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MISUNDERSTANDING ASEAN

By
Bunn Nagara

“SO when is China going to join Asean?” a foreign news editor asked me in the early 1990s by way of introduction at a luncheon meeting in Tokyo.

He had asked when, not if, seeming to assume it was just a matter of time. There was no talk or even rumour of such a prospect at the time, so he must have just dreamt it up.

It was so ludicrous as to seem like a trick question.

Shouldn't a foreign news editor be better informed about Asean, and China, than to even think of asking such a thing? And yet so much about Asean remains unknown even among some of its national leaders.

Last year Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte advocated Asean membership for Turkey and Mongolia. The Philippines at the time held the rotating chairmanship of Asean, and Duterte must have thought he could do as he pleased.

This year it was the turn of Indonesian President Joko Widodo to dabble in the ridiculous. On a recent trip to Australia he told the media that Australia should join Asean.

Nobody else in Asean took either remark seriously, even if those statements made the news throughout the region. In case of lingering delusions resulting from these statements, some history may help.

South-East Asia has had more than its share of regional organisations through the decades.

During the Cold War, the US and its allies fashioned the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (Seato) as a bulwark against international communism. It was basically a military grouping to turn the region into a Cold War zone. Seato was a misnomer from the start, with six of its eight members from outside South-East Asia. Even the two members from this region, Thailand and the Philippines, were allies of the US in a Western-directed Cold War scheme.

Indonesia and Malaya (later Malaysia), which wanted no part of the Cold War, stayed out. So did most other countries in the region.

The Association of South-East Asia (Asa) was another attempt at regional identity politics. But with only three members Thailand, Malaya and the Philippines, it lacked credibility and purpose.

Maphilindo comprising Malaya, Philippines and Indonesia was yet another attempt by South-East Asian countries to create an organisation of, for, and by the countries of the region themselves. Maphilindo came on the eve of Malaysia's formation, with the undeclared purpose by Macapagal's Philippines and Sukarno's Indonesia to thwart the creation of Malaysia. Indonesia had its confrontation (konfrontasi) policy against Malaysia, while the Philippines pursued its claim to Sabah. Thus Maphilindo was diplomatically worded to favour Malaya over the others.

Still that did not work. With Maphilindo's hidden purpose known to Malaya, it suffered from neglect and died an early death.

Soon after that Malaysia was born, with Sabah, Sarawak, Singapore and Malaya coming together to form a new federation.

Meanwhile, historic change was underway in Indonesia. Rebellion erupted against Sukarno's rule, he was stripped of his life presidency, and konfrontasi against Malaysia ended.

Malaysian officials and their Indonesian counterparts had worked feverishly behind the scenes to manage an emerging situation with a fledgling new Indonesia. Within months, Asean was born.

Thus began a slow but steady process of regional institution building to ensure peace, stability and prosperity through fraternity. Since then, Asean has been at the heart of this process.

The other three co-founding members of Asean were Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore. With Asean, the dormant Philippine claim to Sabah stayed dormant between governments.

Since Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia had been locked in disputes over territory and Sukarno's aggression, Asean had to come by way of a neutral partner country: Thailand.

So the Bangkok Declaration of Aug 8, 1967 saw the birth of Asean, following much spadework by Thai officials to ensure agreement. Malaysia acknowledged the hard work put in by Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman, awarding him the title of "Tun" for his efforts.

However, right from the start, disparities existed among Asean member countries. There was a hulking Indonesia next to tiny Singapore, while differences in economic development made for more variations.

For Asean to work, all members had to agree to certain basics: all members were equal regardless of size or wealth, decisions would be made by consensus, Asean chairmanship would be by rotation, none shall interfere in another's internal affairs, and disputes had to be resolved peacefully.

Even as Thailand and the Philippines continued to host US military bases, these would only be temporary and never to be used against another member country. The Asean region would equate peace with freedom and neutrality, while rejecting all manner of nuclear weapons in every way.

The spirit and essence of Asean are for non-alignment. Today all 10 Asean members are in the Non-Aligned Movement, with Thailand, the Philippines and Brunei the latest to join in 1993.

When Duterte championed Turkey and Mongolia for Asean membership, many in the region were taken aback. Aung San Suu Kyi asked if he had considered geography and he said he had, showing instead how he had failed to grasp the subject and the question.

Neither Turkey nor Mongolia is in South-East Asia. Besides, Turkey is a member of Nato and hoping to join the EU.

When Jokowi advocated Australia's membership of Asean, he seemed to have lacked the luxury of thinking before speaking. To be fair he was probably prodded into a rash answer, or something must have been lost in translation.

His apparent enthusiasm has not been supported by his colleagues in government, among Indonesia's elites or anyone else in Asean.

Australia is not in Asia, much less in South-East Asia. When Paul Keating was Prime Minister he insisted Australia was in Asia, but when he moved to a solemn academic post he admitted it wasn't. Neither is Australia a non-aligned country, nor likely ever to be one. It is comfortably set in the US strategic alliance. Yet some senior Australian figures and establishments like the Asia Society Policy Institute recommend Australia joining Asean in 2024 together with New Zealand. Clearly, it is not just a deficiency in geography that is at issue.

One or even a few Asean leaders do not make decisions for a grouping that operates by consensus. When Asean was being formed in 1967, Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman reportedly favoured Sri Lanka's membership.

Singapore opposed it, while the other three members were not particularly motivated either way. A decade later Papua New Guinea applied to join and Asean has kept it waiting ever since.

Some reports suggest even Pakistan and Bangladesh had been keen to join. Again, a better sense of geography and geopolitics would help to keep things in perspective. In 2011 Timor Leste applied to join Asean with the official support of Indonesia. Unlike the other hopefuls, the territory and people of Timor Leste had been in Asean before independence as part of Indonesia and as Indonesians.

No country joins Asean without a formal invitation, with that invitation resulting only from a consensus among all member countries. However, consensus is more accessible than unanimity.

If political expediency trumps geographical identity in membership hopes, would the EU or Nafta accept any Asean country's application to join?

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