

BY INVITATION

Asean up to tackling sixth challenge

Asean has withstood trials in the past, but it has to recover from the setback in Phnom Penh and remain united on the SouthChina Sea issue

By TOMMY KOH FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

FOUNDED in August 1967, Asean is 45 years old. At its 45th annual Foreign Ministers' Meeting, held in Phnom Penh in July, Asean suffered a serious setback. For the first time in its history, the ministerial meeting ended without adopting a joint communique.

The ostensible reason for the failure was the inability of the chair, Cambodia, to find a consensus on how to depict the recent intensification of disputes in the South China Sea between the Philippines and Vietnam, on the one hand, and China, on the other hand, in the joint communique.

Below the surface, however, there were two other factors at work. The first is the growing influence of China in the region. The second is the competition between the incumbent superpower, the United States, and China, the rising power. Asean is, therefore, faced with a challenge. Can it recover from the setback in Phnom Penh and remain united? I will call this the sixth challenge. I am confident that Asean will overcome this challenge as it has overcome its five previous challenges. Let us briefly review the record.

Challenge No. 1

Will Asean allow Vietnam to use its superior military power to invade and occupy its weaker but troublesome neighbour, Cambodia?

In 1978, Cambodia was ruled by the odious Khmer Rouge regime. Its rise to power had been supported by Vietnam. They had subsequently parted company and became "brother enemies", to use a phrase from Nayan Chanda.

In December 1978, Vietnam responded to the provocations of the Khmer Rouge regime by invading Cambodia. Vietnam overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime and

replaced it with a new one consisting of the pro-Vietnam faction of the Khmer Rouge, headed by Heng Samrin.

Asean was faced with its first major challenge: whether to acquiesce to Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia or to oppose it.

Although the Khmer Rouge regime was universally hated, Asean decided that Vietnam's invasion and occupation of its weaker neighbour would set an unacceptable precedent.

Asean's objectives were: to persuade Vietnam to withdraw its forces from Cambodia; to prevent the Khmer Rouge from regaining power and to give the people of Cambodia the right to choose their own government in an election organised by the United Nations. From December 1978 until the 1991 Paris Peace Conference, Asean led a successful diplomatic campaign to bring the Cambodian conflict to a peaceful resolution.

Challenge No. 2

Will Asean survive the end of the Cold War?

Asean faced its second major challenge when the Cold War ended. Some scholars had mistakenly perceived the grouping as an American-inspired creature of the Cold War. They predicted that, with the end of the Cold War, Asean would become redundant and fade away. Asean confounded its critics. It welcomed Vietnam into the family. It decided to support the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation.

Sensing that the Asia-Pacific was in need of an inclusive forum to discuss issues of peace and security, Asean founded the Asean Regional Forum. Therefore, instead of fading away with the end of the Cold War, Asean responded creatively to the challenge and thereby gained a new salience.

Challenge No. 3

Will Asean close its doors or welcome the world to South-east Asia?

With the exception of Thailand, all the other members of Asean had once been colonised by the West. It is natural for newly independent countries to be wary of their former colonial masters. One would, therefore, have expected Asean to close its doors and to attempt to keep the major powers from interfering in the region. Contrary to such expectation, the leaders of Asean decided that it was better to give the external powers a stake in the stability and prosperity of the region rather than to keep them out.

Beginning in 1973, Asean established dialogue partnerships with external powers which have an interest in the region. Today, Asean has 10 dialogue partners, namely, Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Russia and the US. Annually, the Asean foreign ministers would invite the ministers of the dialogue partners to meet with them, in an Asean+dialogue partner format.

This has become an annual fixture in the international diplomatic calendar. Asean has also concluded free trade agreements with six dialogue partners, namely, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea. Such arrangements have enhanced economic growth and trade between Asean and its partners.

Challenge No. 4

Will Asean stagnate or re-invent itself?

The leaders of Asean are aware of the danger of complacency. They realise that the grouping must constantly raise its game in order to match the competition. In order to compete more effectively with a rising China and India, Asean decided to broaden and deepen its integration. It has set the ambitious goal of transiting from an association to a community in 2015. The community will comprise three pillars: economic, socio-cultural and political-security.

By 2015, Asean will become a single market and production base of 600 million consumers with a combined gross domestic product of US\$1.8 trillion (S\$2.3 trillion). Asean has also adopted a charter, established two commissions on human rights and embarked on a journey to be a more rules-based organisation.

Challenge No. 5

Will Asean continue to play the role of convenor and chair of regional forums and institutions?

Asean acts as the convenor and chair of the annual Asean Post-Ministerial Conference, the Asean Regional Forum, Asean+3, and the East Asia Summit.

Asean's centrality is, however, constantly under challenge. For example, a few years ago, there was an Australian proposal to replace Asean with a "concert of powers". It is not normal for such leadership to be exercised by a group of 10 not very powerful countries. It is normal for the strong to lead the weak and not for the weak to lead the strong.

In this region, the four major powers - the US, China, Japan and India - do not trust one another. They are quite happy to let Asean take the lead as long as Asean is

united, neutral, pragmatic and prudent. Singapore's Foreign Minister, Mr K. Shanmugam, has however warned that: "Only a united Asean can credibly play a central role in engaging major powers towards the common goal of promoting regional peace, stability and prosperity."

Challenge No. 6

Will Asean recover from the setback in Phnom Penh and remain united on the South China Sea issue and in the new strategic landscape?

I am confident that when our leaders meet in Phnom Penh in November, they will restore Asean's credibility by forging a consensus on the South China Sea. The statement of six principles, brokered by Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa and issued in Phnom Penh on July 20, forms the basis for a common Asean position on the South China Sea.

I am also confident that our leaders will reaffirm Asean's neutrality and independence in the face of growing competition for influence by the US and China. Individual Asean countries can be pro-China, pro-US, pro-Japan or pro-India. However, Asean as a group must be non-aligned. If Asean becomes divided or partisan, its central role in the region's forums and organisations will be in **jeopardy. The future of Asean is, therefore, at stake.**

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