



Commentary by Kishore Mahbubani

In response to East-West Dialogue Issue 2 lead article, *How (and Why) the United States Should Help to Build an ASEAN Economic Community*, by Michael G. Plummer.



The American-ASEAN Relationship

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American policymakers sadly underestimate the value of ASEAN to American long-term interests. President George W. Bush abruptly cancelled his participation in the 2007 U.S.-ASEAN Summit, which celebrated 30 years of U.S.-ASEAN partnership, in favor of a 24-hour photo op in Baghdad. American Secretaries of State have frequently skipped the annual ASEAN ministerial meetings. These decisions reflect a complete misunderstanding of the standing and value of ASEAN to the international community.

To understand the value of ASEAN, it is important to understand the three modern miracles ASEAN has performed. At the end of the Cold War, if anyone were called upon to predict whether war would break out in the Balkans of Europe or in the "Balkans of Asia" (namely, Southeast Asia), most people would have predicted Asia rather than Europe. Instead, the opposite happened. While the Balkans of Europe erupted into a frenzy of killing, Southeast Asia enjoyed a sweet patch of peace and prosperity. Despite the decade-long tension between Vietnam and ASEAN (over the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia), ASEAN was able to peacefully engineer the entry of Vietnam into ASEAN in July 1995. The first modern miracle of ASEAN is that it has ensured that no two ASEAN states have gone to war with each other since ASEAN was created.

What makes this achievement truly remarkable is that the Balkans of Asia are far more diverse in culture, religion, ethnicity, and history than the Balkans of Europe. There is no shortage of bilateral tension between any two ASEAN neighbors. Conflicts could have erupted over territorial and other disputes. Instead, ASEAN secured peace in a geopolitically vital region. Given long-term American interests in a peaceful and stable Southeast Asia, ASEAN is doing the job at no cost to the American taxpayer. Valuable sea lanes and air-traffic routes remain at peace without a massive and active American military presence, in contrast to the Persian Gulf.

The second miracle of ASEAN has been to foster close economic and social cooperation. Here again, if anyone had looked all over the Third World, from Latin America to the South Pacific, few people would have predicted that the most successful regional economic cooperation outside the European Union would be achieved in Southeast Asia. Intra-ASEAN trade has grown from \$123.8 billion in 1995 to \$352.8 billion in 2006. ASEAN has also agreed to implement the ASEAN free-trade area in 2015 for the original six members and in 2018 for the remaining countries.

Equally important, ASEAN holds more than 700 meetings each year. These regular meetings have, over the years, created a culture of *musyawarah* and *muafakat* (consultation and consensus). Having attended the initial ASEAN meetings in 1971, which were full of suspicion and distrust, I can personally attest to the enormous change in the chemistry and tone of ASEAN meetings. Other regions of the world, including the Middle East and South Asia, could learn valuable lessons from ASEAN on how to overcome distrust. America could encourage this learning by holding ASEAN up as the model to emulate.

The third miracle of ASEAN is the geopolitical centrality it has achieved in Asia—the region where the largest number of new powers is emerging. Normally, the emergence of great powers is accompanied by rising tension and conflict. Instead, the opposite is happening. Many factors explain this. One key factor is ASEAN's ability to provide the only political platform where new powers can meet and engage with each other. Tensions were rife between China and Japan in 1998, partly as a result of President Jiang Zemin's visit to Japan, during which he bluntly criticized Japan's wartime atrocities during an official banquet attended by Emperor Akihito. The ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, and South Korea) meeting in Hanoi later that year, provided a face-saving platform for the Chinese and Japanese leaders to meet and build bridges. Similarly, India's emergence as a new great power has been delicately managed by ASEAN through the creation of the East Asian Summit.

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of geopolitical stability
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Paradoxically, the greatest beneficiary of this geopolitical stability in East Asia is America. With its hands tied by looming foreign policy failures in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East, America can hardly afford to handle major new geopolitical tensions in East Asia. By contributing to geopolitical stability in this region, ASEAN serves many vital American interests. Yet, while ASEAN has clearly risen as a geopolitical priority in the eyes of China, Japan, and India, it remains a low priority in the United States. The thinking of some key U.S. policymakers is still clouded by old mental maps of ASEAN's geopolitical value. The time has come for Washington to carry out a major reevaluation. Once Washington finally understands the vital importance of ASEAN, it will also understand America's vital interest in the success of the ASEAN Economic Community. Good geopolitical management is the vital foundation for long-term economic cooperation.

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