

Asean integration a work in progress, not an 'illusion'

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Asean leaders at the 25th Asean Summit in Naypyitaw, Myanmar, on Nov 12, 2014. (From left) Philippine President Benigno Aquino, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, Myanmar President Thein Sein, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, Brunei's Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Laotian Prime Minister Thongsing Thammavong. -- PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

BY K. KESAVAPANY FOR THE STRAITS TIMES S.E.A
VIEW

With his rich store of "insider" knowledge, my friend and colleague, Ambassador Barry Desker, has set out a case for believing that Asean has not achieved much in the way of regional integration in the five decades of its existence ("Asean integration remains an illusion"; last Wednesday). While acknowledging that Asean has been successful in "moulding a greater consciousness among policymakers", Mr Desker fears the worst for the regional grouping in the years ahead.

His main frustration appears to be that Asean has not achieved its self-proclaimed goal of establishing a regional economic community by 2020, brought forward to this year. However, is this the only yardstick to measure Asean's success? If politics is the art of the possible, then Asean policymakers have had to trim their sails in accordance with prevailing conditions, both domestically and regionally.

I believe that, when all is said and done, Asean and its integrative processes are working well, albeit at a speed less than what one would like to see. Apart from the European Union, no other regional grouping has been able to build so much cohesiveness as Asean has done. For that matter, even the EU is having trouble maintaining its cohesion as a union, as seen by the ongoing tiff between member states and Greece. Ukraine is another nettlesome issue, with geopolitical and economic implications.

For me, the real worth and value of Asean is the consciousness that has been developed among ministers, officials and NGO representatives of thinking in regional terms.

Emerging issues such as cross-border environmental issues and illegal trafficking of narcotics can only be addressed through a collective mindset.

Mr Desker writes that "Asean is a diplomatic community with little impact on the lives of most people in its 10 member states". I beg to differ.

The fact that this region has been at peace for over five decades surely is something to be treasured, particularly when members of regional groupings in other parts of Asia cannot even sit down together, let alone discuss to find solutions to the myriad of problems confronting them and their peoples. The ease with which nationals of member countries move across the region (except in the case of Myanmar) is but one example of the socialisation of Asean.

Until it joined Asean, Myanmar was of little economic significance to the region. Since opening up and embracing the values and practices of Asean, it has become a sought-after market and an investment destination. Thousands, if not millions, of Myanmar people have had their lives changed for the better.

Secondly, Asean economic cooperation, which has evolved into a gradual process of economic integration, has made the region attractive for the flow of foreign investments, capital and technology. In the past five decades, under the umbrella of political and social stability provided by Asean, member states have made unprecedented economic and social progress.

Thirdly, the diplomatic capital that Asean has built up over the years is a worthy strategic asset. This has led, among other things, to the US adopting its "pivot" policy - a reflection of its assessment of Asean's continued relevance to regional peace and stability.

China, behaving as all Big Powers do, is beginning to ponder whether it has gone too far in alienating some of the Asean member states over the South China Sea issue, and in the process, causing disquiet in the international community. The newly elected Modi government in India is directing more of its policy measures towards this region, particularly in the maritime arena.

Rather than dismissing Asean integration as an "illusion" and condemning five decades of efforts put into building a community, I would take a more realistic approach and opt for the route that Institute of Southeast Asian Studies researcher Moe Thuzar has suggested, that is bridging the missing links in the integration process. As she puts it, "it is all about changing mindsets and cultivating an outlook that sees the benefit of working regionally ("Asean's missing links need to be bridged"; last Thursday).

On the occasion of the launch of the \$100 million S. Rajaratnam Endowment by Temasek Holdings last year, it was observed in an editorial in *The Straits Times* that investing in promoting regional cooperation and development is the natural impulse of a small state with an open economy, which needs to stay engaged with its neighbours and others farther afield.

Pioneers like Mr S. Rajaratnam nurtured this instinct and laboured to institutionalise linkages. Illusion or not, Asean is here to stay and we, the inheritors of the legacy of Mr Rajaratnam and the other founding fathers of Asean, are duty-bound to make Asean integration a reality, however long it takes.

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