

ASEAN can boom with China, India
*(From the Straits Times Interview of Mr George Yeo,
Singapore Foreign Minister)*

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Ahead of the ASEAN and related summits which will take place in Thailand this Friday, Foreign Minister George Yeo gives his take on what can be expected from the meetings with regional leaders and ASEAN's progress towards integrating the region by 2015

PEERING into the future of the region comes as second nature to Foreign Minister George Yeo, who is regarded as a strategic thinker on geopolitical issues and a dab hand at forging new friendship ties.

Like a visionary who enters where others fear to tread, Mr Yeo has, for example, been at the forefront of efforts to rebuild the ancient Buddhist university of Nalanda in north-east India.

He is part of the 10-member Nalanda Mentor Group - formed in 2007 and helmed by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen - that has pushed the project from a near-fantasy to an imminent reality.

The new Nalanda International University in the state of Bihar is expected to open by 2011.

So when Mr Yeo talks about the future of ASEAN and what it can and should do to ensure its central position against a global backdrop of rising, competing superpowers, he is worth listening to.

That was what he did during a 30-minute interview yesterday, ahead of the 15th ASEAN Summit taking place in Hua Hin on Friday.

At the Thai seaside town, ASEAN leaders will also meet the grouping's dialogue partners individually as well as through group platforms, such as the 12th ASEAN Plus Three Summit and 4th East Asia Summit (EAS).

ASEAN Plus Three comprises ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea, while the EAS comprises ASEAN Plus Three, along with India, Australia and New Zealand.

Since last year, ASEAN 's position as the fulcrum at such meetings of the global powers has come into question as a result of proposals for a new regional architecture by new political leaders.

Japan's new Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama is promoting the concept of an East Asia Community, while Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has been pushing the idea of an Asia-Pacific Community since last year.

The fulcrum

THE simmering but rising rivalry among global giants such as the United States, China and India has cast a spotlight on ASEAN 's continued role as the fulcrum.

But Mr Yeo firmly believes that ASEAN can play a key role in securing peace in the region, not just for the immediate future but for the next 'one or two generations'.

What ASEAN needs to do is to stay on track with its integration efforts, remain united as a grouping, and retain its neutral position towards the major powers, he says.

And here, the fact that Asean is not a major power can be its strength.

He says: 'We (ASEAN) have largely asserted the position that ASEAN is central. The larger countries have gone along with the formulation because they see in our weakness a strength.

'We're completely non-threatening. We don't have nuclear weapons, we don't have cruise missiles. We threaten nobody. Therefore we can provide a neutral platform for all the others to meet.'

This gives ASEAN the opportunity to shape a larger geopolitical architecture that is favourable to its growth and well-being.

Rivalry among the global powers, which makes them view one another 'with a certain care and wariness' is to ASEAN 's advantage: 'If we play it right, we in ASEAN can play a major role in securing another generation or two of peace in the region, by which time the transformation of Asia will change the world.'

But for ASEAN to continue playing this role, it needs to remain neutral and united, to prevent bigger powers from serving their own interests by aligning themselves with certain countries in the region.

Indeed, if the regional grouping plays it right, it can ensure that South-east Asia will boom along with China and India as both continue to grow, adds Mr Yeo.

The coming ASEAN meetings in Hua Hin will help ASEAN achieve these aims. A major topic will be connecting South-east Asia more with China and India, not just in terms of physical infrastructure like roads and railways but also electronically.

Says Mr Yeo: 'Looking ahead to the 21st century, the re-encounter of China and India will be a very dramatic one and a lot of it will be through South-east Asia. If we become not a place (that) they fight over but a place where they meet and cooperate and link up, we will boom with them.'

The last time that ASEAN tried to meet its dialogue partners was in April in Pattaya. This was scuttled after 'red shirt' supporters of deposed Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra stormed the summit venue, forcing some leaders to flee by boat and helicopter.

Some of ASEAN's partners have expressed concern over security for the coming summit, but Mr Yeo says he has assured them that the Thais, who are chairing, are taking security seriously.

Pointing to how the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings in Phuket in July took place without incident under tight security, Mr Yeo says he expects an equally smooth meeting in Hua Hin.

This time round, the Thais have placed the area under the Internal Security Act and deployed 18,000 troops there to prevent protests.

How about ASEAN 's integration efforts?

On this, Mr Yeo reveals that at a meeting in Pattaya in April, ASEAN economic ministers decided to enhance two earlier agreements on trade and investment.

They also agreed to put the implementation of the ASEAN Charter on track.

The Charter, which came into effect last December, is a landmark document that turns ASEAN from a loose grouping into a rules-based organisation. It sets out ASEAN 's aspirations to set up a European Union-style community by 2015.

Each country has appointed an ambassador to be based at the ASEAN secretariat in Jakarta, to form the Committee of Permanent Representatives.

This is in full swing after a difficult start, says Mr Yeo.

Moral pressure

ANOTHER example of progress: ASEAN will take a major step forward when its leaders launch the ASEAN Inter-governmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) on Friday.

The AICHR, which has been in the making for 16 years, is ASEAN's attempt at proving that the group does take a serious stand towards promoting and protecting human rights in the region.

Critics who have often lambasted the grouping for being too soft on Myanmar for its handling and detention of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, have already dismissed the new commission for adhering to ASEAN's non-interference stance, among other things.

But Mr Yeo says that ASEAN has made good progress while achieving good agreement along the way on human rights.

He also says that while the AICHR will have no teeth, it will have the moral authority to raise issues on human rights with ASEAN member-states.

'If countries are in breach, we can say: 'Look, you agreed to these things in the Charter. It's on this basis that we have become a community. Can we please show some respect for what we've agreed to?'

'So it allows us to put moral pressure on countries that fall short.'

Connecting ASEAN and the world

What are some of the key issues for the various summit meetings this week, especially now with the global economy slowly recovering?

A key subject which will be discussed during the East Asia Summit (when ASEAN leaders meet the leaders of China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India) will be the idea of connectivity. Connectivity not only within ASEAN linking us all together as we become more integrated, but making sure that our connections also link us to the world, to China, to India by road and rail and then to the rest of the world, with all our major trading partners by land, by sea, and by electronic means.

ASEAN leaders at Hua Hin will ask for a group to be formed to study this in detail and I believe this will also be raised to the East Asia Summit leaders.

During the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phuket in July, you raised the idea of enhancing connectivity within ASEAN. Why did you make this suggestion and what does this proposal entail?

What prompted me was a lunch conversation I had with Kamal Nath, India's former commerce minister and now its transport minister.

We were discussing infrastructure development in Asia and China's remarkable achievement in building a network of highways and railroads. Kamal Nath told me that soon India will have the world's biggest highway construction undertaking. This is because China is plateauing off while India is only now accelerating.

So I put this to our ASEAN colleagues. We have China on the one side and India on the other - two very big countries with developed or developing infrastructure. And we are in between.

If we ASEAN, in our own integration, make sure that our links connect to theirs, not only will ASEAN be linked to China and India, we'll also link China and India together. Think of the many ways we'll benefit from the flow of people, goods, services, ideas and information.

That's the basis on which we decided to give this a fresh push - collect all that we've done so far, take a fresh look, update our plans in accordance with what the Chinese and the Indians are doing for road and rail.

In addition, we should also talk about open skies agreements for air travel, maritime links, even riverine links. There is for instance the Mekong River project which has received quite a lot of attention.

Think also of the electronic links so that your Blackberry or your iPhone can be singing and dancing all the way from Delhi, through Southeast Asia and to Beijing. If we can have such a region, I think the benefits to individual Singaporeans and indeed all citizens of ASEAN, will be tremendous.

The United States will hold its first-ever summit with ASEAN next month on the sidelines of the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) to be held in Singapore. What led to this meeting, given that previous attempts failed?

A change of policy on the part of Washington means that it is giving more attention to ASEAN now. This has been demonstrated by a series of moves they've made, most importantly in the engagement of Myanmar, which for a long time was an obstacle (to closer US ties with ASEAN). The fact that one issue could hold an entire agenda back said something about how the ASEAN region was viewed from far away.

Now, (under the Obama administration), there's a perception that ASEAN is important against the larger landscape of the rest of Asia, and America's and Europe's place in it. Therefore there's a willingness to view ASEAN in a more comprehensive way, not just on the basis of one or two issues.

I think it's right that Myanmar continues to be an issue for them (the US). It doesn't mean that they should ignore Myanmar. It means that while keeping Myanmar as an agenda item, other agenda items are also addressed.

How will the ASEAN Inter-governmental Commission on Human Rights, which will be launched this Friday in Hua Hin, benefit Singaporeans?

Creating a community means a certain agreement, explicit or implicit, on the way human beings are treated, agreement that there must be the rule of law, that there must be transparency.

We can't have secret executions or arbitrary application of laws. And we should be allergic to military coups and extra-constitutional actions.

Now while the commission begins as an intergovernmental body and will not have teeth, it will have a certain moral authority to raise issues and this itself is helpful.

While we adhere to the principle of non-interference in each other's internal affairs, the fact that we belong to a community must mean that we share certain things in common, which are explicitly articulated in the ASEAN Charter.

If countries are in breach, we can say: 'Look, you agreed to these things in the Charter, it's on this basis that we have become a community. Can we please show some respect for what we've agreed to?'

So it allows us to put moral pressure on countries that fall short.

How will Singapore react when the Commission, or other countries, use that same moral pressure on Singapore with regard to certain perceived human rights issues?

Once we sign on to the Charter, we in Singapore also agree to be measured against what we've agreed to. If one day we're in breach and we're criticised, that's a good thing and I think Singaporeans will cheer.

But Singapore is not the problem. The problem is really some of the other countries which joined ASEAN later and which had to recover from war and revolution and other internal problems.

Thailand hands over chairmanship of ASEAN to Vietnam this year. How has Thailand fared as chairman, and what can we expect from Vietnam as the new chair?

I don't envy what the Thai government has had to go through. They will have been in the chair for 11/2 years by the end of this year, during which time they had changes of government and all kinds of domestic disturbances.

Despite that, I have sensed in the Thai ministers, whichever government they are from, and in the Thai officials, a determination to keep pushing ASEAN forward, even though for some of them, their preoccupation must be their domestic politics.

I am glad that despite all the problems, the ASEAN agenda was not derailed under the Thai chairmanship and in fact made good progress.

A good meeting in Hua Hin, which I fully expect will be the case, will override the bad experience that we had in Pattaya.

The Vietnamese are a very organised, methodical and industrial people. They've already been making preparations to take over the chairmanship, asking for advice, views and recommendations from all the other ASEAN countries. I expect ASEAN to make further progress under Vietnam's chairmanship next year.

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