

ECONOMIES AND THE LURE OF 'EXCLUSIVE CLUBS'

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When J.R. Jayewardene wanted Sri Lanka to join ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) once upon a time during his presidency, he was curtly told by ASEAN potentates, it's not possible. Commentators here in Colombo did not take kindly to the rebuke, and retorted.

Of course the reason for the rejection of Sri Lanka's application at that time could be seen as eminently legitimate. ASEAN took up the simple position that Sri Lanka was not geographically in South East Asia, which was true of course, and incontrovertible except to the willfully purblind.

Saying its all fine and geography should not matter, is like saying Australia should be part of NATO. The country has helped in all of NATO's efforts and has been a close partner, but you cannot be in the Southern Hemisphere and be a member of NATO, while being situated nowhere, at least topographically, near the Atlantic Ocean, so there.

However, what of Sri Lanka's initial aspiration to join ASEAN? It seems now that this was a bridge too far in many ways, because Sri Lanka is not economically anywhere in the same league as ASEAN countries. But that's not true though at all — is it? — considering that Myanmar and Philippines for instance are ASEAN countries.

The main objection to Sri Lanka joining ASEAN at that time besides the geographical incompatibility of course was the fact that Sri Lanka was beginning to punch above its weight. After all, Singapore was a member of ASEAN. But not South Korea though or Taiwan, as far as economic heft goes, though Malaysia was.

Today it seems that joining ASEAN due to those ambitions — of being associated in the same Tiger league with Singapore etc. — was JRJ's absurd daydream. But perhaps the late president wanted us to shine by virtue of association, which was a virtuous idea perhaps, had it not been for the fact that Sri Lanka was absurdly unprepared for it.

Myanmar and Thailand may be the odd countries out in ASEAN today, but almost all other nations are economically relatively well away, even though they are not by any means all Asian Tiger economies like Singapore is.

So how much is geographical association helping economies, and why are some leaders losing their hair over efforts to join one international grouping or another? Turkey for instance always wanted to join the European Union, but much to the disappointment of President Erdogan, the talks failed and the EU is adamant that 'human rights violator' Turkey remains out.

ALLIANCE

But why should Turkey try to get into an organisation that the UK for instance wanted so badly to get out of? Economy, is the answer and that's the one word answer to the question 'why did JR want to get us into ASEAN?' Those who aspire to a certain status within a regionally



Former President J. R. Jayewardene

determined partnership of nations most often hope that economic success within the group's foremost countries would rub off on them and their countries as well.

Of course issues such as free movement of goods and other economically advantageous pluses do matter, but even though Erdogan must be targeting some of those favours when he wants so badly to join the European Union, it is unlikely that JR was thinking of similar fringe-benefits when he applied for ASEAN membership.

Hoping to have some part of a neighbouring country's success rub off on your nation, is not exactly an astute way of getting ahead economically or becoming a force to reckon with, economically speaking. This is very clear looking in the rear-view mirror and sizing up Sri Lanka's then aspiration to join ASEAN, and contrasting that ambition with how we have performed as an economy since then.

Within ASEAN, who knows, even Myanmar's military leadership may blush over the fact that they may have had to put up with Sri Lanka as an ASEAN partner. This year, our economy was not the envy of any nation rich or poor, to put it mildly. When JR Jayewardene wanted to join ASEAN, however, he may have made the bid because he was sure that we couldn't possibly join NATO.

It's not stated merely in jest. Many countries have wanted to join NATO, and JR with his closeness to the USA and UK certainly, would not have minded it had we the geographical qualification and the military chops to join an organisation set up primarily for defence purposes.

But more unlikely individuals as leaders of countries have wanted to join this or that alliance, and failed. For example, Vladimir Putin one

upon a time wanted Russia to join NATO.

DISADVANTAGEOUS

Putin went on record in an interview in 2000, saying that he doesn't rule out the possibility of Russia joining NATO if the organisation treats Russia as an equal partner. Sources within NATO have also let on that the Russian leader expressed some desire to join NATO once upon a time but 'did not want to wait in line', and hoped to be treated as an equal partner right away. But the West wanted Russia to improve on its human rights record and though Putin stated that he doesn't want to think of NATO as the 'enemy', that's exactly how things have turned out over the years.

Joining regional groupings is therefore seen to be based not merely on geographical criteria, but on what's clinically called 'shared values.' ASEAN didn't see shared values with JR Jayewardene even though they may have considered going the length at least if Sri Lanka was smack in the middle of South East Asia, as Myanmar was for instance, or Philippines, or Thailand.

If a country is judged by the friends it keeps, it could be asked why Greece had to go through a meltdown being an EU member, and having those advantages ostensibly that Erdogan craves for, in Turkey today.

Greece, it may be argued, economically went under not despite but because of its use of the Euro, so it's clear that being in a powerful regional grouping or a common-currency alliance is not "all that it's cracked up to be," to use the Americanism.

Not all leaders consider regional groupings in the same manner anyhow, and the way President Trump

regarded NAFTA and the way his predecessors did is, to put it mildly, wildly different.

JINGOISM

NAFTA of course was not a regional grouping but was a trilateral trade agreement between Canada, the US and Mexico. NAFTA later morphed into the USMCA (US, Mexico, Canada Agreement) because President Trump disliked NAFTA and thought it to be disadvantageous to the US. He called it the worst trade deal the US ever signed.

Eventually the USMCA replaced NAFTA, and it appeared that there was not much substantial difference between the two agreements at all. It shows that regional groupings or regional agreements are most of the time not so much about tangible advantages that can be eked out, but about political advantages that can be derived to be used as psychological leverage or cudgels, as the case may be, by various leaders contemplating domestic constituencies.

The ultimate example in this regard is the EU and Brexit of course. Arguably Britain is not gaining anything, but stands to lose as a result of Brexit, but all its leaders including the left-leaning these days, are today pro-Brexit and want to make Brexit work.

This was all of course about regaining British pride and all that type of unalloyed jingoism, but now it has been accepted by all sides in the UK that Brexit has to be delivered and made to work.

So when JR wanted to get into ASEAN — an entry — and the likes of Johnson wanted the UK to get out of the EU — an exit — the motivating factor was about the same in both cases. It was not about the partnership or its tangible benefits, but it was all about what partnerships can bring to the political table back home.

In JR's case, it's good he didn't succeed. Imagine the embarrassment this year, for all and sundry, if we were counted as one of ASEAN's member nations?

Unless of course ASEAN could have prevented the economic meltdown for us if we were part of it. But that's only a joke — JR would have never thought he was taking us eventually to meltdown-territory with his liberalized 'open economy', with or without ASEAN being red faced and uncomfortable about it.