

Asean: the case for cultural heritage



THERE is no doubt the most important grouping which Malaysia belongs to is the Association of South East Asian Nations. Our country's future and destiny lies with Asean. We sink or swim with Asean.

The Asean region is where the "heart, soul and spirit" of Asia is most represented. And Asia is the fastest growing region in the world. It has often been said that the "21st century belongs to Asia".

Asean was formed on Aug 8, 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand at the height of the Cold War when there was a strong desire by these countries for neutrality, peace and social and economic development. Its membership has since expanded to 10 to include Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

The motto of Asean is "One Vision, One Identity, One Community".

Asean is home to about 600 million people. In 2011, the combined GDP of Asean was more than US\$2 trillion, ranking its combined economy as the eighth largest in the world.

The most pressing issue before Asean is its intended economic integration with the Asean Economic Community (AEC) scheduled to roll out on Dec 31, 2015. Malaysia will assume the chairmanship of Asean in 2015 and with it, the huge responsibility and role to play to promote the concept and implementation of the AEC.

There is a general consensus on the need for the long-term economic integration of Asean. It would improve the economic and market efficiency of all the member countries and speed up the socio-economic development of the group as a whole. It would reduce time-wasting bureaucracy, cost of doing business and corruption. It would improve and promote business efficiency and modern methods of production such as the "production block" concept, encourage cost and services sharing and open market access for all member countries. In short, the AEC makes good business sense and there is not a single argument against it. If there is any doubt about the AEC, it is on its would-be implementation.

Much has been achieved on the road map to AEC but it is mostly in the area of regulatory and economic measures. There has been an acknowledgement of scepticism on the readiness of the market and the real problems to be faced by the people on the ground or by businesses as stated in an article

Beyond the Wall:
A new mindset

BY K.K. TAN

by Professor Hidetoshi Nishimura of the Economic Research Institute for Asean and East Asia.

There are three major challenges to the long-term economic integration of Asean.

The first is the disparity in the economic status and growth between the more developed and the less developed Asean members, much like what Europe was initially facing just after the Cold War when many of the less developed and poorer Eastern European countries joined the European Union (EU). There is nothing much that Asean can do about it except to recognise this factor in the implementation of the AEC.

The second challenge to Asean's long-term integration is the territorial, especially maritime claims and disputes between Asean members and other Asian powers such as China and Japan. There are too much vested interests (especially oil and gas resources) at stake here and it also involves the "national pride" of some countries. Therefore, this has become an extremely difficult and complicated issue to resolve, which any claimant is prepared to give in, unless there are tangible trade-offs. The focus now is to prevent wars at all cost in the region (which would affect the implementation of the AEC) and to strive in resolving them using diplomacy, UN channels and the World Court. Perhaps a future integrated Asean would be strong enough collectively to provide a fair and comprehensive solution to this problem.

The third challenge to Asean integration, economic or otherwise, is on promoting multi-cultural integration, especially in the face of extremist, chauvinist and ultra nationalist tendencies in some Asean countries.

Culture (including religions and heritage) can often be a source of conflict among Asean members, in fact for some of its more diverse multi-cultural members, it can also be a source of disunity and conflict within these countries.

Thailand's past claim to the 12th century Angkor Wat, one of the largest cultural monuments ever built and its war with Cambodia from June 2008 to December 2011 over the 11th-century Preah Vihear Temple are examples of how cultural heritage can be a real source of conflict.

There are ultra-nationalist groups in Indonesia alleging that Malaysia has stolen their heritage songs and dances and they are threatening to unleash violence on Malaysia.

Furthermore, when it comes to doing business anywhere in the world, understanding local cultural sensitivities is often a pre-requisite.

Cultural heritage and understanding has been taken for granted for too long since the formation of Asean 46 years ago. It was generally assumed that the cultures of Asean countries were similar to each other. Yes, we are essentially Asians, but we forget the vast cultural diversity of the region especially in religious and ethnic diversity, which should have been a strength if it were promoted proactively and sustainably many years ago.

One of the main reasons why Europe was easier to integrate economically is because its members as a whole are more culturally in sync with each other, especially in the area of religion.

The need for peace and cultural development has been stated in the first three (primary) aims and purposes of Asean in its founding document, the Bangkok Declaration. Peace and cultural understanding are essential components for Asean economic integration and for the economic development of all Asean members as well.

Not enough efforts have been put into promoting cultural understanding to integrate Asean and this has been going on for far too long. But it's better late than never. Asean should focus more on promoting cultural understanding as greater cultural goodwill would certainly help in its economic integration.

The long-term economic sustainability of Asean is very much dependent on the peaceful co-existence, harmony, goodwill and unity of its multi-cultural people with its rich and diverse heritage. The sooner that Asean and its members recognise this as a priority, the better. Promoting multi-cultural heritage and diversity would also help to counter and neutralise extremist and ultra-nationalist tendencies within Asean, whose destructive ideas and actions are out of sync with the Asean spirit of mutual respect and complete acceptance of multi-culturalism and peaceful co-existence.

The writer, the CEO of a think tank and consultancy firm based in Kuala Lumpur, "walks the talk" as he is also involved with some eminent and pro-heritage Malaysians in developing an innovative and unique government-supported Asian Heritage project in Kuala Lumpur to promote tourism, multi-culturalism, heritage and peace in the region. Comments: kktan@the.sundaily.com