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ASEAN'S FUTURE IDENTITY: IMAGINED OR IMITATION COMMUNITY?

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The ASEAN Summit in Singapore this month has been preceded by an unprecedented tussle for the new identity of the regional grouping. Will the Asian Way prevail, or will Western norms and values be dominant? Or will there be a third way forward?

FIVE YEARS AGO, two Western authors wrote a stinging journal article on ASEAN which they dismissed as an “imitation community”. The idea of an imitation community was borrowed and expanded from the concept of “imitation states” coined by the British political philosopher, Michael Oakeshott.

Imitation states are new or young states struggling to overcome their weaknesses, including a sense of insecurity. They form regional groups for strength in numbers. But their sense of insecurity produce “regional institutions that are essentially rhetorical shells that give form but no substance to domestic and international arrangements”. ASEAN, they argue, is a classic imitation community. “That, sad to say, is the case with the much-vaunted Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a case study of what we might term an ‘imitation community’,” say David Martin Jones and Michael L.R. Smith in their article in *Orbis* entitled, “ASEAN’s Imitation Community”.

It should not be a surprise if such a view enjoys some currency, especially among scholars critical of ASEAN in the wake of the Asian financial crisis of 1997. There are also many Aseanists who would dismiss the Jones-Smith view as sweepingly extreme. I belong to those who take the middle ground – people who would not dispute the faults within ASEAN, but would not be so dismissive of it either. ASEAN is not a perfect organisation. Indeed, it has its flaws, such as its fragile cohesion. But ASEAN is certainly not an imitation community, if, by imitation is implied the blind and spineless parroting of what others do in international diplomacy -- certainly not after 40 years.

Strength in insecurity?

Yet, while ASEAN is not an imitation community, it does possess some attributes of an insecure organisation. Non-interference is a cherished principle partly because members still harbour latent distrust, if not fear, of each other despite the years of nurtured camaraderie. There is also the fear of being sucked into the power play of the major powers, the end of the Cold War notwithstanding. Strangely, however, precisely because of this sense of insecurity, ASEAN has driven itself, after four decades, into a position of surprising strength. Believe it or not, ASEAN is today, in spite of its inherent fragility, a major player on the world stage, playing a role that has so far not been equalled by other similar groupings.

Fifty years from now, when historians look back at the beginnings of the Asian Century, they will find the unmistakable handiwork of ASEAN in its rise. It is no mean feat to be able to influence and shape the political, economic and security architectures emerging in the Asia Pacific. It is no small achievement for six, and then ten small and medium-sized states, to have the collective will and skill to initiate major strategic moves to secure peace and stability, and to rally the major powers to their turf.

Regional powers look to ASEAN's regular summits as a convenient platform to sort out their differences – which these powers would otherwise not deal with on their own. It is from this position of cumulative influence that ASEAN is beginning to deal with all its inherent weaknesses that the Jones-Smith school of thought have correctly fingered. Dare we say that this month, when ASEAN convenes its 13th summit in Singapore, the leaders will usher in the seismic shift towards a new ASEAN – an ASEAN of the 21st century? Or will the Association be held back by old habits?

Glimpses of the New ASEAN

To be sure, there is still a lack of clarity over what the future ASEAN would look like. But some outlines are emerging. The imagined community of the new ASEAN will not be an imitation community. It is a cohesive region that is united in diversity, developed and open, cosmopolitan and global, politically tolerant and respectful of human rights, with the citizens of ASEAN enjoying their civil liberties amidst peace and stability. The embodiment of the new ASEAN is the ASEAN Charter, which the leaders hope will embody the group's new rules and norms. But while the hardware of the new ASEAN – the institutions and the processes – are easier to define and construct, the software is more elusive.

This software has to do with ASEAN's values, ideology and political culture. I suspect that the new ASEAN will struggle with its own soul before it successfully transits from the present to its future identity. Indeed, the run-up to the 13th summit is already showing signs of this inner struggle. It is a struggle between the “old ASEAN” that is conservative, cautious and always politically correct, to the new ASEAN that is more vocal, more dynamic and more participative in each other's affairs. In other words an ASEAN that is also more democratic -- or intrusive. This inner struggle was triggered prematurely by the recent crisis in Myanmar. This crisis tests not just Myanmar as a nation-state but also the moral instincts of ASEAN as a regional association.

Myanmar forced the new ASEAN to come to the fore when regional leaders broke their usual reticence to express revulsion over the junta's violent crackdown on the Saffron Revolution. By ASEAN's standard of decorum, this was unprecedented. But note how as soon as it was praised by the Western-led international community for this unusual display of moral courage, ASEAN balked at calls to suspend or sack its fellow member from the regional club. ASEAN's fledgling aspiration for a new political identity was immediately held back by its inherent instinct to check the limits of intervention.

Struggling for the new soul of ASEAN

What we are seeing in action now, even as ASEAN prepares for its summit, is actually a clash of two sets of norms or values. One is the current ASEAN way of doing things which is very much shaped by the Asian approach or values of organising society and conducting relationships. This is reflected in the centrality of authority, order and collective welfare over individual rights. The other is the set of norms that is influenced more by international, or more precisely Western, values of organising society and relationships, marked by the preference for individual rights, open societies and open

markets.

This new dialectic influencing ASEAN's future continues to be debated by scholars. Barry Desker of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, in a 26 July 2007 inaugural lecture at the University of Sydney, prefers to view this tension between the two sets of values in terms of "alternative philosophical traditions". He refers to the Asian way as the emerging "Beijing Consensus" of Asian values revolving around China, the rising Asian power whose world view is gradually finding its place in the international arena. Contrasting this is the "Washington Consensus" which he uses in a broader sense to highlight the political agenda favoured by Washington in its interactions with developing countries, especially after the Asian financial crisis of 1997.

The new ASEAN is only just emerging. It will take some time before its full identity will blossom in clear and unmistakable form. But the process of change is already palpable, although it is still hazy which set of values will emerge dominant. My guess is that the future ASEAN identity will be a blend of both – or the Asian Way with Western, or international characteristics.

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