

## **ASEAN a rising power (Lu Jianren 2006-2-11)**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is getting increasingly assertive as a player in regional and world arenas.

The group, which includes Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Viet Nam, Laos, Burma, Cambodia and Brunei, has focused on economic integration since as the 1990s.

In 2003, it set the goal of forging the "ASEAN Community" by 2020.

Furthermore, ASEAN sponsored the first East Asian Summit at the end of last year, gauging the qualifications of the participating nations with three preconditions: the participants must be ASEAN's dialogue partners, they must have joined the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation in Southeast Asia and they must have substantial relations with ASEAN.

The United States, Russia and the European Union all had to be content sitting on the bench, watching the events unfold.

This signifies that ASEAN is becoming a new power centre in Asia and is projecting its influence across the Asia-Pacific region.

It is conceived that the "Southeast Asian Community" will consist of three pillars - the economic community, the security community and the social and cultural community.

Now the nucleus of the "ASEAN Community" has taken shape. The ASEAN, for example, has introduced bilateral dialogue mechanisms with China, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Japan, Russia, Australia and India.

This, dubbed "10 plus 1," formed the inner circle in ASEAN's "concentric circles" strategic framework. The "10 plus 3" dialogue mechanism, with 10 ASEAN members on the one side and China ROK and Japan on the other, forms the second layer.

The East Asian Summit (10 plus 3 plus Australia, New Zealand and India) forms the outermost layer of this "concentric circles" framework.

This indicates that ASEAN is by no means a passing trend in regional co-operation, but a permanent player.

This is really something for ASEAN, with small- and medium-sized countries - some being the poorest ones in the world - joining hands. The only "big" group member is Indonesia.

True, ASEAN has its geographic advantages, sitting astride the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Moreover, the area boasts rich natural resources and low-cost labour forces. Also, Southeast Asia is an area that has huge potential for development.

All of this, plus the organization's deft manoeuvres among the big powers, which of course have conflicting interests enables ASEAN to present itself to the world as a major player.

ASEAN has been successful in terms of reinforcing its own position in the regional and world economic and geo-political arenas.

Southeast Asia, for instance, has become a focal point for the US anti-terror campaign since September 11 terrorist attacks, and the United States would hate to see any other big power play a leading role in the region.

But the traditional hegemonic ways do not work out with the ASEAN. In view of this, Uncle Sam resorts to courting the ASEAN countries and supports it to play a bigger role in the region, steering clear of too much direct involvement.

Japan regards Southeast Asia as its "economic backyard," having invested heavily in the region.

As a result, Japan has been generously pumping economic aid into the region, in hopes of augmenting its political capital.

Russia, with its strength declining after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, closed its military bases in Viet Nam. But it soon came back to the region as an arms seller.

India is a newcomer on the Southeast Asia scene but is getting itself actively involved in the regional affairs. It joined the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation in Southeast Asia, signed a free-trade pact with ASEAN countries and therefore sailed smoothly into the venue of the East Asian Summit.

In the case of China, Southeast Asia is a vitally important periphery area. There would be no security for China's southern parts in the absence of peace and stability in Southeast Asia.

It is also important to let the ASEAN play a major role in regional affairs and China has been supporting the association to do so.

ASEAN counted on China's support to put forth the East Asia co-operation initiative, introduce "10 plus 3" dialogue mechanism and sponsor the East Asian Summit.

China's encouragement is returned by ASEAN's trust. The country, therefore, was among the first batch of countries to join the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation in Southeast Asia and was the first non-ASEAN country to sign free-trade accord with the organization.

ASEAN is very clear about its disadvantage of being mostly made up of small and weak nations. But the disadvantage can be turned into an advantage: Small and weak countries pose no threat to big powers.

It is therefore wise to manoeuvre astutely among the big powers to create a much roomier living space, instead of relying too heavily on a certain giant.

All this shows that the ASEAN has a good mastery of the tactics of "balancing one big power against the other." It is the manoeuvring deftness that has catapulted the ASEAN into the position as an important player.

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