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Creating a Southeast Asian identity

By Ooi Kee Beng

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It is common wisdom that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) was formed 40 years ago to help maintain peace among its founding member states. The creation of the Federation of Malaysia five years earlier had precipitated military confrontation with Indonesia, which refused to accept the "loss" of northern Borneo to a "neo-colonial regime". The Philippines also strongly opposed the inclusion of Sabah in Malaysia.

With help from British and Australian forces, Malaysia managed to withstand Indonesian aggression until (Indonesian president) Sukarno himself was toppled.

With the end of the confrontation between Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, plans to form a regional body within which Southeast Asian neighbours could have dialogue and foster mutual understanding were quickly carried out, and Asean was brought into being.

Since then, the original five-member organisation has expanded to include 10 countries, and true enough, no open conflict has taken place between them. The success of Asean's peace-maintaining role is its greatest achievement so far.

Despite the overly cautious diplomacy that gave birth to Asean, cooperation within the region on security issues has not been lacking. Ecological and health threats today are forcing the governments of the various countries to work ever more closely. No doubt, tension still exists between members but no real clashes have taken place.

One parallel aspect to consider is that Asean was born in the middle of the Cold War — out of the Cold War, if you like — when the world was simplified in black-and-white terms of communists and capitalists. The war in Indochina was at its worst. Countries in the region were all dealing with that very division among their citizens. This helped to push the new states of Southeast Asia closer together.

The need for Asean countries to get along with each other has always functioned in tandem with global geo-politics. Today, after the Cold War, when the world is becoming more and more multipolar, and a united Vietnam, along with Cambodia and Laos, are all members of the bloc, economic considerations have become more important than security issues.

Besides being responsive to global pressure, and being a means through which its members can relate to each other in a civil manner, Asean has the potential to help reduce ethnic tension within each of its nation-state components. Regionalism provides much-needed intellectual space for curbing the ethnic anxiety that the more excluding nation-state paradigm fosters. Let me explain.

The economic infrastructure of Southeast Asia, due to its location on the world map, and due to its maritime nature, has always been shaped by trade routes. With Asian civilisations to the East, and Arab, Indian, Persian and European centres to the West, entrepot trade was the natural basis for the founding of polities in the area since time immemorial.

Sea routes touched land where harbours were good and where there was political stability. There lay the centrepiece of kingdoms and maritime empires. These ports — dominated by conglomerates of traders, warriors, aristocrats and bureaucrats — would compete with each other when they did not complement each other.

Here, in these cosmopolitan towns by the water, spheres of power were charted through the control of routes and by the attraction they held for tradesmen, professionals and workers. Just as the goods they traded were varied, so were the cultures of these human collectives.

Over the centuries, therefore, the mixture of cultures varied tremendously. What remained constant was the fact that the many loose ethnicities had to survive side by side, and mix pragmatically.

Contrast this with the nation state and its exclusivistic idea of ethnicity, where there are majorities and minorities, and where the polity is alleged to be based on ethnicity, and not on political and economic expediency.

With the transformation of entrepot polities into sprawling colonies in the 1500s, and then into nation states in the 1900s, the relationship between ethnicities became locked within dubious ideals of nationhood, indigeneity and territoriality, instead of a reality based on economic usefulness, demographic transience and unbordered polities.

This is no easy trap to wriggle out of. Regionalism, being a challenge to nation-state rationale, offers a way of loosening the grip that European ideas of political organisation have on the Southeast Asian body politic. It potentially allows Southeast Asian peoples to rethink their historical position and to recognise themselves as individuals and collectives living along trade routes with basically open economic borders and open ethnic flows, and not merely as citizens locked within jealous nation states.

What Asean professes to do today is create a Southeast Asian identity alongside the national identity of its peoples. For that to happen, the region's peoples have to start seeing themselves as being more fluid than nations, more unrestricted than races, and more evolving than ethnicities. Only then can inter-ethnic distrust diminish.

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