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Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak and his wife, Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, at the Asean@50 Achievement Awards in Kuala Lumpur last Friday. That Asean has survived to mark its 50th anniversary is no mean feat.

FULCRUM

ASEAN'S LONGEVITY SECRET

The regional bloc respects members' diversity, operates only by consensus

THE pomp and circumstance as foreign ministers from the region and around the globe descend on Manila over the last weekend and into this week for the annual series of meetings convened by Asean must be reassuring to those worried that the shifting geopolitical sands will sweep the regional grouping off its treasured "centrality".

That Asean has even survived to mark its 50th anniversary this year is itself no mean feat. When the first gathering took place in Bangkok in 1967, only five ministers from the original Asean Five (Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines) gathered. Today, all 10 countries of the region are in the grouping.

It is easy for outsiders and even many in the grouping to deride and even ridicule Asean; in particular, over the way it operates only by group consensus. But, it is difficult to imagine how the grouping could have lasted and even thrived all these years if not

for that very operating principle. National sovereignty may appear passé, especially in the eyes of sophisticated liberals in the West, and seem incongruent in the globalisation era, but it is back with some vengeance even in the developed West with the Brexit vote that tore such a huge hole through the European Union (EU) and the election of Donald Trump in the United States.

Some will argue that forgoing some national sovereignty by surrendering bits of it to such supranational organisations as Asean or the EU will best preserve the interests of smaller and more vulnerable nation-states against the predations of bigger states and superpowers.

But, Brexit shows that we should perhaps be even more worried about how the bigger countries in any grouping may resist ever greater regional integration. Goodwill lasts only so long as solidarity holds. And, both may be equally threatened if national electorates in individual members of any grouping of nations are ignored or their views not sufficiently factored into regional decision-making processes.

So, what then is the secret of Asean's seemingly remarkable longevity? My best guess is that the regional grouping respects individual members in their amazing diversity — from such

free-wheeling democracies as the Philippines and Indonesia to one-party states, such as Vietnam and Laos, from an economy just emerging into modernity such as Myanmar's to the sophistication of today's Singapore and almost everything else in between.

This, of course, is the way it has always been for Asean and it looks as if the grouping and its plodding methods might just be the winning formula, after all. If there is one unifying imperative that bonds Asean members, it must be the shared sense of vulnerability about being located where the cross-currents of ideas and the interplay of great power interests often intersect.

Asean countries benefit immeasurably from being the fulcrum of such interacting forces, but are fully aware of inherent risks attached to it as well. That was perhaps best exemplified by the toxic effects felt by many of the most open economies of the region during the Asian financial crisis two decades ago.

Today, there are heightened regional worries anew as China, the rising global power, seems locked in competition with the US for the affections (if nothing else) of countries surrounding the South China Sea, a common body of water that affects almost all of Asean to varying degrees.

The differing and even diver-

gent national interests of Asean member countries are again on full display as their foreign ministers grapple with the intricacies of arriving at a consensus on such a prickly matter, in Manila.

But as the wisecrack goes, rather jaw-jaw than war-war, no matter how taxing back-room talks can be. And for that, there is simply no alternative forum to Asean and its related gatherings for the larger East Asian region.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has made two stops in Manila, this month and last. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has kept with the tradition of his recent predecessors by his maiden presence at an Asean meeting.

Even the foreign ministers of the two Koreas were at least rubbing shoulders in Manila, if not exactly sitting down bilaterally to discuss North Korea's missile tests.

A perfect governing formula has yet to be found within nations and among nations. But, as glasses are raised for Asean at 50, it may be forgiven if it thinks it will get the last laugh in a post-globalising world.

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