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ASEAN's 40th Anniversary: Great Achievements and New Challenges

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THE Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is holding its annual series of ministerial meetings this week in the Philippines, including the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) on 30 July and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) on 2 August. This year's meetings have particular significance in that they mark the fortieth anniversary of the association. What has ASEAN achieved in four decades, and what challenges are confronting it today?

Achievements in the past 40 Years

Reflecting on the forty years of cooperation, it can be said that ASEAN has achieved a great deal. In August 1967, the foreign ministers of five Southeast Asian countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore – met in Bangkok and established a new association. At the time, their central concern was to mend fences and to build intra-regional political confidence.

In terms of this basic goal, the accomplishment of ASEAN is clear. Over the last four decades, there has been no direct military confrontation between the five countries. It can be said that the situation today would probably have been significantly different if ASEAN had not existed, taking into consideration the seriousness of intra-regional tensions in the 1960s.

More remarkably, ASEAN has achieved more than its founders originally sought. To begin with, the original five members have integrated all the Southeast Asian countries within the framework of ASEAN, thereby constructing a community of ten nations.

Furthermore, ASEAN has attained a status as the center of Asia-Pacific regional security cooperation, involving major powers such as China, the US, Japan and Russia. The association of minor powers in Southeast Asia held the first meeting of the ARF in July 1994, thereby taking the initiative for Asia-Pacific region-wide cooperative security. Since then, the ARF has been the most prominent multilateral security arrangement in the Asia-Pacific region.

In addition, in the economic area also, ASEAN has accomplished quite a track record. The founding document of the association, the 1967 Bangkok Declaration, vaguely stated that ASEAN should accelerate economic growth. Unsurprisingly, during the 1970s and the 1980s, the development of economic cooperation stagnated.

In retrospect, the Singapore Summit in 1992 was the turning point. In this meeting, the leaders decided to seek an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). Today, it is fair to say that such an area has

been virtually established.

New Challenges

The above review of ASEAN cooperation demonstrates that the association has had many achievements. At the same time, however, the challenges which its members are facing today are enormous.

While there are numerous items on the agenda, the most urgent one can easily be singled out: the pursuit of liberalism, the elements of which include the norms of human rights and democracy. The pursuit of liberal agendas has not been an integral part of ASEAN diplomacy, which has traditionally been state-centered, designed to address the interests of governments. The challenge now is to address the interests of the people of Southeast Asia, some of whom have been under political oppression.

The issue of Myanmar constitutes the core of this new challenge. ASEAN has thus far avoided being intrusive. However, the pursuit of liberalism is more urgent than any other agenda item, for two reasons.

The first is a moral one. Although it is not my purpose to make value judgments, it is hard to deny the importance of human rights and democracy. Thus ASEAN should never turn a blind eye to any abuse of human rights in Southeast Asia.

The second reason has to do with ASEAN's international standing. Any political actor would lose its international legitimacy if it downplayed the norms of human rights and democracy, which have increasingly attracted concern in today's global society.

ASEAN today has to be accountable to the international community. During the Cold War era, the relevance of the Southeast Asian association was a function of superpower rivalry, and its members focused only on intra-regional fence-mending. In contrast, ASEAN today is an independent player in the global society, involving major powers but itself leading the cooperative security process in the Asia-Pacific region.

If ASEAN is to maintain its status as the center of Asia-Pacific cooperation, it has no choice but to address issues of human rights and democracy. The participant countries of the ARF process do question the legitimacy of the leader of this process. The 2005 ARF is a case in point: the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice boycotted the meeting, recognizing the possibility that the Southeast Asian countries might allow Myanmar to chair the series of ASEAN meetings in 2006-2007. In the following year, she attended the ARF, but only because ASEAN had made it clear that Myanmar would not chair the meetings.

The pursuit of liberalism, which is important for these two reasons, is one of the key points at issue in the drafting of the ASEAN Charter. The members of the association are now seeking to establish the charter, and debating whether and to what extent the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states should be modified. The amendment of this principle would enable them to implement intrusive measures and to take punitive action against countries which violated liberal norms.

Yet, at the same time, it would be unreasonable to expect a sudden change in ASEAN's diplomatic style. The unity of the association is crucial for all the members, and any intrusive measure may be detrimental to it. ASEAN has become a global player, only because its members have been able to speak with one voice. Since its establishment, this association of minor powers, by acting as one body, has been able to ensure a bigger role for Southeast Asia than any member could have played alone.

With regard to Myanmar, the ASEAN members have been careful not to alienate this country. The worst scenario for them is that Yangon will become China's proxy, speaking on behalf of Beijing. In this respect, ASEAN needs Myanmar as much as Yangon needs the Southeast Asian association.

The drafting process of the Charter has reached its crucial stage. The ASEAN countries are planning to finalize the content of the Charter in their summit meeting in November. Their challenge is to strike a balance between two opposing goals – the enhancement of international legitimacy and the maintenance of the unity of the association.

Implications for Singapore

Singapore will have to make a substantial commitment in the next few months, since it will be at the helm of ASEAN. By the end of this week's AMM in the Philippines, Singapore would have been elected as the Chair of the ASEAN Standing Committee. As Chairman of ASEAN, Singapore will be responsible for holding the next ASEAN Summit in November and the AMM in July/August 2008.

Singapore will have to consider the interests of all the ASEAN members, and skillfully coordinate their policies. Preparation in the domestic arena is under way. Several conferences to explore relevant issues are being held, including one on 31 July and 1 August by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, a graduate school of Nanyang Technological University, named after the first Singaporean foreign minister who attended the inaugural meeting of ASEAN in 1967. This conference is in partnership with a German foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. For Singapore, this year's AMM and the ARF mark the beginning of its leadership in the tough negotiation process, in which a number of different views and interests will have to be coordinated.

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