

# **ASEAN's role, support crucial for any new regional body**

by Pou Sothirak

For the Business Times, 17 December 2009

As a non-official Cambodian participant, I attended a conference organised by the Australian government in Sydney early this month to discuss Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's proposal to form an Asia-Pacific community (APc).

Australia's aim is to create a far-reaching institution in Asia-Pacific with the membership and mandate to address comprehensively both economic and strategic challenges facing the region. Australia sees that economic power and strategic weight of the world economy are now shifting towards Asia, particularly China and India, and that Asia-Pacific will ultimately be the new centre of gravity. Australia thus calls for a more energetic effort in the region to expand Asia's global responsibilities - in the financial and macro economy, in trade policy, climate change, and on strategic/security issues - and how best a regional community can be formed. Without making direct prescriptions, Australia nevertheless believes that such a community can be formed, based on one or more combinations of the existing institutions.

Cambodia is conscious and appreciative of the centrality of ASEAN to its member states and its value, especially to smaller countries such as Cambodia. Cambodia, which was reborn in 1993, was a fragile and vulnerable new state. It needed all the regional support and solidarity it could get. ASEAN provided us with this protective framework, while New Cambodia was finding its feet and learning the ropes within the region.

Because ASEAN works on consensus, consultations and cooperation, even a newly reborn member such as Cambodia could express its views and concerns, and have them taken into account. That is why, despite the criticisms of external observers that ASEAN is nothing but a talk shop, from our own experience we value ASEAN, the ASEAN way and the centrality of ASEAN in the wider regional architecture. Any new regional

organisation that is proposed should be inclusive and based on consultation, consensus and cooperation.

Any prime mover that tries to assert its way, and claims a consensus where there was none, will encounter much unhappiness and negative reaction. A house divided cannot stand. ASEAN has exerted much effort to create various ASEAN communities and to remain centred within wider regional frameworks such as the 'ASEAN plus Three' (APT) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), and does not relish being marginalised by new proposals.

Some observers claim that various ASEAN-centred organisations are too slow and unproductive, or that there are gaps in their coverage. Precisely because the Asia-Pacific region is huge and complex and contains many sensitivities, progress has to be slow and carefully handled. One argument advanced has been that a new comprehensive regional Asia-Pacific community should be created to replace several existing ones so as to avoid complexity and overlaps. But it is precisely because of the complexity of the wider region that several regional bodies were created to address different agendas.

Based on my observations of the Sydney conference, I felt that the messages expressed by participants were mixed. There was scepticism as well as optimism over the Rudd proposal. It will take a very long time, much debate and negotiations before any progress can be made. The backers of the proposal should be mindful that any new regional body needs ASEAN's support and should provide for ASEAN to play a central role. It will be hard to modify existing regional bodies such as APT or EAS. The general mood at the Sydney conference expressed no particular enthusiasm for additional institutions. The APc idea was seen as lacking in specifics and rationale. From the debate at the conference, it appeared Australians are now suggesting that the APc could be a rationalisation of existing institutions, rather than setting up a brand new one.

The majority of the participants supported the institutional arrangements that are already in place, and they valued these institutions' ability and utility in keeping the region stable,

peaceful and prosperous. There was a strong view that, if and when the APc is formed, there would be the need to relate to these established regional structures, if the new body is to be accepted.

Finally, there were competing ideas on how to move forward. Those who were comfortable with the ASEAN way did not feel that it was all that important to decide on some kind of rigid structure at the moment, but we should be aware that the regional architecture would continue to evolve. It was clear that there was no consensus on a so-called set of principles which could form the basis for the next step. Nor was there consensus on the establishment of an Eminent Persons Group. There were also no substantive discussions on the topic of ASEAN's role in the Asia-Pacific multilateralism.

*The writer was the Cambodian representative to the Asia-Pacific community Conference in Sydney from Dec 3-5, 2009 and currently is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.*