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NEW DIRECTIONS FOR ASEAN

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As ASEAN foreign ministers prepare for their annual meetings next month in Hanoi, a number of key issues await to be resolved. Can the ministers preserve the ASEAN model of community building amidst the emergence of alternative approaches?

ASEAN will hold its 43rd Foreign Ministers Meeting as well as a series of related meetings of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN+3 Foreign Ministers in Hanoi from 19-23 July. While these meetings are routine, this year's session will provide a significant challenge for ASEAN. The ASEAN model of community building through consensus has come under pressure from alternative approaches.

Regaining ASEAN's initiative

One prominent example is Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's proposal for an Asia-Pacific G8 or G10, which would serve as a concert of major and medium powers in the Asia-Pacific and largely excludes smaller states from decision-making processes in the region. Yet another is former Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama's concept of an East Asian Community which excludes the United States. Both these approaches would undermine ASEAN's efforts to make the regional association the fulcrum of community building in the East Asian region. ASEAN needs to regain the initiative in Hanoi.

The proposal for an ASEAN+8 grouping, which was discussed at the ASEAN Summit in Hanoi in April this year, should be followed up. The US and Russia would join ASEAN as well as China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India in meetings at the summit level whenever the APEC Leaders Meeting is held in an Asian country. ASEAN may want to broaden the criteria so that these meetings could be held even when APEC meets in a non-Asian member economy. This would cement the commitment of participating states to the new process.

APEC – the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum -- has 21 members, of which 7 are ASEAN states. India is the only non-APEC member among the non-ASEAN participants of the proposed ASEAN+8. Thus the grouping would meet at the summit level twice out of every three years.

ASEAN must ensure that this initiative has substance. The proposal for Meetings of Foreign Ministers and Defence Ministers of the grouping is a good start. ASEAN should put forward proposals for a new security agenda which looks at non-traditional security issues like energy security, pandemics, climate change, food security and trans-national crime as well as the more usual themes of confidence building, especially among militaries, and preventive diplomacy.

Confidence building and preventive diplomacy are already the focus of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). However, the ARF is a foreign minister-led network in an environment dominated by summits of national leaders. Its expansion has also resulted in an unwieldy institution. But ASEAN will find it difficult to persuade ARF members - especially those like Bangladesh and Pakistan, which are not part of the other groupings -- to agree to winding up of the ARF. This highlights a problem in the structure of regional institutions. They are likely to continue even when the rationale for their existence has passed!

Risks of New Membership

Another issue which will attract attention is the interest of Papua New Guinea and Timor - Leste in becoming members of ASEAN. They have been participating as observers at these ASEAN annual foreign ministers' meetings. ASEAN may feel increasingly pressured to agree to their accession. But the new members are likely to find the large number of ASEAN meetings beyond the capacity of their bureaucracies to manage. The larger problem for ASEAN is that expansion will dilute ASEAN's coherence and shift ASEAN's attention away from East Asia. It could be argued that the process of ASEAN's expansion in the 1990s, with new members admitted without any conditionality, led to the undermining of its effectiveness. Indeed, members such as Myanmar have been an albatross around ASEAN's neck. The foreign ministers should therefore resist the temptation to expand ASEAN.

It is inevitable that Myanmar will be discussed during the Hanoi meetings. US and European Union participants will probably refer to reports that Myanmar has embarked on a programme to develop nuclear weapons as well as ballistic missile capabilities. These reports are based on evidence provided by a defector and have been widely circulated. However, such reports should be examined closely and viewed with scepticism. The reports originated from exile groups critical of the Myanmar regime and appear to have been timed to coincide with the US attempt to impose UN Security Council sanctions on Iran.

The Myanmar government can be criticised for its attempts to control the electoral process in the country and its efforts to prevent Aung San Suu Kyi from competing in the elections planned later this year. Nevertheless, the claim that it is developing nuclear weapons lacks credibility. Unlike North Korea, whose acquisition of nuclear weapons enables it to target Japan, South Korea and the US offshore presence, Myanmar has good relations with its nearest neighbours China, India and Thailand. None of them has participated in Western efforts to impose sanctions on the country. Myanmar would need to surpass North Korean ballistic missile capabilities to pose even a remote threat to US facilities.

ASEAN has always prided itself on its inclusive character. In the Southeast Asian fashion, it has been reluctant to respond negatively, especially to turn down initiatives from outside the region. The time has come for ASEAN to do so in Hanoi.

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