

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Title	Scaling the conceptual walls in ASEAN's way
Source	http://www.opinionasia.org/ScalingconceptualwallsinASEANsway
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Publication/Conference	Opinion Asia, 28 Feb 2008
Edition	NA
Document Type	Article
CPI Primary Subject	Foreign Relations and Treaties
CPI Secondary Subject	ASEAN; ;
Geographic Terms	ASEAN;
Abstract	The dilemma common to Southeast Asia's societies today stems from a bias towards nation-state thinking, kept alive by the fact that political discourses are western in nature, and Southeast Asian leaders and intellectuals are largely trained in the west to favour Westphalian ideas.

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Scaling the conceptual walls in ASEAN's way

Kee Beng



No matter how the Asian century unfolds in the coming decades, the long-term challenges facing the countries of Southeast Asia, sandwiched as they are in more ways than one between China and India – the giants that will define this very century – are conceptual in nature.

This requires them to be discussed at length by thinkers from within the region and from without, because by their very nature, they require a painful transcendence beyond the present way of thinking about peaceful regional integration, balanced nation building and the proper representation of democratic concerns.

The first of these regards political thought. The Socio-cultural Pillar in ASEAN integration adopted in the Bali Concord II of October 2003, though attractive to NGOs and people's groups for obvious reasons, tends to confuse the issue at hand. No doubt, people power needs to be brought to bear in an association that has thus far relied on top-down mechanisms. The conceptual base for this pillar, however, is too diffused, too ambitious and too populist in nature.

The questions to be asked, and an integrated answer to which should be sought are of the type: "Why government?"; "For whom do we have governments?". The central issue is not socio-cultural integration but "a sufficiently common understanding of governance within the region". ASEAN needs a regional convergence in political thought.

Issues to discuss in such a context would include; limits of government; accommodation to the changing international scenario and the impact of that on the role of government in the region; income distribution and the dangers of income inequity, and so on and so forth.

Since the most pressing reason for regional integration is economic, not ideological, cultural, or religious, it is the relationship between economic growth and the goals of governance that is key, not economics as such.

As a reminder of the importance of this, we should take hard look at the European Union. The strength of that body lies in the high level of convergence in political thought that it enjoys, not in issues of culture or religion, as is often assumed. The often sloganic use of the word "democracy" has unfortunately been making it difficult for Southeast Asian governments to admit that a convergence in political thought is important if social and cultural integration in other areas is to have a chance. This convergence, in effect, cannot but tend towards democracy, but without saying as much.

In that context, the ASEAN Charter that is now being ratified by the member-states is a big step forward. It can act as a focal point that will generate legalistic habits. The approaching realisation of the ASEAN Economic Area will in addition allow for more legislation that apply in common to the countries involved, which will allow for further convergence in political thought.

The second conceptual transcendence needed in ASEAN integration involves the open promulgation of the region's historical geographical location. The geo-economics of the region – and the worldviews accommodated therein – has traditionally been based on trade routes. How ethnicity, religion and culture were perceived were very much informed by the endless flux of trade and tradesmen. What we call essentialistic views today was absent because the economic life of the region dictated otherwise. With the coming of nation-state thought and structures, however, tolerance in the relationship between faiths and ethnicities quickly gave way to defensiveness at the societal and national levels.

The dilemma common to Southeast Asia's societies today stems from a bias towards nation-state thinking, kept alive by the fact that political discourses are western in nature, and Southeast Asian leaders and intellectuals are largely trained in the west to favour Westphalian ideas. We need to reintroduce trade-route mentality back into social relations in the region. Through that process, the stiff framework now dictating ties between nations, states, business, culture, ethnicity and even socio-political change, will soften.

Regionalism, when established beyond a certain level, holds the potential to swing present political and cultural thinking back towards one that expresses the underlying reality of Southeast Asian cultural and economic conditions.

Inter-ethnic and inter-faith tensions in Southeast Asian countries will improve if we nudge nation-state-based thinking towards a trade-route mentality. In Singapore's case, this tension is illuminatingly expressed through the much-discussed polarity of "nation-state versus global city".

The third transcendence lies in taking the democratic bull by the horns, as it were. The fact of the matter is that representation of popular sentiments in ASEAN will not be forthcoming for a long time to come, given the top-down nature of its development. Attempts at creating regional parliaments and representative bodies will have a hard time succeeding.

What can act as a short cut towards getting the common worries of the Southeast Asian population into the general discussion is, paradoxically enough, through the creation of a permanent Eminent Persons' Group (EPG).

ASEAN cannot exist as a unit that generates culture and thought, and that catches the imagination of its peoples, if there are no Southeast Asian voices to listen to and no Southeast Asian faces to identify with.

For ASEAN's project of integration to gain increasing acceptance and participation at lower social levels, there have to be personalities that common folk can easily identify as strongly anchored Southeast Asian entities, and not merely as ASEAN bureaucrats.

If a group of respected individuals is formed, whose only authority is their moral power and the respect they enjoy in their home societies, and who is beholden to none but their own conscience and their reputation, the chances that their views will represent those of the common man, woman and child in Southeast Asia will be good.

Such a body of grey eminences, supported by think-tanks, people groups, as well as ASEAN's bureaucracy, can provide a forum for a brainstorming envisaging of the region's present and future, without the common people being forgotten.

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