

Asean should sell own success story

Domestic concerns trumping institutional advancements
to detriment of regional cooperation

By Izzah Ibrahim



Discussions about Asean's purpose and utility are often followed by criticism towards the lack of tangible and meaningful results. This was observed in some of the most pressing issues in the region, such as Myanmar, the US-China rivalry and social, political and economic concerns.

Thus, it raises the recurring question as to whether Asean and its relevant bodies can meet these challenges and address them accordingly.

It has been argued that one reason for its ineffectualness lies in the lack of depth and sophistication in regional defence cooperation. The general aversion to broach sensitive issues, whether strategically inclined or otherwise, leaves out a major component necessary for a holistic approach towards addressing threats.

Instead, what has become more apparent is the enduring primacy of domestic interests. While not inherently problematic, such a narrow focus could turn into an obstacle to advance Asean's interests and the pursuit of deeper regional connectivity.

It also casts doubt over the extent of Asean member states' willingness to cooperate over more controversial issues. If these do not align with vested national interests, they can affect the institution's performance in terms of capacity and influence.

Domestic interests' peril

Southeast Asia's general inclination to pursue domestic concerns was reflected in the "The state of Southeast Asia" survey conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.



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The 2023 edition captured the general sentiment that internal issues remained at the forefront. It surmised that post-pandemic socioeconomic impacts, especially unemployment and economic recession, were the highest-rated concerns. Even concerns over geopolitics were seen in the context of its effects on energy and food prices, cost of living and inflation as opposed to its strategic implications.

This was similarly expressed at the 36th Asia-Pacific Roundtable. Speakers at the Southeast Asia session raised concerns that the preoccupation with domestic interests could have wider effects on member states' respective foreign policy and commitment towards institutions, such as Asean.

Drawing on the examples of Thailand, Myanmar and the Philippines, speakers highlighted how domestic priorities have leveraged on political narratives and their outlook towards international partners. They noted how despite many of these domestic concerns spill over, there remains hesitation to acknowledge them as a regional problem.

Such attitudes not only earn rebuke from "outsiders" but also draw criticism internally. The survey reported that the region's own dissatisfaction towards Asean stood at 82.6% with respondents finding the institution "slow and ineffective and thus cannot cope with fluid political and economic developments".

Similar sentiments were expressed about the region becoming increasingly disunited and becoming a space for major-power competition. Such concerns go against the suggestions and encouragement from Asean's partners to incorporate more external engagement as a constructive way forward.

Asean centrality at risk

This interplay of pressing domestic concerns and Asean's institutional limitations further enable the preference for unilateral action as opposed to collective institutional responses.

This could be detrimental to the efforts and aspirations for Asean's centrality and capacity when this inattention can be misconstrued as a lack of faith in its ability to set the norms and agenda for Southeast Asia.

Even those with stronger and active participation have demonstrated such preference. For example, Indonesia's chairmanship of both G20 and Asean has shown the difference in attention, tempered by capacity and interest.



Embracing pragmatism in setting national priorities is the norm for small- to medium-sized countries. However, decision-makers should strive towards synergising their country's growth and development with wider regional goals.

Indonesia concluded its G20 presidency with a declaration condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine and renewing the agenda for global economic cooperation. For the latter, while Indonesia has traditionally played a role in unifying Asean and expressed commitments to strengthen the secretariat's capacity, it failed to advance new norms and principles to maintain Asean's centrality and unity.

While its efforts on deliverables, such as boosting economic growth and buttressing its inclusive Indo-Pacific strategy, should not be discounted, its impact is limited by the insistence on upholding the principles of non-interference and consensus-building.

Share achievements

Embracing pragmatism in setting national priorities is the norm for small- to medium-sized countries. However, decision-makers should strive towards synergising their country's growth and development with wider regional goals. This also naturally implies that such an ambition should be communicated clearly to their citizens as well.

The Asean Masterplan for Connectivity 2025 is a good place to start with connectivity efforts supported through grassroots domestic initiatives across the region to enhance visibility of its efforts.

This focus could also present more opportunities for dialogue partners and other external parties to invigorate collaborative efforts. Anchoring these with Asean-led initiatives can boost the centrality of the institution and support its ability and credibility

to set a regional agenda. It is necessary to communicate beyond just normative values, such as confidence building and cooperation, by presenting the deliverables of the outcomes.

With the way the world has become increasingly interconnected, domestic issues do not always remain neatly contained within their borders. There are regional ramifications that could create destabilising effects for neighbours and threaten Asean's already fragmented institutional basis if they are not addressed collectively and decisively.

The existing top-down approach, while a prescriptive solution, has failed to meet these changes in ways expected by observers. The ability to meet the mounting expectations of the institution does play a significant role in determining the course of regionalism in Southeast Asia. It is in Asean and member states' best interest to sync domestic interests with these loftier goals.



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