

# Asean's legal framework 'can be stronger'

## Issue among strategies discussed at NUS forum to take grouping forward

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MORE than 45 years after the birth of Asean, the regional grouping's legal framework remains weak. A list of all the agreements between member countries and their compliance on each of these would be almost impossible to find.

And manpower for the Asean secretariat remains close to around 100 for a region that boasted more than 600 million people and a combined gross domestic

product of US\$2 trillion (S\$2.5 trillion) last year, a figure which exceeded that of India.

The European Union, by contrast, has nearly 10,000 officials working to promote European integration.

These were some of the stark realities presented by speakers at a conference on Asean Integration Through Law, hosted by the National University of Singapore's Centre for International Law here yesterday.

More than 100 Asean officials, experts, diplomats and policymak-

ers attended the forum to discuss the regional grouping's way forward as it seeks, and gains, an expanded role for itself with non-Asean partners which have a more ruled-based way of functioning.

"Law is an integral aspect of Asean integration and community building as the law instils predictability in how Asean member-states interact with each other and with external partners," said Singapore Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam in his inaugural address. "Law has to be the foundation, the pillars, the skeleton to provide the framework for the Asean project to go forward."

Reminding the audience that the raison d'être of the regional

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**INSTILLING PREDICTABILITY**

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grouping was economic integration, Mr Shanmugam said members are gearing up for the creation of the Asean Economic Community by 2015, which will mean tremendous economic opportunity for citizens of this region and “for further unlocking the region's economic potential”.

Asean needs to continue inte-

gration and community building to strengthen its resilience and competitiveness, he added.

“This is key to maintaining Asean centrality in the evolving regional architecture,” he told the audience, adding that “a stronger, unified Asean will remain influential”.

Against this backdrop, the

work of harmonising legal standards and strengthening existing legal frameworks would be important components of Asean integration, he told the audience.

Speakers at the forum noted that while the political will for regional integration existed, there was still resistance to strengthening the grouping's legal framework even though the Asean charter had been approved in 2007.

Calling for a mindset change, delegates said differences between members should be resolved through rules agreed to by members, instead of international arbitration.

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