

25/10/2003

Envoys treading too softly

Ashraf Abdullah

ON Dec 13, 1990, at a dinner in honour of the visiting then Chinese Premier Li Peng, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad proposed an East Asian Economic Grouping. The United States promptly denounced it. China was cautious. Singapore and Japan, both allies of the US, objected.

While the US felt that the grouping would eventually turn into a protectionist economic bloc, the others feared that failing to toe the line may incur the wrath of the hegemon.

For these reasons and more, they all stayed away.

But Dr Mahathir had, since then, repeatedly said that the grouping would be an informal gathering to discuss ideas, rather than an economic bloc.

It was also aimed at giving East Asian nations a stronger voice in international forums.

He saw no logic in the US objection to an East Asian grouping when the North American Free Trade Agreement and the European Union, both of which are economic blocs, were established without consultation with the international community.

To appease the US, he renamed the EAEG "East Asia Economic Caucus" so that it would not be seen as an economic bloc. Even so, the Clinton administration's hardline approach prevented the formation of the grouping.

In 1997, under Dr Mahathir's chairmanship of Asean, China, Japan and South Korea were invited to the Asean Summit.

It was then that the Southeast Asian and Northeast Asian countries realised the importance of a stronger East Asian grouping.

With such a grouping, the most obvious benefit was that East Asia would now be able to maintain a united view and also have bigger clout in international decision-making.

The EAEG can play a much-needed role to balance the power of North America and Europe by looking into ways of enhancing trade among themselves in order to build up their markets and make them attractive to the European and American trading blocs.

In other words, with its presumed market power, East Asia would be able to bargain on equal terms and not accept rules set by others.

This will allow East Asian countries to protect themselves from foreign interference that was evident during the Asian financial crisis of 1997. It is merely the simple idea of strength in numbers and unity.

Since 1997, the Asean+3 became a permanent feature and in 1999, the Asean leaders commissioned an East Asian Vision Group to study the possibility of formalising an East Asian grouping.

At the Asean Summit in Bandar Seri Begawan in 2001, the group, led by South Korea and comprised of two members from each of the 13 countries, presented its report and proposed the formation of an East Asian Grouping.

Dr Mahathir promptly announced that Malaysia would like to host the Asean+3 secretariat, an offer which was rejected outright by Indonesia and Singapore. Even the Indochinese nations to whom Malaysia is a friend, did not support the idea.

Indonesia has objected to the setting up of the Asean+3 secretariat as it believes that it would render the Asean secretariat in Jakarta redundant.

Singapore fears that it will overshadow the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation secretariat, which it now hosts.

In the past two Asean Summits, in Phnom Penh and in Bali, Malaysia did not raise the issue of wanting to host the Asean+3 secretariat. Why? Has it given up?

Diplomacy is all about convincing the doubters, and making them change their minds through persuasion.

The argument that Malaysia failed to bring the Asean+3 secretariat home because fellow Asean members did not support the proposal is unacceptable and boggles the mind.

When the idea for Apec was first mooted, Malaysia gave a lukewarm response because it felt that an organisation composed of all nations of the Pacific rim will be too large and too messy. But in the spirit of Asean brotherhood, it accepted Apec, albeit with some pessimism, because other Asean members wanted to be part of it.

And when Singapore offered to host the Apec secretariat, it managed to convince Malaysia to support it. As Apec subscribes to consensus-building for its decision-making process, it could have easily blocked the proposal. But for the sake of good neighbourliness, it voted in Singapore's favour.

Similarly, Indonesia's offer to host the Asean secretariat three decades ago received Malaysia's support.

Malaysia was also instrumental in admitting the less-developed countries like Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia into Asean.

Why was it that when it came to Malaysia wanting to host the Asean+3 secretariat, these countries did not return the favour? Did the Foreign Ministry stress this enough? Has the ministry lost its bargaining power? No matter how strong the objections, diplomats should be able to convince the opposing party. They are trained and paid to do so.

How else did Singapore convince Malaysia to support it when it wanted to host the Apec secretariat and how else did Indonesia convince Malaysia when it wanted to host the Asean secretariat?

Instead of blaming other Asean members for the failure to bring the Asean+3 secretariat home, the Foreign Ministry should blame itself for the failed diplomacy.

And one of the main reasons for the failure is that Malaysian diplomats are not allowed to use one of the main tools of diplomacy - the Press.

Unlike other civil servants, diplomats should be given a free hand to deal with the Press both in their own country and in their host countries in order to be effective. They serve as the country's salesmen. And to sell the country, they need a good rapport with the Press, something which Malaysian diplomats are not allowed to establish.

How often do we see Malaysian diplomats quoted in newspaper reports and seen on television?

For Dr Mahathir, who retires in a week, the Asean+3 secretariat would have been one of the best parting gifts. But unfortunately, the Foreign Ministry failed miserably on this one.