

EU's lessons for Asean

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THE difficulties in organising regional responses to massive natural disasters and transboundary challenges have led many to question the usefulness of Asean. But very few are knowledgeable about how Asean was developed over the past 40 years.

Comparisons have been made between Asean and the European Union (EU), usually in an unenlightened way.

Asean, it is assumed, should be like the EU, or even a mini-United Nations. Hardly any attempt is made to understand the dynamics underpinning Asean cooperation, compared with European integration.

Mr Jorgen Orstrom Moller's *European Integration: Sharing Of Experiences*, just published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, is thus a timely guide.

Mr Moller provides a detailed picture of how the EU operates, its 'grand designs' and 'mechanics', and its significance within the context of international relations.

The key to European integration is political will. Without this essential ingredient, diplomacy and the availability of resources would not have sufficed to actualise Europe's lofty goals.

Propitious circumstances were, of course, important, but translating them into positive results was not just a matter of luck. The political will of courageous politicians from different nation-states was crucial.

In a remarkable downloading of the knowledge he had accumulated over 40 years in the Danish diplomatic service - 26 of which were spent on European integration - Mr Moller takes the reader through the EU's rules-based regime, institution building and mind-shaping.

His basic point is that politics drove European integration, but economics kept it going - and this required mutual trust among member states. That trust derived from Europe's devotion to institution-building and the rule of law.

In this respect, the European experience is exceptional and not easily replicated elsewhere. Mr Moller alludes to this. Despite some concessions, the EU is a one-size-fits-all framework. In defined areas, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Court of Justice can weigh in on the domestic systems of member states without exception.

There have been difficult moments in establishing the supra-national mindset, and it is only the demonstrated positive effect of pooling sovereignty that has kept centrifugal forces in check.

Integration has not been without cost. Many of the EU's supra-national measures are counter-intuitive, and they have been costly to implement. Is the EU model sustainable, especially with the inclusion of former Soviet-bloc countries - and perhaps of Russia itself some day?

The requirements of EU membership mean that the latest entrants have met the conditions of admission and should be sharing similar values and visions. Yet, the latent differences cannot be underestimated, and the true cost of keeping all of them in the so-called 'Project Europe' may not have manifested itself yet.

The truth is the EU model is expensive. Its integration programmes and subsidies are costly. The EU has generated income from measures such as a fixed percentage of value-added tax and Customs duties. It is doubtful other regional entities can do the same.

Asean's approach is to build institution only when other arrangements have been exhausted. This is not only because of the financial costs involved. Asean's intuition is to let the rule of man take precedence and to proceed to a rules-based regime step by step, at a pace comfortable to all member countries. An overriding rules-based regime, wherein the South-east Asian tradition of consensus decision-making is devalued prematurely, cannot be instituted unless the political will to do so is there.

Indeed, as Mr Moller points out, the Europeans themselves have not abandoned consensus decision making, even though they have adopted qualified majority voting on more and more issues.

With its recently adopted Charter, the rules-based paradigm is being delivered in Asean, but it will take several more years for it to be ingrained.

Asean's early development was unique. Uncertainty and confrontation characterised the region even as the grouping was being nurtured. Mutual suspicions, unsettled border demarcations and many other colonial

legacies had to be dealt with. Nationalism and pseudo-nationalist attributes caused serious difficulties. Many people perished in wars and guerilla insurgencies. The agenda of regional governments was dominated by moves and counter-moves to ensure sovereignty and national survival.

In contrast, in Europe during the same period, nationalism and its portents were being minimised.

Asean is now in a different era. South-east Asia has been transformed. Globalisation and the emergence of two giant Asian economies - China and India - have made Asean increasingly uncompetitive. Staying relevant would require integrating the diverse economies of the region.

This means looking at the EU for useful lessons. Mr Moller's book will provide Asean's policymakers and educated citizens with useful inputs as to how they might take Asean to another level.

It is important to bear in mind that Europeans took 50 years to reach their present coherence in responding to the woes of man and nature.

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