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Can the EU learn lessons from ASEAN?

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Author : Kishore Mahbubani

After having missed two ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meetings, Lady Catherine Ashton finally made it to an ASEAN meeting, the EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Brunei on 27 April 2012. She arrived in Brunei, spent a few hours with ASEAN ministers and then rushed away from ASEAN as quickly as she could to go to Myanmar to set up an EU office there. In so doing, she missed an incredibly valuable opportunity to learn whether the EU could learn lessons from ASEAN. Indeed, she probably could not even conceive of the possibility that ASEAN could have lessons for the EU.

At this stage, I would like any European reader of this essay to pause and ask himself or herself a very simple question: "Can I conceive of the possibility that the EU has lessons to learn from ASEAN?" The honest answer that most Europeans would give to themselves is that they too, like Lady Ashton, cannot conceive of this possibility. This is why an essay like this is an important one for European minds. To understand the world of tomorrow, they have to understand and embrace the inconceivable thought of today. And this is why understanding ASEAN is so important for leading European policymakers.

To begin this painful journey into the land of the inconceivable, let me state an important macro fact. Most of Europe is in trouble; most of Asia is not. This large reality is, of course, a major reversal of the patterns of the past few centuries. The simple question that the Europeans should ask themselves is this: are the Asians doing something which we are not?

There is a simple answer to this question. The Asians are practicing the virtue of pragmatism. The Europeans are not. Currently, even though pragmatism is very much a Western virtue, it has fallen into disfavour in the West. I cannot even begin the complex process of analysing why this has happened. It would be too long a story to tell in this essay. Hence, all I can do is to assert that at the end of the Cold War, the European minds (like American minds) were overwhelmed with hubris and overwhelming arrogance. The biggest mistake that Europe made at the end of the Cold War was to assume that it had reached the end of history and that it would not have to change course and adapt intelligently and pragmatically to a rapidly changing world.

In retrospect, it is clear that the timing of the end of the Cold War was a particularly bad historical accident for Europe. This end of the Cold War, when Europe was drowning in hubris, coincided almost exactly with the time that most Asian countries decided to launch significant economic and other reform programmes to improve their performance. And – guess what – most Asian countries succeeded. Hence, it was precisely when the greatest challenge to Europe was emerging that European minds fell asleep. And, as demonstrated by Lady Ashton's lightning-brief visit to an ASEAN meeting on 27 April 2012, minds like hers remain asleep. To wake up these sleeping European minds, let me suggest a few concrete areas where European minds can begin to conceive of the possibility of learning from ASEAN.

Let me start at the simplest possible level: language. Even though the EU has far more

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WHAT IS THE EU'S ROLE IN AN

members (27) than ASEAN (10), it is clear that ASEAN is far more culturally diverse than the EU. All the EU countries share a common civilisational heritage: the Judeo-Greek-Christian heritage. ASEAN, by contrast, has Buddhists and Christians, Hindus and Muslims, Confucianists and Taoists. No other regional organisation anywhere in the world is as diverse as ASEAN. So how do the members of this most diverse regional organisation communicate with each other? They chose one un-common language: English. This was a remarkably wise and pragmatic decision made by ASEAN's founding leaders. It was a wise political decision because it avoided a decision on who was the most important member state and it was a wise economic decision because it is much cheaper to have meetings without a constant army of translators and interpreters. And ASEAN now has over a thousand meetings a year. Just imagine the savings made.

By contrast, the EU members communicate in 23 official languages. For ministerial meetings, it has to provide translators in all these languages. For official-level meetings, it provides, in practice, fewer translators. But it should be obvious to any objective and impartial observer that it is clearly an absurd practice to pay so many translators. The EU institutions' translation and interpreting services absorb €1.1bn or 1% of the EU budget per year. Only an organisation which believes it has unlimited resources would undertake such folly. I have deliberately underlined the phrase above because this is another area where European minds have to embrace the inconceivable: that Europe now has limited resources and it must learn to be as careful and pragmatic as ASEAN in its working methods.

Let me emphasise one point here. The real issue is not language; it is whether European Union officials can learn to be pragmatic in their decision-making. This is the one big lesson they can learn from ASEAN: the art of pragmatism. To explain the value of this art of pragmatism, let me switch from the low-level issue of language to the high-level issue of geopolitics. In this extremely important area of geopolitics, there can be no doubt that ASEAN has been competent and the EU has not. This difference is a result of the failure of the EU to be pragmatic.

The best indicator of the EU's geopolitical incompetence is that while it has clearly preserved peace within the EU, it has had great difficulty creating similar peace and prosperity all along its periphery. By contrast, one of ASEAN's biggest success stories is that it has managed its periphery well. Clearly, as the chief foreign policy representative of the EU, Lady Ashton should have provided the leadership to understand why this has happened. But she probably did not even conceive of this possibility when she attended the ASEAN meeting in Brunei.

How does pragmatism improve geopolitical performance? The simple answer is that the EU is always trying to be ideologically consistent. Hence, it will not admit any member states unless they have met a whole series of standards. It wants to have a club of "people like us". The fundamental geopolitical mistake the EU has made is its failure to understand that the vast majority of the world's population does not consist of "people like us". To only admit or deal with "people like us" creates a club of exclusion.

By contrast, ASEAN has set the gold standard globally by becoming the club of "inclusion" and not "exclusion". For decades, ASEAN was subjected to derision by Western thinkers because it had admitted a flawed military regime in Myanmar as a member to ASEAN. I have personally experienced the scorn that European policymakers used to pour upon ASEAN. So I know from first-hand experience what I am talking about.

Hopefully, it is now clear that ASEAN's decision to admit Myanmar in 1997 was a brilliant geopolitical decision. The then-Foreign Minister of Indonesia, Ali Alatas, explained well the geopolitical merits. He said that if Myanmar was excluded from ASEAN, it would have become a bone of contention between China and India for geopolitical influence. By including Myanmar, ASEAN minimized Sino-Indian rivalry. Equally importantly, by admitting Myanmar, ASEAN exposed the senior elite of Myanmar to the rapid progress made by other ASEAN countries. Hence, these Myanmar officials could see at first-hand how far behind Myanmar had fallen. The Myanmar story provides an excellent example of how successful ASEAN pragmatism has been.

Ironically, the reason why Lady Ashton rushed out of Brunei is that she wanted to fly to Myanmar for the obligatory photo-op with Aung San Suu Kyi that all Western leaders aspire to have. Yet even though she visited Myanmar, it is unlikely that she understood how and why ASEAN's pragmatism has worked. If she had studied ASEAN and Myanmar

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well, she could have understood that the EU could enjoy similar benefits by being equally pragmatic towards a vexing geopolitical problem that the EU faces: Iran.

Iran, like Myanmar, is a difficult challenge and has been a difficult challenge. However, the approaches of ASEAN and the EU have been almost mirror opposites. As the problem became more difficult, ASEAN did not impose sanctions on Myanmar. Instead, it engaged Myanmar more deeply. By contrast, as the problem with Iran became more difficult, the EU resorted to its time-tested policy of failure: that of imposing even more sanctions on Iran. The simple truth that the EU policymaker now finds inconceivable is that sanctions will not change Iran. Engagement could. So why does the EU not try to engage Iran, especially Iranian society, more deeply?

One reason is that unlike ASEAN, the EU has allowed Washington DC to have a veto over any major foreign policy initiated by the EU. Hence, even if the EU came to realise that engagement with Iran might work better, it could not possibly carry it out because an American veto would block it. To illustrate the difference between the EU and ASEAN approaches, a comparative example might help. Washington DC has been as worried about nuclear proliferation in North Korea as it has been about Iran. Hence, over time, Washington DC has been imposing more and more sanctions on Iran.

If ASEAN had behaved as rigidly as the EU, it would have followed the lead of Washington DC and imposed sanctions on North Korea. Amazingly, even though ASEAN was at its creation in the Cold War a pro-American organisation, it has done the exact opposite of Washington DC. Instead of isolating North Korea, it has encouraged North Korea to remain engaged with its region. Hence in a remarkably bold geopolitical move, North Korea was admitted as a member of ARF in 2000. By skipping two ARF meetings, Lady Ashton lost the opportunity to learn at first-hand how ASEAN pragmatism worked in ARF.

Washington DC was not happy with the admission of North Korea into ARF. Hence, in the mid-1990s, not long after North Korea's admission, there was a mini-confrontation between the then-US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, and the ASEAN delegation over North Korea. Albright pushed hard but failed to persuade ASEAN to move away from its pragmatic approach. There is no doubt that if she had done the same at a meeting with the EU, the EU would have complied with American wishes.

The EU would bend reflexively to American wishes without asking an obvious question that any pragmatic policymaker could and should ask: "As we move away from the American century into the Asian century, should the EU continue on auto-pilot or should it change course?" Indeed, the auto-pilot record of the EU's foreign policies clearly suggests that no such pragmatic reevaluation is taking place. This is also why I have emphasised throughout this article the strategic folly of Lady Ashton spending only a few hours at the ASEAN meeting in Brunei. This decision was a result of a fundamental omission in her briefing papers on ASEAN.

And what was the major omission? If her briefing papers contained any comparisons between the EU and ASEAN, it would have highlighted this important fact: that the EU's GDP is much larger than ASEAN's. This is true. The total GNP of the EU in 2011 was US\$17.6 trillion. By contrast, ASEAN's GDP was only 2 trillion. Yet, I am prepared to bet a thousand dollars that her briefing paper would not have mentioned an equally undeniable reality: ASEAN is a sunrise organisation; the EU is not.

In this new emerging global dynamic of ours, the EU and ASEAN are on opposite trajectories. Even though the EU is far from being a sunset organisation (unlike, say, the OECD), its share of global power and influence will steadily decline as the share of the global GNP of the rest of the world increases steadily. In short, the fundamental strategic challenge of the EU is that it has to manage decline in relative terms. And it can manage its decline well or manage it badly.

By contrast, ASEAN, which is undoubtedly a sunrise organisation, will see both its geopolitical influence and its share of the global GNP rise steadily. The centre of gravity of the world's economy and indeed the centre of gravity of the world's geopolitics are moving steadily towards ASEAN. And, so far, ASEAN has taken brilliant advantage of these fundamental trends by providing the one geopolitical platform where all rising powers in Asia can meet.

In one way or another, all the major regional processes in the Asia-Pacific region are either related to or created by ASEAN. The decision by the USA to join the EAS with President Obama attending the first meeting with American participation in Indonesia on 19 November 2011 provided a powerful demonstration of the strength of the processes that ASEAN had launched in Asia. As I have documented in my book *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*, one reason why most of East Asia has been rising peacefully was the careful and pragmatic policies pursued by ASEAN.

Despite these monumental geopolitical contributions by ASEAN, there remains remarkable ignorance in the EU about the valuable work done by ASEAN. Even outside the geopolitical dimension, there are many lessons that the EU can learn from ASEAN. Let me suggest two more examples in closing. Firstly, as we move away from the era of Western domination of the world to a complex multi-civilisational world, ASEAN remains by far the most successful multi-civilisational club in the world. By contrast, the EU cannot manage the entry of even one country outside its civilisational club, not even one as similar as Turkey. Hence, in this area, the EU should set up a high-level commission to learn lessons from ASEAN. Secondly, as the EU struggles hard to disentangle itself from the Euro crisis (and possibly dealing with the potential exit like Greece from the Eurozone), the EU could also learn lessons from ASEAN on how to proceed with multi-speed cooperation. Instead of assuming that all members have equal capacity, ASEAN has worked pragmatically on the principle of ASEAN-X cooperation. It does not allow the slowest partners to slow down the rest. Hence, it has allowed some of its members to proceed first with the rest joining later.

Both these examples also demonstrate that ASEAN's biggest asset is the culture of pragmatism that it has developed after 48 years of existence. Let me also emphasise in conclusion that ASEAN is a deeply flawed organisation. It never moves forward in a straight line. Instead, it often takes two steps forward and one step backward, and sometimes even one step forward and two steps backward. The great strength of ASEAN is that its member states are acutely aware of how flawed the organisation is. The cure for these flaws is not a search for perfection. Instead, ASEAN has evolved a culture of pragmatism to manage and handle a deeply flawed organisation. As the EU experiment becomes more and more flawed, it may want to study ASEAN more deeply to understand how to manage its flaws. Lady Ashton could lead the way by spending more than a few hours when she next attends an ASEAN meeting.

Kishore Mahbubani is Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, NUS and the author of the forthcoming book "The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World". kishore_mahbubani@nus.edu.sg

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