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Results Matter: Pragmatism Prevails in Asia

By Kishore Mahbubani

A seminal characteristic of East Asian approaches to security issues is their reliance on pragmatism rather than the ideological underpinnings that often render Western approaches — especially American ones — ineffective or counterproductive, argues former Singaporean diplomat and scholar Kishore Mahbubani. Can US and European leaders cast aside their moralistic approaches to international relations and become as pragmatic as their Asian counterparts?



Photo caption: The flags of the ASEAN + 6 countries fly as proudly as they can amid turmoil on the streets of Pattaya in April 2009 as the grouping's members attempt to hold a meeting there alongside the ASEAN +3 forum. As ugly as the domestic Thai political unrest was at that event — it had to be abandoned — the ASEAN + 3 process itself has shown remarkable resilience and has been responsible for notable successes such as the Chiang Mai Initiative and Asian Bond Markets Initiative. Photo: Nyein Chan Naing/EPA

The fundamental problem in trying to understand East Asian approaches to security is that the concepts used in Western discourse (both Anglo-Saxon and European) are either unsuitable or inadequate for understanding what is really going on. Neither is the usual realist versus liberal-internationalist distinction useful in understanding how East Asian policymakers think. They do not see policy as an either/or choice and see no incompatibility in including various elements in their policies.

My goal in this essay is to explain how East Asian policymakers think about and address security issues. The key word that runs through this essay is pragmatism. Most Asian policymakers do not adopt approaches that are driven by any ideology or intellectual framework. Instead their goal is to focus on results. And if an approach works to enhance security, it is adopted, even if it may appear to be intellectually incoherent or contradictory. At the end of the day, Deng Xiaoping's wise maxim describes contemporary East Asian approaches to security: "It does not matter whether a cat is black or white; if it catches mice, it is a good cat."

I will first look at Chinese approaches followed by those of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other East Asian players. From time to time, contrasts will be made with the United States and Europe to illustrate differences with East Asia.

China's View

One of China's great fortunes is that it has been blessed with brilliant geopolitical thinkers in the 20th century. This abundance of wisdom did not emerge by accident. It was a result of the century or more of humiliation that followed the Opium War of 1842. China's leaders learned many lessons from this humiliation. As Deng Xiaoping also said, "being backward invites invasion and defeat." This is why he focused on modernization. But to accomplish modernization, China had to ensure it remained at peace and was not subject to great power pressures.

Hence, after the famous Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s, which saw China sandwiched between the two superpowers — the US and the Soviet Union — China's leaders, especially Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, executed the brilliant geopolitical maneuver of luring Henry Kissinger to Beijing and subsequently welcoming President Richard Nixon. These moves sharply tilted the balance against the Soviet Union, then the primary threat to China. Ideological differences with the US were put aside to secure this geopolitical coup.

When the Cold War ended and the geopolitical cards were reshuffled, Deng wisely calculated that a rising China could one day be perceived as a threat both to the world's leading power, the US, and its Asian neighbors. He knew that the most disastrous outcome would be a containment policy aimed at China akin to Cold War US policy toward the Soviet Union. Deng was acutely aware of how weak China was in relation to the US and he knew the country needed at least a few more decades of peace to enable it to grow its economy. The overriding strategy that he adopted (later followed by Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao) was to integrate China into the prevailing international system, even though it was led by

the US. To enable this dramatic move, Deng wisely counseled China's leaders to keep a low profile. His advice was expressed in 28 characters that still guide China's policies, even though Deng is long gone. They state:

- *Lengjing guancha*: observe and analyze [developments] calmly;
- *Chenzhuo yingfu*: deal [with changes] patiently and confidently;
- *Wenzhu zhenjiao*: secure [our] position;
- *Taoguang yanghui*: conceal [our] capabilities and avoid the limelight;
- *Shanyu shouzhuo*: excel at keeping a low profile;
- *Juebu dangtou*: never become a leader;
- *Yousuo zuowei*: strive to make achievements.

Nothing Succeeds Like Success

China's leaders judge their policies purely from results. And here it is difficult to match China's geopolitical record.

First, it has successfully prevented a US containment policy. It may have been China's good fortune that the anti-China hawks in Washington were never able to seize control of US policy. But while luck may have helped, China also engineered a high degree of interdependence with the US to ensure that American policymakers would think twice about trying to contain China. Hence, while China relies on US markets for exports, it created an equal dependence in the US on China to purchase US Treasury Bills. There are many reasons why US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton chose to visit East Asia on her first overseas tour in February 2009. But one key reason was that at the height of the financial crisis, the US needed assurance from Beijing that it would continue purchasing US Treasury Bills as American deficits skyrocketed. The paradox about this growing interdependence is that both China and the US feel vulnerable as a result. This mutual vulnerability leads to care and caution in the management of the bilateral relationship.

The second result was that China achieved the same degree of economic interdependence with its neighbors. To understand why this is unique, try contrasting it with US handling of difficult relationships. After the 1979 US Embassy hostage episode in Tehran, America's relations with Iran have been particularly troubled, but this pales in comparison with what China experienced with Japan: a brutal military onslaught that by some estimates led to the death of 30 million Chinese. And, from time to time, Japan has carried out actions that have angered the Chinese population, from textbooks being doctored on the World War II invasion of China to Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visiting the Yasukuni Shrine.

The traumas Japan has inflicted upon China have been far greater than Iran's traumas on America. Yet, the US is constitutionally incapable of adopting a pragmatic approach that prevents the past from determining future policies. By contrast, China's leaders can switch off the past. Hence, while the US has been steadily accumulating sanctions against Iran, China has been doing the exact opposite with Japan. It has worked to increase trade, and in 2004, China became Japan's largest trading partner, surpassing the US. Amazingly, that was also the year when China was exploding with anti-Japan riots over the textbook dispute. China does not allow long-term strategic goals to be derailed by short-term political upsets.

Moral, Amoral or Immoral?

In discussing Asian pragmatism, are Asians being amoral or immoral in their foreign policies? A contrast may again illustrate the force of this question: could the US ignore the nature of the political regime in Iran or North Korea and establish diplomatic relations with them? The simple answer is that the US is incapable of doing so because having demonized these regimes it has to be seen to be holding its nose while doing business with them. There is a moral streak that influences US foreign policy thinking that cannot be scrubbed out. And many Americans are proud of the fact that this moral dimension is a cardinal factor. Clinton stated in an April 2009 interview: "There is always and must be a moral dimension to our foreign policy."

Yet it is possible that Asia's pragmatic approach may be doing more moral good than America's moralistic one. As Max Weber once famously observed: "It is not true that good can follow only from good and evil only from evil." If the US

could have normalized relations with Iran and North Korea and increased trade and economic interdependence with them — much as it did with China after Nixon's famous visit in 1971 — the regimes might have been significantly transformed in the process, thus reducing the constant threat Washington faces from these two countries. Indeed, North Korea and Iran are not much worse than China was in 1971 under Mao in terms of political-military hostility and ideological antagonism. Hence, the US should be able to work with both regimes. This is an obvious truth to an Asian mind. But what is an obvious truth in another place is an inconceivable geopolitical option for an American policymaker. America's moralistic policies are, therefore, an obstacle to peace. Asia's pragmatic policies are producing peace.

ASEAN & China: Pragmatism in the Lead

A similar pragmatism influences China's relations with ASEAN. Few people remember today that ASEAN was essentially a pro-US creation of the Cold War. When it was founded in 1967, the Chinese government loudly denounced it as "a tool of American imperialists aiming at containing China and other communist powers." Yet today there can be no doubt that China has become more influential in ASEAN than the US. In a brilliant stroke to prevent the US from using ASEAN again to contain China (as it did during the Cold War), China decided to share its economic prosperity by proposing a Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN in 2001. It also spiced up the offer with unilateral trade concessions and then negotiated and concluded the FTA in record time.

This Chinese offer of an FTA shocked Japan, which had assumed that its relations with ASEAN were closer because it has given more aid to ASEAN over the years. Awakened by this new Chinese competition, Japan also proposed an FTA with ASEAN in 2005. Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and India have also concluded FTAs with ASEAN. With the exception of the Japan-ASEAN FTA (which will come into force in 2012), the other FTAs all came into force by January this year.

What exactly was going on in the minds of these policymakers when they proposed and concluded these FTAs? And what will the results be both in the geopolitical and economic spheres? Was there a clear and logical path they followed? Or were they merely responding to opportunities? All these are pertinent questions because the answers will show that the Asian approach to regional cooperation does not follow the European model.

Europeans begin with the end in mind. A vision is clearly articulated. To achieve that vision, a set of agreements is negotiated between the member states. And after lengthy negotiations, the agreements are finalized. Then an equally lengthy process of ratification takes place. There is a very heavy emphasis on form and structure as well as legal standards. The Lisbon process to increase European economic competitiveness illustrates this well. When the initial process of ratification failed, the EU member states went back to the drawing board, crafting a new set of agreements and proceeded to ratify them. It would have been inconceivable in the European context for any concrete cooperation to begin until all the proper legal processes had been completed.

By contrast, in East Asia there is very little emphasis on legal process. The form does not matter too much. What matters are results. Hence, while the Europeans spent thousands of hours negotiating and ratifying the Lisbon process, an equally significant process of regional cooperation evolved in East Asia with hardly any negotiation: this was the ASEAN+3 process.

It began with an invitation to the leaders of China, Japan and South Korea to attend the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 1997. When it happened, none of the participants had any vision of where the process could lead. Indeed in some subsequent years, the process looked set to fail, as when relations between China and Japan suffered a downturn between 2001 and 2006 and between South Korea and Japan in 2000. Then in 2009, an ASEAN+3 Summit in Pattaya had to be abruptly cancelled when demonstrations spurred by Thailand's political crisis overran the conference site.

Yet, despite all this, 10 years after the first ASEAN+3 meeting, the process has grown by leaps and bounds. Some of the major ASEAN+3 achievements to date include, but are not limited to, the Chiang Mai Initiative, which aims to address and supplement the existing international financial safety net arrangements for ASEAN+3 countries, and the Asian Bond Markets Initiative, which aims to mobilize Asian savings for Asian investments.

A detailed comparison of the Lisbon process and the ASEAN+3 process will illustrate well the differences between the European and East Asian approaches. In Europe, the emphasis was on the process. The number of man hours invested in correct procedures was phenomenal. In East Asia, the emphasis was on results. And while there were few meetings and relatively few negotiations, the results were quite significant.

How Does it Work?

It is easier, however, to point out the differences between American/European and East Asian approaches than it is to try to describe conceptually exactly how East Asian approaches to security work. A question once posed to me by a leading Indian strategic thinker, Dr. Raja Mohan, captures the dilemma: “Singapore is well known to be hard-headed and realist in its international analysis. Yet, Singapore is working equally hard to participate in global and regional multilateral processes. Why?” The simple answer is that Singapore sees no contradiction between the realist and liberal-internationalist approaches. This is equally true of most East Asians.

Most of China’s neighbors in Asia have no illusions about its policies towards the region. They know China is not motivated by altruism or charity. Instead, China has shrewdly calculated that the best way for it to gain two or three decades of peace (so that it can focus on internal development) is for it to share its prosperity with all its neighbors. Cold geopolitical logic drives the warm policies of China towards its neighbors. However, as these policies also benefit its neighbors, there is no reason for them to reject China’s initiatives.

Get a Clue

China’s neighbors also know that they will have to deal with a much stronger China in a few decades time. Hence, they would also prefer to see a continuation of a strong US and European presence in East Asia. However, they also want to deal with subtle and sophisticated US and European policies towards East Asia, not crude ideological walls or a black and white game of choosing sides. Unfortunately, subtlety and sophistication have not characterized either European or US policies towards the region.

European policies towards ASEAN have been disastrous. Only one factor drives policy: Myanmar. European governments have allowed themselves to be pushed by their human rights lobbies to reject all dealings with Myanmar. And because Myanmar is a member of ASEAN, EU-ASEAN relations have also suffered. Initially, India followed the European approach. But it quickly realized that by doing so, it was making Myanmar a geopolitical gift to China. Hence, Indian policies were reversed. Fortunately, India is capable of making geopolitical U-turns. The European Union, though, is incapable of doing so and as a result is unable to take any advantage of geopolitical opportunities in Asia.

Fortunately, the US is capable of making small U-turns. Before Obama, it would have been inconceivable for a US president to attend a summit meeting that included a Myanmar leader. But this is what Obama did when he attended the APEC Leaders’ Meeting in Singapore in November 2009. For domestic purposes, the US made some ritualistic denunciations of Myanmar, but the clear message the region got was that the US was not prepared to sacrifice its relations with ASEAN because of Myanmar. This is the message China would have taken away from the meeting.

This small pragmatic step needs to be enhanced if the US is to retain its traditionally significant influence in the region. As the balance of power shifts, with China gaining more influence relative to the US, there is a need for both American and European policymakers to begin thinking the unthinkable: can they give up their ideological and formalistic approaches and learn to play the “pragmatic” game in East Asia?

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