

Asean co-operation

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By

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Since the formation of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) much has been heard about co-operation within the Association in various activities.

This paper will discuss certain aspects of the co-operation within the ASEAN nations and give some suggestions that might become topics for further discussion among journalists.

I must say at the start that ideas or views presented in this paper are superficial ones because of time limitations.

Concept of Co-operation

It is said that a regional co-operation such as this is not a substitute for economic reforms, social changes and political refinements at the national level.

Regional co-operation is only a strategy to aid the progress of development, and unless there is progress at the national level regional co-operation is an ineffective policy measure.

A regional co-operation programme requires the assistance of certain regional institutional mechanisms to make it successful in attaining its objectives.

Industrial Co-operation

The ASEAN industrial complementation (AIC) agreement that was signed during the 14th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in June 1981 is another breakthrough in industrial co-operation among ASEAN nations.

The first industry to benefit under this scheme is the automobile parts manufacturing industry. At a glance it seems that this programme may succeed and this may lead to other schemes as the private sector in ASEAN has shown an increasing interest in regional co-operation.

The Malaysian car project which was expected to produce the first car in the middle of 1985 might jeopardise the long-planned complementation scheme, some industrial analysts have commented.

It is not known whether the Malaysian Government will allow its vehicles to be part of the complementation scheme or not. (The only certainty is that ASEAN will provide a market for Malaysian cars).

Malaysian car assemblers are also concerned about the national car project, because the local market has been their monopoly for years. (There are 11 car assemblers in Malaysia now).

Under the AIC programme, Malaysia has been assigned to produce automobile components include spokes, nipples and drive chains for motor cycles. With the introduction of the national car project the situation might change.

The potential for setting up other projects under the AIC scheme in Malaysia is large, particularly in resource-based industries such as rubber products, food processing, agricultural machinery, plastic products and building materials.

Co-operation in trade and commerce has been established through the ASEAN chamber of commerce and industry (ASEAN-CCI) which has already short-listed various other industries which could be initiated in joint ventures among member countries.

We hope that in the near future these industries will emerge as a source of co-operation among ASEAN nations.

Producer Associations

Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand initiated the establishment of an Association of Tin Producer Countries (ATPC) recently, and the co-operation is vital for ASEANs strength as an economic block in the future.

ASEAN countries, being among the richest regions in natural resources in this part of the world, need to consolidate themselves as producers, especially in deciding the future of commodities such as rubber, tin, timber and others.

Other ASEAN nations can give their support to such producer associations. Through such associations work such as that in research and development on the commodity concerned can be done for the benefit of member countries.

Such associations will also allow the nations to have a common approach for marketing the commodity directly, and will make it possible for the producer countries to get market information easily.

Mass Media

Another field for co-operation among ASEAN countries is the control of all foreign news that is wired through foreign news agencies. Malaysia is now in the process of taking steps to channel all foreign news through our own national news agency - Bernama.

Although this intention to channel the news from outside the country will control information, it does also give an opportunity to the National News Agency to develop its own strength and to market locally.

This measure to control news from outside is also part of the implementation of what is known as the New International Information order. A stop should be put to the monopoly of foreign news agencies.

Security Co-operation

It has been occasionally suggested that, besides its cultural and economic activities, ASEAN should include in its programme a security defence arrangement.

The envisaged need for a regional defence arrangement arises from the fear that there will be a power vacuum in the region, at some time. But from the time defeat of the Americans in Vietnam until now it seems that such a vacuum has not become a reality.

ASEAN nations do not need a defence treaty as such.

Until now it is still uncertain whether the ASEAN nations would really agree to establish a regional defence force, although co-operation between Malaysia and Thailand along their border has been going on for a certain period of time now.

The need for such co-operation would lie, however, not so much in its military strength in war situation, but in the value of the psychological feeling of security and stability in the region which security co-operation would engender.

The feeling of security and stability which ASEAN hopes to realise would be a significant deterrent to potential foreign invasion.

One might suggest that by having a common defence arrangement there would be a reduction in the increasing amount of national defence expenditure.

The presence of the Soviet Union armed forces in the far east has placed the ASEAN nations in an uncertain situation with regard to defence. Certain ASEAN Governments seem to respond to the Japanese defence programme.

The political developments in this part of the world did bring some ASEAN member countries into co-ordination and co-operation among themselves like Malaysia and Indonesia having their "Air Defence" training programme.

The Young People

The ASEAN region is fortunate to have wise leaders who work towards having friendly relations among member nations. But it is not sufficient for the leaders alone to work in this direction; every level of the people, particularly the young people, should be equally motivated.

This important aspect has been neglected by most ASEAN governments.

Much has been said about ASEAN, and many of our people know that Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore have grouped together to form ASEAN. But until now the majority of our people, especially the ordinary people, do not understand the real organisation that ASEAN is supposed to be.

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The exchange of visits between ASEAN leaders, traders, bureaucrats and upper class tourists can contribute little towards explaining what ASEAN is.

If we feel that the association should grow in strength, be understood by the masses, and become part of their aspirations in everyday life, something has to be done about it.

We could speak on subjects such as economic co-operation and other aspects such as education, trade, and people of various professions coming together to discuss and organise projects within the ASEAN context, but without having the support of the people as a whole co-operation could be just temporary and superficial.

Steps should be taken to bring together more people from different sectors of the economy and social strata to understand the spirit of ASEAN co-operation. The emphasis should be on the young people of ASEAN.

We have various regional organisations of different professional people of ASEAN. But for the young I would suggest a regional student organisation. Students are the future generation of our society and can play an important role in ASEAN in time to come.

Such an organisation is needed to promote more effective co-operation between ASEAN students. I feel that such an organisation would assist in the promotion of an ASEAN identity among the young people, besides promoting their own programmes which could be of common benefit to their member.

The association of ASEAN writers and ASEAN journalists are examples of such organisations that bring the young people of ASEAN together.

Conclusion

With the economic systems that exist, the development programmes and financial positions and social systems, joint efforts to accelerate economic development would be among the best strategies available.

ASEAN Nations need regional co-operation, but factors such as political, economic and psychological concerns may provide the fuel for differences and disagreements.

Whatever may be the outcome in development in regionalism, co-operation between the ASEAN Nations should not be considered as an omnipotent potion to solve all economic ills.