

In the first of a four-part series on South-east Asia, Ng Wei Kai talks to ambassador and former Asean secretary-general Ong Keng Yong about how the organisation has evolved, and Singapore's future in it.

Asean is more professional now; the next step is to enforce its decisions

There is still no punitive option for errant members, says ex-Asean chief

Ng Wei Kai

The next frontier for Asean is to find a way for the organisation to enforce its decisions on errant members, said its former secretary-general, Ambassador Ong Keng Yong.

Mr Ong, who is currently executive deputy chairman at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), was Asean's secretary-general from 2003 to 2007.

He told The Straits Times the organisation has become more professional and sophisticated since it was formed in 1967 as a platform for political and economic cooperation.

But questions remain on how it will tackle and enforce its decisions on thorny issues such as the crisis in Myanmar, he said.

Asean now comprises 10 member countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Home to more than 650 million people, the 10 Asean countries' combined gross domestic product is US\$3.6 trillion (S\$4.8 trillion). This figure is projected to reach US\$4.5 trillion by 2030, setting the bloc on track to become the fourth-largest economy in the world.

ST spoke to Mr Ong about what is next for Asean, and what has changed since his term as its chief administrative officer.

Q How has Asean changed over the last 20 years?

A The Asean secretariat (which is headquartered in Jakarta) has become more professional, in the sense that we have more experts and expertise.

Because of two decades of bureaucratisation, there is an increased ability to make decisions based on precedents.

We are now not in any way inferior to any of the United Nations expert organisations or any other international bodies on technical issues.

At the same time, this is a bit more time-consuming. You cannot just take an idea that you formed last night and tomorrow morning



About ambassador Ong Keng Yong

Ambassador Ong Keng Yong is executive deputy chairman of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University.

Mr Ong served as the 11th secretary-general of Asean, based in Jakarta, Indonesia, for five years from January 2003.

He continues to hold the position of ambassador-at-large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is Singapore's non-resident ambassador to Iran.

He was high commissioner of Singapore to Malaysia from 2011 to 2014, and high commissioner of Singapore to India and concurrently Singapore's ambassador to Nepal from 1996 to 1998.

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Singaporeans, most of whom are not involved in high-level foreign affairs?

A The basic dilemma for Singaporeans and citizens of all member states is that we have not reached a level where there is an understanding of the level of obligation we have to Asean.

As members of Asean, we have dual identities – for us, we are Singaporeans first, but we are secondarily Asean citizens.

We have not reached a point in any member state where individuals are prepared to say: "In the short run we may not benefit, but this decision is good for Asean, so in the long run we will benefit."

We have yet to reach this level of commitment, where we would stand together against any large power.

For example, in the case of digital crime and scams, we have not managed to tackle the problem consistently as a region.

This is one opportunity, in tackling digital scams and crime, for us to develop some level of Asean identity. Can we all say we have come up with a strong, common set of rules?

What we can see from the European Union is that other than economic cooperation, people are now asking if there is a better way to secure our futures.

The next level of work is to look at how we can increase the commitment of each citizen by increasing the notion of being an Asean citizen and having Asean as a safeguard against bullying by big countries or what have you.

Q You have mentioned how Asean and its constituent countries are more sophisticated now. How can Singapore continue to contribute to the region?

A We are quite an open society, everyone can come and see what we are doing. We may be able to demonstrate some innovation, especially for the management of cities. Asean has many many cities.

Asean, as a whole, can be a platform for us to show our innovation and ingenuity, and survival instincts as a small island.

It can also be a platform to see how we can fix problems on a larger scale. If we can prove ourselves to be useful to the countries around us, I think our own standing and our own security will improve.

We have to be useful to others. The basic point, which founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew said, is that if you are not useful, then who cares about you as a small state?

If the rest of South-east Asia gives Singapore the benefit of the doubt, we can survive for many, many centuries.

If our neighbours see Singapore as an example of what is possible or as a way to experiment with their own respective challenges, then we have a role.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew used to say Singapore is an oasis. In contemporary times, Singapore is still an oasis – of ideas.

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put it to an Asean meeting and get approval.

In the old days, you could get away with that.

Now you have to have specific timelines, look at pros and cons, and address dissenting people's concerns.

There are also fewer executive decisions made by prime ministers or foreign ministers; more often now people have to go back to their own Parliament to get "blessings".

Some have complained this has made Asean's decision-making slower.

Q What does this mean for the organisation?

A I personally feel this is better. In the old days, if somebody said yes, everybody would follow.

Now we all have to do our homework and explain why proposals should be accepted. There is a lot more of what I call "considered diplomacy".

There is more detailed analysis of pros and cons of proposals.

We have to be more prepared. Everything that we do regarding Asean we have to think about in advance.

As a result of these kinds of requirements, we see the need for our political leaders to be more in

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contact with their counterparts in Asean member states in order to get work done.

Leaders are now more aware that they are required to take decisive moves in forums like the Asean

Summit (held twice a year).

The most recent manifestation of this was when we had the meeting on what to do with Myanmar four years back, which resulted in the Five-Point Consensus about

resolving the civil unrest.

This is the most structured and forward-looking document on the crisis from anyone.

The analysis from some is that we are stuck (as civil unrest in Myanmar is no closer to resolution). But what else is there?

This is at least an agreement which we have reached, which cannot be untangled or dropped once decided upon.

For me, there is a certain consistency, and the operational principles are good ones.

They don't allow what used to happen in the old days, which is that if you are not the chairman, you don't care about what happens in Asean.

But while Asean is now more robust and decisive, whether each member state plays its role is still in question.

We have not reached a point where we can make a decision on how to punish errant parties.

This is the next step.

There is still no punitive option for countries which do not follow requirements set by Asean.

How do we enforce a consensus decision in Asean? That is the next challenge.

Q What does this mean for