Asean’s quiet resilience

Its culture of accommodation and pragmatism has proven to be a source of strength in a year marked by growing United States-China tensions.

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Asean should have begun to crack and fall apart from the strain of the rising geopolitical rivalries in Asia between the United States and China, if what critics say about its fragility were true.

But Asean steadily marched through another difficult and challenging year and quietly delivered many positive results that will improve the well-being of its 650 million people.

Most importantly, there were no wars or conflicts. Indeed, not even serious political tensions. Asean did not experience any aerial battles like the ones between India and Pakistan in February or a major military assault like the drone attack on the Saudi Arabian oil installations that took 5 percent of global oil supplies.

Asean consistently and quietly delivers peace to one of the most Balkanised regions in the world. Yet, no one notices.

Asean economies continue to grow moderately but steadily. A few years ago, Western media reported with great fanfare that India had surpassed China as the fastest-growing major economy in the world. There will be no such fanfare when the results show that Asean grew faster than India this year.

Nor are many people aware that Asean is already the fifth-largest economy in the world with a combined gross domestic product of US$3 trillion (S$4 trillion).

More remarkably, the understated and quiet leadership of Asean managed to pull off one of the biggest coups in recent economic history by announcing the completion of negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world’s largest free trade area. RCEP’s 15 member states make up 30 percent of the world’s population and 29 percent of its GDP.

Singapore’s Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing observed that “RCEP is more than just an economic agreement. It is a strategic signal to the rest of the world that this part of Asia continues to believe in upholding a global, multilateral trading order”.

India’s last-minute decision not to join could have stalled and broken down the RCEP process and could have been as distracting as Brexit. Instead, the wisdom of the “Asean minus X” formula shone through.

Asean has always believed that perfection is the enemy of the good. If not all participants can join, the rest will proceed first. India will come to realise that its “Look East” and “Act East” policies will mean nothing if it does not join RCEP.

The completion of RCEP was particularly critical against the backdrop of the escalating trade war and the larger geopolitical contest between the United States and China. Asean could have been paralysed or broken apart by this rivalry, owing to a struggle between its more pro-China members and the more pro-American members.

Yet, the culture of accommodation and pragmatism imprinted on Asean.

Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong spoke for many in the region when he said at the Shangri-La Dialogue on May 31 that the region should not be divided by geopolitical contest. He insisted that regional cooperation initiatives proposed by other countries “should strengthen existing cooperation arrangements centred on Asean. They should not undermine them, create rival blocs, deepen fault lines or force countries to take sides. They should help bring countries together, rather than split them apart”.

Significantly, Asean launched its own Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific because of Fears that the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy could divide the region.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo argued for the need to cooperate with China within Asean’s Indo-Pacific framework and to build connectivity and infrastructure between Asean and China.

In recent years, the South China Sea issue has been divisive. Against this backdrop, it was significant that on July 31, China revealed that Asean and China had completed the first reading of the single draft negotiating text for a Code of Conduct ahead of schedule. This was commended at the Asean-China Summit in Bangkok on Nov 3.

While Beijing continued its steady and constant engagement with Asean, Washington remained strategically distracted. US President Donald Trump did not attend the Asean-US Summit in Bangkok on Nov 4. Neither did US Vice-President Mike Pence nor US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Only the US National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien turned up. As a result, only three of the 10 Asean leaders — Thailand, Vietnam and Laos — attended the meeting. Washington was miffed, but as Ms Hoang Thi Ha (an ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute political analyst) observed, the US missing meetings with Asean was a classic case of deja vu for Asia. Each such absence is a geopolitical gift to China.

It would be a mistake, however, to believe that Asean will drift inexorably into a Chinese sphere of influence. Over the years, Asean has accumulated quiet geopolitical wisdom. It will keep all windows open and also take advantage of unexpected geopolitical opportunities.

In recent years, South Korea has been in a rough spot. It has experienced difficult relations with China over the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence. Japan over “comfort women” and the US over base funding. It made sense for Asean to reach out to South Korea — leading to a tremendously successful summit between Asean and South Korea on Nov 26 in Busan.

The wisdom and resilience that Asean revealed again this year took years to develop. The Indonesian culture of musyawarah (consultation) and mufakat (consensus) has become embedded into the DNA of Asean and has proven to be a major asset. Perhaps the time has come for other regions to come and study the Asean “miracle”. Emulating Asean may be a productive approach for other regions to adopt.

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