



With experience comes resilience

STABILITY: Thirty years in the diplomatic service have enabled former Indonesian foreign minister Dr Raden Mohammad Marty Muliana Natalegawa to understand the workings of Asean. Quality of consensus is far better than speed, he argues. In Kuala Lumpur to attend the World Capital Markets Symposium, Dr Marty tells *Rupa Damodaran* that there is no shortcut to success

Question: You played an active role in promoting the idea of an Asean community, which was formally endorsed by Asean through the Bali Concord II. We are now at the cusp of announcing the Asean Economic Community (AEC) in Kuala Lumpur in November. How have things shaped up over the years?

Answer: Yes, we are at the cusp of AEC 2015 and it is great to have Malaysia leading us to this important point.

The process of Asean community building has brought a lot of benefits to the region — enhancements to trade, intra-Asean trade and relations with our dialogue partners.

The AEC is not only about the economy, but also has political-security and social-cultural pillars.

I remember when we began on the political-security community pillar, there was a lot of debate on why Asean should develop a capacity or outlook on political issues.

But when you look at different parts of the world where there are tensions and conflicts, Asean has developed a resilience in its political domain.

This is a momentous occasion but

Asean has no time to linger as the immediate challenge is to ensure that the process is seamless and smooth. It is an important date in our history and Asean should be proud of its achievements.

Question: In your years of diplomacy, how has Asean been able to weather diplomatic shocks? The South China Sea dispute and organised sea piracy are among cases in point.

Answer: We can surmount and overcome whatever challenges come our way if we are united. The South China Sea is a litmus test for Asean as there are varying degrees of stake — some are claimant stakes and some are not. But that kind of distinction is academic.

It is about how Asean can provide an umbrella for its member states to look after its interests.

In the past, Indonesia had been proactive and quick to address the tensions between Thailand and Cambodia.

A united Asean is prerequisite for peace in our region. That is how it should be, but my concern is if Asean countries are beginning to think that there is a distinction be-

tween national and regional interests when both should be synergic.

Now that we have financial challenges, I hope we don't resort to looking only inwards, but instead find solutions in integration and through greater sharing and caring.

Question: Do you see a disconnect in the Asean Political Security Community (ASPC)? What approach should be adopted by Asean leaders?

Answer: I don't want to use the word "disconnect". There are different stages of development in all areas of endeavour, and as long as common objectives are shared, we can move in that direction and encourage one another.

For example, compare Myanmar's transformational change from 2011-2012 onwards with that of the Middle East and North Africa's Arab Springs, which everyone was cheering for before it became a precursor of internal, local, national, regional and global conflict.

In Asean, away from the public glare, changes take place in a peaceful way without geopolitical tensions and repercussions.

It is important to continue nur-

turing such an atmosphere in Asean.

Question: Do you think it is time for Asean to change its decision-making process from a consensus type to a more dynamic one to keep pace with the fast evolving changes in the vibrant region, especially if we want the corporate sector's support to make the AEC a success?

Answer: We are thankful the free trade agreements (FTAs) with our regional partners are Asean-initiated, including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, when there are other initiators like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

Asean should not take things slowly. There must be a sense of urgency but at the same time, it should not move at a pace where it cannot deliver on its promise and have its credibility undermined.

We have to be on top of issues. When we become ceremonial, there are too many meetings. Asean needs more rapid response capacity — workmanlike and direct approach — and although there is quiet diplo-

macy, we need a good balance between the two.

Question: In recent months, Indonesia, Asean's largest economy, has been in the limelight for the administration's "protectionist and nationalist" sentiments. Does that not go against the level of commitment towards such a community?

Answer: I wish we can all demonstrate the required commitment to the project which we began a decade ago.

The Indonesian government has stated its continued support for Asean and engagements that are open to business and infrastructure development.

Prior to Asean, the region was divided. Indonesia had helped to bring Asean together and I hope we can continue the tradition.

Leadership in Asean should be earned and not be measured by size. The Indonesian government has given its commitment and will give positive leadership.

On Indonesia not being in the TPP, one of the reasons was the emphasis on Asean — and its centrality in the East Asian summit and RCEP. We

were not comfortable with TPP as we thought it would lead to the fragmentation of Asean. I don't know the current stand of the government on TPP.

Question: How do you perceive the roles of China vis-à-vis the United States in the regional architecture?

Answer: How we deal with the US and China relations will determine whether Asean becomes a passive bystander in the great competition or sets the tone.

Indonesia's concern in the past was for both to thrive in a conducive setting and not in a zero-sum atmosphere.

That was why Indonesia, during the East Asia Summit in KL in 2005, was keen to make sure that Asean remained central and not be driven by China, Japan and South Korea, and added India, Australia and New Zealand to dilute the influence of different countries. Then in 2011, we simultaneously admitted the US and Russia to maintain that equilibrium.

We have been trying to extrapolate the Asean experience from a region of conflict to a region of peace.

Question: A year ago, your name was one of the most popular to remain in the new cabinet. What are your feelings now that you are not in President Joko Widodo's line-up?

Answer: The president has new perspectives about Indonesia's rise.

I have 30 years of experience in government service with five years as foreign minister. Towards the end, I decided to take a break.

I retired from civil service at 51, about nine years earlier than my term. I am happy to have served my country and (not being in the cabinet) is not something I lament.

The success of the government is success for all Indonesians. It has been a fantastic passing of the baton. Democratic Indonesia has been a

beacon of how orderly change can take place.

Question: You have been described as a gifted professional diplomat, helping to shape Indonesia as an international citizen and an active diplomatic player. How do you compare your current role as member of the United Nations High-level Panel on the Global Response to Health Crises with that as a foreign minister of an important economy?

Answer: Foreign policy is in my DNA. I love diplomacy. I love Asean. Ever since I was nine, I have wanted to represent my country.

Now, with a 30-year career behind me, I am serving in a different capacity in UN and others. We must have a sense of our plateau and I felt during the last government that I wanted a break to do other things and devote more time to my family.

Question: Your name was added to the Jardine Cycle & Carriage (C&C) board of directors early this year. Will that mark your foray into the corporate world;

are you making some changes to your career? What else features in your plans?

Answer: Absolutely yes. It is a new chapter in my life. Sitting on a couple of boards gives me new interest and allows me to give advice on what I have learnt.

When it was time to take a break from government service, my worry was whether I had left some stones unturned, such as the risk of failure when there is no Asean consensus. But I fear (more) the risk of not doing anything.

My other passion is classic motor cars. In C&C, it has appeared more like a hobby.

I keep a deliberate low profile as I don't want to be misconstrued of being an armchair critic and trying to second-guess policies.

I am enjoying my retirement quietly in Jakarta after spending many years abroad.

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