

The spirit of 1967 is still alive today

Asean has come a long way, and it's time to tackle some major challenges ahead.

In his autobiography, the late Lee Kuan Yew reflected on "Asean - Unpromising Start, Promising future". The history of regional community building in South-East Asia dates back half a century. The region was then fraught with confrontation, internal insecurity and the threat of communist infiltration.

Nonetheless, spirits were high in proclaiming their will to "bind themselves together in friendship and cooperation and, through joint efforts and sacrifices, secure for their peoples and for posterity the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity."

This spirit is still alive today.

1967 was a pivotal year, when the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) was formed. Even after the war fought in this region ended in 1945, battles and diplomacy for independence agonisingly continued. Internal strife against communism persisted and intensified.

The Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung, in 1955, calling for the swift end of colonial domination, was still halfway towards the independence of all. At last, by the mid-1960s, most states in South-East Asia began to stand on their own feet.

Newly-born nations needed time and efforts to create peaceful and co-operative interfaces among them.

Thailand brokered reconciliation among Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia over certain disputes.

The moment then arrived when the five nations, including Singapore, realised that, without regional co-operation, the future of the region would remain uncertain.

Tedious negotiations led to the signing of the Bangkok Declaration by the foreign ministers of the five nations.

Over the last half a century, Asean has skilfully managed what one calls "sports-shirt diplomacy" to strengthen solidarity, deepen co-operation and expand its wings. They overcame challenges in raging waves during decades in the bipolar Cold War era.

The end of the Cold War in the early 1990s offered them the alluring opportunity to realise the objective written down in its founding document, the Bangkok Declaration, to make it open for participation to all countries in the South-East Asian region subscribing to the aims, principles and purposes of Asean, now becoming 10.

Their hospitality spirit has treated outside rough powers well, and often even tamed them, politely ushering them one after another to become "dialogue partners". Asean has exhibited brilliant and crafty diplomacy.

Half a century has passed. At the end of 2015, Asean members are set to celebrate the formation of one community. The market potential is remarkably large, as their aggregated population exceeds that of the European Union or of North American Free Trade Agreement.

Asean's total Gross Domestic Product tripled over the last 10 years. Its trade has reached 7% of world trade.

Further, this community is ready to proclaim determination to strengthen political and security co-operation in this region of critical geostrategic importance.

As the Ambassador of Japan in Malaysia, I could not find anything more delightful than this real advancement of Asean.

Much more so for my home nation, continuously rendering support with sincerity for its

Comment

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Over the last half a century, Asean has skilfully managed what one calls 'sports-shirt diplomacy' to strengthen solidarity, deepen co-operation and expand its wings.

formation, for its economic foundation and for its political stability for many years since its inception till to date, and even days before its formation.

During Japan's 15 years' economic stagnation, it stepped down to Asean's third biggest trade partner, and the second largest investor into Asean. Nonetheless, now with our economy resuming steam, trade and investment links appear to thrive yet again.

From 1980 to 2012, Asean has received our official development aid, amounting to US\$216bil (RM771.7bil), the biggest (22.5%) among its recipients.

It is our pleasure to see most states in South-East Asia stand on their own feet economically as well.

This year is designated in Asean as the year to formulate a community.

There appear to be three challenges: On the economic front, Asean integration now faces the question of how to narrow income gaps among the members, when and whether slower growing countries could agree on the same level of liberalisation with faster growing countries, and when and whether faster growing nations could accept liberalised inflows of cheap workforce from slower growth countries.

On the political arena, to what degree and when could countries in this region reduce self-imposed restrictions on the application of democratic rules at the sacrifice of internal stability risks and intervention risks from outside?

On the security field, to what extent could Asean countries trust each other to lower threat perception with one another, and how much can members of Asean be prepared to collectively face threats from outside the association?

An even greater challenge to Asean seems to be whether Asean could expand its horizon to create a broader regional co-operation.

While Asean fears being dominated, Asean finds its needs and interests to be connected with outside powers. This is a dilemma for Asean.

Heavy is the mission entrusted upon its Chair, Malaysia, this year. Expectations of Malaysia are also high. Japan renders its fullest support.

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