasures personal relationships among its leaders. Consultative diplomacy at the very highest level has been key to the advance of what was initially a modest agenda.

But Asean still has some way to go to build an Asean Community along the lines of the European Union. Given the economic and social disparities between members, forging EU-like integration is a goal whose building blocks will have to be put in place piece by piece over time. It will require, as Dr Mahathir has stressed, the need for Asean countries to address their challenges squarely and acquire the political will and commitment to continue to nurture Asean into a region whose whole will be greater than the sum of its parts.

At the Bali summit last week, a major building block was put in place when leaders of the 10 member countries adopted the Declaration of Asean Concord II to establish an Asean Community and pave the way for the creation of a single market. The Concord is far-reaching. Its pillars of co-operation, covering economic, political, security and socio-cultural matters, will bind the member countries even closer together. An Asean Community will enable member countries to progress and grow in concert, and for their companies to reap economies of scale when they invest or trade in the region. However, much hard work needs to be done to map out the details. It will take time before the full benefits of regionalism can sink in and spread. But a great leap forward has been taken with the adoption of Concord II.

