

By Invitation

Asean and the UN: Natural partners

Both have mutually supportive roles in promoting global peace and a rules-based international order



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For The Straits Times

The United Nations and Asean are natural partners.

This is reflected in the charters of both organisations. In the case of the UN, Article 52 of its charter makes references to the role of regional arrangements or agencies in the maintenance of international peace and security. As for Asean, Article 2 (2) (j) of its charter commits Asean and its members to uphold the UN charter.

HISTORY

Asean's relations with the UN began in the early 1970s through the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the development arm of the world body. The UNDP sponsored a two-year study to assist Asean in conceptualising its economic cooperation activities.

As Asean began to make enormous progress in its economic development and rose to become a significant player in the international system, the relationship was transformed. The UN was no longer represented by the UNDP but by its secretary-general.

SUMMITS AND MINISTERIAL MEETINGS

The first Asean-UN Summit was held in 2000 in Bangkok, laying the foundation for a growing network of stronger linkages and diverse areas of cooperation in the years to come.

The second summit was held in 2005 at the UN's headquarters, in New York. It was attended by the UN secretary-general and the heads of the various UN bodies. In 2007, a memorandum of understanding between Asean and the UN was signed in New York, establishing a partnership for cooperation in many fields.

The third Asean-UN Summit was held in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2010. At the meeting, the leaders reaffirmed their commitments to working more closely in addressing issues of common concern such as the global financial crisis, climate change and disaster management.

Asean-UN cooperation was reinforced at their fourth summit in 2011 in Bali, during which the leaders adopted the Joint Declaration of the Comprehensive Partnership between Asean and the UN. Areas of cooperation include maintaining and promoting regional peace, security and prosperity.

Subsequent years saw summits



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being held in Brunei (2013), Naypyitaw in Myanmar (2014) and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2015).

The eighth summit was held in 2016 in Vientiane, Laos. At that meeting the leaders approved a plan of action for the period 2016 to 2020 to implement the comprehensive partnership. Implementation of the plan is well under way, especially following the institutionalisation of the secretariat-to-secretariat mechanism last year.

In addition to the summits, there is an annual meeting between the Asean foreign ministers, the president of the UN General Assembly and the UN secretary-general during the high-level week in New York. This annual meeting is both substantive and symbolic. It reflects the close partnership between Asean and the UN as well as the high comfort level among their leaders.

OBSERVER STATUS AT THE U.N.

In 2006, the UN granted observer status to Asean.

In keeping with Asean's frugal and pragmatic culture, the regional grouping has chosen not to have a permanent observer mission to the UN. However, the Asean New York Committee (ANYC), which comprises the 10 Asean missions to the UN, plays an active role in New York. It meets regularly to discuss issues of common concern, deliver joint statements and engage with its external partners.

Under Singapore's ANYC chairmanship this year, Asean engaged with the leadership of the

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UN as well as with external partners such as the United States and Russia.

A HELPING HAND IN ADVERSITY

A friendship is tested in times of adversity. In 2004, the Indian Ocean tsunami brought death and destruction to Indonesia, Thailand and, to a lesser extent, Malaysia and Myanmar.

The UN secretary-general sprang into action and mobilised the resources of the UN system and the international community to help the affected countries. It was a shining example of cooperation between Asean and the UN.

In 2008, Myanmar was hit by a killer cyclone called Nargis. It killed 140,000 people, destroyed 700,000 homes and devastated the padi fields of the productive Irrawaddy delta. Myanmar faced a major humanitarian crisis.

At first, the Myanmar government was unwilling to open its doors to foreign assistance, fearing that certain Western governments would take advantage of the crisis to interfere and change its regime. Asean assured Myanmar that this would not happen.

In the end, Myanmar agreed to accept international assistance, under the framework of the Asean-Myanmar-UN Tripartite Core Group. The cooperation between Asean and the UN in helping Myanmar to recover from the destruction of Cyclone Nargis is a success story.

U.N. PEACEKEEPING

One of the UN's most important contributions to international peace is the role of UN observers and peacekeepers. The blue beret worn by soldiers and police officers serving under the UN flag is a symbol of peace.

Over the years, Asean members have contributed 4,500 personnel to various UN peacekeeping and observer missions.

The UN has established peacekeeping training centres in several Asean countries. All 10 Asean countries have supported Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' new Action For Peacekeeping initiative.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development consists of 17 goals to promote sustainable development. These goals acknowledge that plans to promote economic growth must also address social needs such as education and health, as well as the need to protect the environment for future generations.

Asean supports the UN's 2030 agenda, which complements the Asean Community Vision 2025. The commonality is the imperative to embrace sustainable development and to save the world from a looming environmental crisis. Thailand, as the next Asean chair, has chosen "Advancing Partnership for Sustainability" as the theme of its chairmanship next year.

PREAH VIHEAR TEMPLE

I want to refer to a case of a threat to international peace and the cooperation between Asean and the Security Council in defusing it.

Fighting between Cambodia and Thailand, along their border in the vicinity of the Preah Vihear temple, had occurred between 2008 and 2011.

When negotiations failed and the fighting continued, Cambodia brought the case to the attention of the UN Security Council. The then chairman of Asean, Indonesia, spoke to the council on what Asean, in general, and Indonesia, in particular, had been doing to stop the fighting and to bring the two parties back to the negotiating table.

In the end, the Security Council decided to outsource the problem

to Asean. Peace was finally restored when Cambodia asked the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to interpret its 1962 judgment, awarding sovereignty over the temple to Cambodia. The ICJ is, incidentally, the judicial arm of the UN system.

ASEAN-U.N. RESOLUTIONS

Since 2003, the UN membership has been adopting by consensus a biennial resolution welcoming cooperation between the UN and Asean. In addition, a one-off resolution commemorating the 50th anniversary of Asean was adopted by the General Assembly last year, the first of its type. These resolutions have been co-sponsored by a large number of countries, which shows the wide support that Asean enjoys at the UN.

MUTUALLY REINFORCING TIES

In April this year, an important meeting was held in Jakarta, between the 10 Asean permanent representatives, called the Committee of Permanent Representatives to Asean or CPR, and the United Nations. The UN was represented by Assistant Secretary-General Miroslav Jenca.

The chairman of CPR, Ambassador Tan Hung Seng of Singapore, said Asean and the UN are both committed to upholding the fundamental principles of sovereign equality, respect for international law and a rules-based international and regional order.

Mr Jenca agreed and emphasised the importance of multilateral institutions like the UN to Asean.

Singapore's Permanent Representative to the UN and the current chair of the ANYC, Ambassador Burhan Gafoor, noted that the relationship between Asean and the UN is a mutually reinforcing one. The UN provides the multilateral rules-based framework that allows regional organisations like Asean to function effectively.

At the same time, Asean contributes to global peace and security by strengthening habits of cooperation and respect for international law at the regional level.

In conclusion, I wish to quote the words of Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan. Speaking to the UN General Assembly this year, Dr Balakrishnan said: "Our work in Asean is rooted in our belief that regional organisations can demonstrate how multilateralism continues to be relevant and beneficial for people all over the world."

Asean and the UN have been, and will continue to be, natural partners.

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