

Horst Posdorf: Readjustment of Asia's Centres of Power – Its Consequences for the ASEAN States and Related Reactions

Asia's economic and political power is still growing –in a world which itself is subject to constant change. This development poses special challenges to Germany and Europe. But what exactly is Asia? What countries are we talking about? What opportunities and risks may arise for the Asian countries themselves? And what course will the future development of the region take?

In this context, it pays to take a look at the relations between the ASEAN states and the People's Republic of China, for the latter is of eminent importance to the ASEAN states due to its geographic proximity, its increasing economic and political relevance, and its endeavours to achieve the status of a hegemon.

In August 1967, ASEAN was founded by Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore; later, it expanded to include Brunei, Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. ASEAN sees itself as a multinational organisation without any supranational superstructure, whose main objective is to intensify economic cooperation between the member states and, to an ever larger extent, to secure stability in the region.

Together with China, Japan, and South Korea, the ASEAN states formed the ASEAN +3 in 1997 – a step which was meant to avert and/or help master economic crises. Yet what are the ASEAN states interested in, and what are the interests of China? From the 1990s onwards, the People's Republic aimed at establishing a multipolar world order as well as at solving international crises within multilateral regional organisations and forums. Beijing's wish to expand its own power in East Asia and to contain American influence in the region probably plays a crucial role in this context. Against this background, it is likely that the importance of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as the only multilateral consultation forum so far will increase – by establishing conflict resolution structures in the long run, for example.

In practice, China and the ASEAN states have already arranged for bilateral as well as multilateral cooperations to fight transnational drug trafficking, illegal migration, human trafficking, terrorism, gun running, and money laundering, exactly those forms of crime which greatly threaten political stability and economic development on both sides. What is more, China and the ASEAN states share the same goals when it comes to preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. In addition, their economic cooperation is showing positive results already: Particular importance is accorded to establishing a free trade area between both sides by 2010 and, especially for China and its direct investment policy, to upgrading the region's infrastructure.

Now, what might the future look like? Next to North America and Western Europe, East Asia will probably continue to be the third key region in our globalised world. It will expand its worldwide position in the fields of industry, trade, and services, although it will also experience the consequences of shorter growth cycles as well as disruptive global and regional influences.

Against this background, increasingly closer cooperation between the People's Republic and the ASEAN states will have a positive effect on both sides. The free trade area will ensure China's advantage over Japan and South Korea; all in all, Beijing's economic as well as its political weight is likely to gain strength.

Europeans should not be indifferent towards the cooperation developing between China and the ASEAN states. The East Asian market will certainly become more important in the future,

challenging even North America's long tradition as the world's economic leader.