

# Bold move by Asean to split from the past

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ASEAN leaders are determined to see through a plan to set rules for the regional body and create a free trade zone with Asia's large economies by 2015.

A session at the World Economic Forum highlighted some concerns over the plan, which included, among others, its implementation, political oversight and development gaps.

"Indeed, it is going to be a very, very big debate. We do not encounter easy sailing on the more difficult issues," said Philippine President Gloria Arroyo.

She joined Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and Jusuf Wanandi, a senior fellow

of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Indonesia, in a session on Asean.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations has made a bold move to set up a charter that will transform the 40-year-old body into a legally-binding entity from its traditional informal consensus-based approach.

This will include sanctions against members.

The 10-member Asean is also taking the lead to create a free trade area together with India and China, among others.

The trade zone, stretching from India to New Zealand, could rival the European Union.

"We see China not as a threat. We see it as a challenge. The challenge is real.

"This is why economic integration must succeed," Abdullah said.

Jusuf, whose role was to provide a contrasting view at the session, was worried about the plan's execution.

He was also concerned that the charter would be "watered down" without the necessary political oversight.

"It is now going to a mid-level, bureaucratic task force."

Arroyo acknowledged the concerns over implementation but stressed that the trade area plan had been fast-forwarded by five years.

The foreign ministers should at least be actively involved in drafting the charter, she added.