

Asean shows right way to stability

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DIPLOMATIC ROLES: Asean, which turns 45 today, faces consonance and dissonance among its partners, writes K.S. Nathan

THE Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), founded under the Bang-kok Declaration on Aug 8, 1967, emerged from the strategic dynamics prevailing in the Cold War era (1947 to 1991). Determined to preserve newly-won independence and protect national sovereignty, the regional entity developed its founding principles that were formally endorsed at the first Bali Summit in 1976.

Respect for territorial sovereignty and integrity, non-interference in internal affairs and effective cooperation among its constituent units became the hallmarks of Southeast Asian regionalism. The emphasis on "process" as opposed to "product" evolved eventually into what has been described as the "Asean Way" of consensus building and conflict avoidance, rooted arguably in the historical traditions and strategic culture of the region.

All the five founding members (Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines), which were staunchly anti-communist in their internal and external orientations, offered an ideological platform that also served Western interests during the Cold War.

Security cooperation with the Western powers, especially the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, helped to build national resilience and regional confidence in promoting national and regional socio-economic development.

The anti-communist states evolved varying degrees of parliamentary democracy, punctuated also by episodes of authoritarian rule.

Eventually, with the demise of the Cold War, all 10 countries of Southeast Asia declared their commitment to Southeast Asia as a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (SEA-NWFZ) in Bangkok in 1995.

At about the same time, the post-Cold War emergence of multipolarity provided added incentives for Asean to promote multilateralism via the Asean Regional Forum.

Asean summitries now have become an annual event to propel the organisation into a more central and even pivotal diplomatic role in maintaining regional security through multilateral dialogues grounded in a progressive three-step approach: confidence building, preventive diplomacy and, ultimately, conflict resolution.

For Asean, regional economic integration has always been viewed as a process with generous time being allocated to late entrants as well as those socialist countries that have been embroiled in decades-long conflict and therefore were deprived of that window of opportunity enjoyed by the initial founding members to integrate with the global economy.

The leaders were cognisant that the success of integration required strong political will, which, in turn, can only issue out of domestic and regional stability.

Asean regionalism over the past 45 years has depicted four principal characteristics underlying the strategic culture of Southeast Asia: sovereignty, non-interference, consensus and process.

These principles embodied in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) signed at the Bali Summit in 1976, have been tested from time to time.

Hence, following Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia (1978 to 1989), Asean internationalised the conflict as it undermined the principle of national sovereignty and threatened regional stability.

In the Timor Lester crisis of 1998, Thailand's advocacy of "flexible intervention" in a member's internal affairs appeared to be contrary to the TAC principles.

However, in both cases, only UN intervention could break the deadlock and restore peace. Notably, the regional conflict-resolution machinery in both conflicts proved inadequate.

Another more recent issue that challenges the "Asean Way" is the conflicting claims in the South China Sea.

The consensus approach has suffered from competing intra-regional sovereignty claims as well extra-regional competition for resources in the context of a changing Asian balance of power marked by the rise of China and India.

The 45th Asean Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh last month highlighted the limitations of the "Asean Way" of conflict management and resolution.

The Cambodian chair abdicated in the face of strong Chinese influence and pressure on it to ensure that the modalities for implementation of the Code of Conduct, which have been stalled since the 2002 Declaration on the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), did not in any way compromise Beijing's sovereignty claims.

The AMM fiasco in Phnom Penh has invariably strained Cambodia-Philippine relations.

Thus, continuing fissures in intra-Asean unity would provide opportunities for external actors to gain leverage over the regional entity and strike common cause with some of its members.

It, therefore, comes as little surprise that in the wake of China's growing regional assertions, the US has been tacitly welcomed under its rubric of "re-engagement" in Southeast Asia signified also by President Barack Obama's November decision to station troops and develop its military presence in Darwin, Australia.

Thai-Cambodian relations have also frayed over the border dispute surrounding the Preah Vihear temple, which was awarded by the International Court of Justice to Cambodia in 1962.

Despite some glaring evidence of dissonance, there is a respectable record of consonance.

Asean has over the past 45 years managed to demonstrate creditable success in nation-building compared to the rest of the Developing World, and in using "process diplomacy" for region-building while deploying its political dexterity in fending off external pressure and influence.

The creation in 1971 of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality and SEA-NWFZ, establishment of currency swap arrangements under the 2000 Chiang Mai Initiative to avert another Asian financial crisis triggered by currency manipulations, setting targets for creating the Asean Community, practising open and inclusive regionalism by broadening regional cooperation through the East Asia Summit, and dynamically engaging as well as regulating the role and influence of external powers -- is no mean achievement for a region, which has systematically moved out of the colonial orbit, gained in regional confidence, and which is determined to be the fulcrum of Southeast Asian diplomacy and balance of power in the coming decades.

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