

# The Straits Times

Review - Others

## It's time for Asean to deliver

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908 words  
16 July 2008  
Straits Times  
English  
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ASEAN foreign ministers meet in Singapore shortly. The meeting will mark the end of Singapore's chairmanship of the group, to be followed by Thailand's. But domestic politics in Bangkok recently resulted in the resignation of Thai Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama. Thailand will no doubt have a new foreign minister soon, but snap elections cannot be ruled out.

Such political problems are not isolated to Thailand. They seem endemic to the region. Political in-fighting in Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines is a distraction and may test Asean's stability.

In addition, Indonesia is beginning a long and, in all likelihood, turbulent electioneering period. Financial turmoil in Vietnam and rising prices of oil, rice and other basics across the region are presenting complex and multiple challenges.

Concurrently with these domestic challenges, Asean has upped its regional ambitions. Following on the promise to build an Asean community, the grouping signed an Asean Charter and also a road map for economic integration. The charter, to be ratified by the end of this year, promises a more efficient Asean and also a specific human rights body.

In the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, Asean took on an unprecedented role, attempting to coordinate relief and reconstruction and intercede between the junta and a critical international community.

Such ambitions are welcome. The main Asean economies have done relatively well this year, despite difficulties. The integration of a market of some 500 million people can help further growth. Alongside economic integration, cooperation must be strengthened in other areas as well. A united and credible Asean can help its own peoples and also be an accepted and effective hub in the wider Asian region.

But ambitions beget expectations and run the risk of disappointment. Clear deadlines, like those in the economic integration blueprint, mean that it would become obvious when promises are delayed or not met at all.

Asean has made progress in the last year. But it is not clear whether integration is moving fast enough, given the pace of global events and higher expectations.

It is true that after the Asean foreign ministers meet among themselves, they will welcome representatives from major powers like China, Japan and the United States in the Asean Regional Forum (ARF). The existence of such a forum shows that Asean is still credible.

But that forum exists in part because many are unsure as to who would lead the region. Despite recent improvements, there are still tensions and competition between China and Japan. There are also questions over the future role of the US.

Asean can serve as a hub not because the group is strong. Indeed, it is precisely because Asean is relatively weak and unthreatening that it is acceptable to all. Asean's hub status is something of a default position. The wider initiatives that Asean hosts, such as the ARF and East Asia Summit, are often criticised for showing only slow or no progress.

Asean cannot rest on its laurels. There are competing ideas and frameworks that are emerging. For instance, some are suggesting converting the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear programmes into a permanent framework for East Asia - with the US, China and Japan in the lead, and without Asean's involvement.

Another recent proposal that may eclipse Asean's role has come from Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. His proposal for an Asia-Pacific community would link the giants of the region, including the US. Unlike the ARF or the East Asian Summit, Asean would not play host.

There are questions about these and other proposed regional architectures. But they point nevertheless to recurring doubts about the continuing relevance of Asean.

This does not mean that Asean had been wrong to propose a charter, economic integration and a human rights body. Nor was it misplaced for Asean to be involved with the problems of Myanmar, both in the wake of Cyclone Nargis as well as in the country's human rights situation. On the contrary, such ambitions are necessary to make Asean more credible to its own citizens and relevant to the wider international community. But delivering on promises must now be key.

One litmus test will be ratifying the Asean Charter by the end of this year. Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines are among those who have yet to ratify the charter. Each is a loud and complex democracy; ratification will involve much horse trading among its domestic constituencies.

Another sign will be progress on economic integration. With concerns over inflation and uncertainty about the regional and international economy, protectionist tendencies may surface in efforts to buffer domestic producers.

A third measure will be Asean's efforts in the wake of Cyclone Nargis. Even if the the junta's response has been wanting, Asean, having taken on the issue, must visibly expend every effort to make things better.

Our regional hopes rest on the domestic politics of Asean's member states being able to deliver results for the greater good of the group. Having made promises, Asean must deliver - and soon.

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#### SETTING THE RIGHT PACE

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Document STIMES0020080715e47g000jr