

The following article “ASEAN in uphill battle for community goal” by Sanchita Basu Das first appeared in the Business Times, 12 May 2011.

It must forge a common position to influence the global response to issues

The 18th ASEAN Summit concluded last week with a lot of expectations from Indonesia for the rest of the year. It was under Indonesia's chairmanship that Bali Concord I of 1976 and Bali Concord II of 2003 were reached. Through Bali Concord II, the member states of ASEAN agreed to develop an ASEAN Community by 2020. Later the deadline was brought forward to 2015.

As a prelude to its chairmanship, Indonesia had set three priorities for ASEAN, namely (a) to ensure the achievement of significant progress towards the attainment of the ASEAN Community, (b) to ensure that the evolving regional architecture and environment remains conducive to the pursuit of development in the region and (c) to chart a post-2015 vision for ASEAN whereby there will be a more cohesive ASEAN role in addressing global issues.

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint is expected to complete the second phase of implementation (covering period 2010-2011) this year. Indonesia does realise that time is a big constraint and hence has reiterated strengthening of respective national coordination mechanisms to effectively implement AEC commitments across various ministries and agencies.

The core elements - trade and investment liberalisation - of the AEC Blueprint must be in place by the target date of 2015. In parallel, measures to enhance connectivity, transparency and predictability should be implemented, as they are key determinants in making the region more attractive to investors.

Failure to implement the essentials for a 'single market and production base' will add to more competitive pressures from China and India and will send a wrong signal to the international community. ASEAN must also remember that it is engaged in a number of bilateral FTAs both as a region and as individual members, most of which will be completed

by 2015. Hence, as chair of ASEAN, Indonesia has to ensure the implementation of agreed commitments by the member countries.

Keeping in mind that all sections of the society benefit equally from the economic integration, enhancement of development cooperation among ASEAN members must be a priority. One such cooperation is between ASEAN SMEs, as they account for 40-70 per cent of most of the economies. The SMEs lack financial and technical know-how and thus need support and knowledge of markets to venture into ASEAN countries. During its chairmanship, Indonesia has to make sure that government agencies increase their assistance in providing the support and information needed.

No breakthrough

Indonesia also has to maintain peace and stability in the region. However, in the first summit of the year, ASEAN failed to achieve any breakthrough to end the border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia. Indonesia has to encourage both parties to adhere to the principles explained in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and the ASEAN Charter, namely the peaceful settlement of disputes in the region.

Positive developments in this area will not only contribute to the progress of the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC) but also a peaceful regional environment is essential for the pursuit of economic development and social process.

ASEAN leaders have agreed to allow Myanmar to chair the group in 2014. It should be noted that Cambodia and Brunei would be the ASEAN chair in 2012 and 2013 respectively. These upcoming ASEAN chairs may be institutionally challenged and may find it difficult to ensure implementation of existing commitments. Any major progress may therefore have to wait until Malaysia takes the ASEAN chair in 2015.

Under the socio-cultural pillar, ASEAN leaders pushed for cooperation in education, health and disaster management. The leaders' endorsed the statement on Enhancing Cooperation against Trafficking in Persons in Southeast Asia. They realised the 'urgent need' for a comprehensive approach to the transnational crime. The trafficking of people includes women and children as low-paid labour for which governments have often been accused of doing little to fight the smugglers.

In 2011, Indonesia has to ensure that the ASEAN Community is truly people-centric. Building a community will not be successful without the involvement of all beneficiaries. The Indonesian government, therefore, must actively encourage the participation of the business community, academics, the media, NGOs and the wider civil society in various ASEAN-related activities.

It is 'the time' that the ASEAN people are involved in different policy actions and are able to develop knowledge and capacity to act on the benefits inherent in the initiatives.

To ensure ASEAN's centrality in the evolving regional architecture, Indonesia has to ensure that ASEAN remains in the driver's seat by enhancing its credibility to act together.

ASEAN must take a leading role in directing the region's response to the security and economic challenges through wider regional forums like Asean+1, Asean+3, ARF, East Asia Summit (EAS). In relation to the EAS, Indonesia and ASEAN will see the US and Russia formally joining the grouping later this year.

Common platform

Finally, it must be noted that by fulfilling the commitment under community building and by maintaining its centrality in regional architecture, ASEAN has to match up to Indonesia's theme of 'ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations' beyond 2015.

ASEAN leaders have agreed that by 2022, ASEAN shall endeavour to have a common platform on global issues. It must be noted that to raise recognition as a single regional entity, ASEAN needs to enhance its common voice in relevant multilateral forums.

To start with, the 10-member group could well exchange views on issues that may be raised at G-20 meeting later this year. It must have a common position to influence the global response on issues such as commodity price fluctuations, currency wars and developments in North Africa and the Middle East.

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