Asean: Long road ahead

The speed of European integration has left Asean in the dust. The Southeast Asian grouping had better attend to the basics if it wants to catch up, writes KAMRUL IDRIS.

O F COMPARISON, the European Union, which will be enlarged by 10 new members on May 1, looks like a regional community on life support. Europe has opened borders, no customs or trade barriers, a single currency and something close to an encompassing, continent-wide identity—all of which had begun as pipe dreams amid the rubble of the Second World War.

The EU's total of 25 nations is a magnificent jumble of cultures, languages, societies and economies held together by a gigantic bureaucracy centred in Brussels. Europeans are cradling their heads over a constitution, no less, while Asean officials endlessly mull over the costs and benefits of setup cooperative agreements.

It is not, or ever closer integration in the part of the world that unleashed two of history's most devastating conflicts has acted as a model for Asean. It stands as an object lesson in the art of the possible against the trauma that Southeast Asia, and Asean as a whole, is simply too disparate to fight together. Diversity hasn't been a hindrance in Europe as much, or as little, separate Singapore from Laos as Luxembourg from Europe's most powerful country, Romans, which is on its way to accession, probably in 2007.

A United States of Southeast Asia isn't a delusion. By any estimation, merging a population of half a billion people in 10 contiguous countries makes perfectly good economic sense. Liberalization under the Asean Free Trade Area, even with its concessions to large members and state sectors, could regional trade to jump by more than 25 per cent per year.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad tried to push the logic of a common market by hitching up Japan and South Korea into an East Asia economic group. But he was stymied every turn by Asean's suspicions of the formation of blocs outside its sphere of influence.

So why is Southeast Asia stuck in limbo? There is something to be said for Europe's lure and Asean's torpidity being quite different political animosities. Fears that Asean secretary-general Rodolfo Severino, speaking at a conference in Phuket, was conducting an ad hoc government bill at the golf course. Its voluntary rounds were paced by Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik's belief in "making haste slowly, in order to build a new association for regional cooperation". Good fences made good neighbours. Nearly a decade had passed before Asean held its first summit, in Bali in 1976.

Unlike Europe, the newly sovereign, post-colonial member countries wanted the luxury to look towards without interference, either from each other or any near-sis. Asean was getting wedded to the concept of the nation-state, while Europe was toring to it. And houses, perhaps too well.

Asean suffers no lack of vision, as Rusk testified, but its members are so busy meddling in each other's domestic affairs that its relevance as a multilateral institution has been questioned. The urge for arms-length neutrality has lapsed since the end of the Cold War.

Asean's proponents, however, have never been so embattled by the label "talk shop", the Asean Regional Forum, for example, a high-profile event in the international security calendar. A "bubbling chamber", the Asean format still offers a mechanism to deal with intra-regional matters such as trans-boundary haze, the SARIS and bird flu outbreaks and the Asian financial crisis.

But at the Kuala Lumpur conference, organized by the European Commission, delegates to the Asia-Europe Foundation, attended quickly shifted to focus on EU's definition of itself as a "community of values". "Norms" and "values", if they are ever to mean anything more than noble words on paper, have to be enforced by political ambition. Asean's high ambition cannot yet afford anything like another Brussels, nor, to its shame, emergency help to members in crisis, such as Indonesia's over East Timor.

However, the project is one-off, and specific to a region isolated by internal rivalry that it was to ready compromise on national sovereignty. Asean, said Severino, was an "inter-governmental concept". And, it continues to be, driven by elites, its deliberations confined to a closed circle of ministers and bureaucrats. Europe, on the other hand, is far more democratic. Its leaders evangelized and the people converted to the faith, by referendums if necessary.

That is probably the biggest difference between the two. Without a popular mandate for concrete action, the limits of the Asean informal model are plain to see. "Asean has to be more jointly binding for future credibility," said Severino. "It is good at frameworks but backs away from difficult political steps. As a result, many initiatives stagnate..."

Last October's Declaration of Asean Concord II in Bali established the "a+11" formula, which allows for a pioneer team of members to move ahead, rather like France and Germany did for Europe. Though even the most ardent Europeans admit that the EU is not copying, the Asean Vision 2020, a statement of intent made at the 1997 Kuala Lumpur summit, clearly had something like it in mind.

But how far can theory diverge from the practice that was acknowledged by Bernard Ziegler, head of the EU delegation in Japan. He said that there was more than one model of democracy and cautioned that the depth of regional integration—"as much as is possible from it".

That calls for harder rules in place of the Asean habit of soft observance. Rules require a supranational authority for compliance and dispute settlement, and, more importantly, a sharper focus on what it means to be part of a shared endeavour.

Asean has to evolve from unbounded principles to what Severino called "forms of behaviour", something akin to Europe's definition of itself as a "community of values". "Norms" and "values", if they are ever to mean anything more than noble words on paper, have to be enforced by political ambition. Asean's high ambition cannot yet afford anything like another Brussels, nor, to its shame, emergency help to members in crisis, such as Indonesia's over East Timor.