

ASEAN: A Case Study for the Post-Western World

Rohan Hazell:

A multipolar post-Western world order means a more diverse range of powers will influence the direction of global affairs.

Many of the nations stepping up to the plate - China, India, Brazil, Turkey, to name a few - represent varied cultures, socioeconomics, and even governance systems.

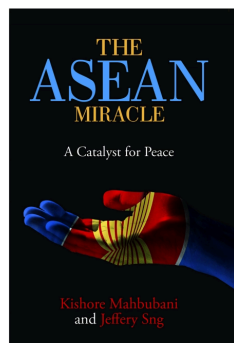
This in turn necessitates cultivating a robust culture of peaceful coexistence, built on mutual respect for diverse values and interests.

But, given the turbulence we've seen even in the unipolar era, can a multipolar world actually offer greater stability?

According to Professor Kishore Mahbubani, former President of the United Nations Security Council and Distinguished Fellow at the Asian Research Institute, there is cause to hope.

He takes us through a real-world example of coexistence that we can learn from - the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, also known as ASEAN.

Professor Kishore Mahbubani:



Source: Lowy Institute, 2020

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

Member nations are Brunei, Cambodia,
Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar,
the Philippines, Singapore,
Thailand, and Vietnam

As you know, the success of ASEAN is a real miracle. And that's why I wrote a book called The ASEAN Miracle, and I called it the ASEAN miracle because ASEAN is by far the most diverse corner of planet Earth. There are around 670 - 680 million people in ASEAN. You have 250 million Muslims, 150 million Christians, 150 million Buddhists, Mahayana Buddhists, Hinayana Buddhists, and you have Taoists, Confucianists, Hindus. And as you know, we have lots of communists too in our region. So it's a really remarkably diverse region of planet Earth. And everyone describes Southeast Asia as the Balkans of Asia. Everyone expected the Balkans of Asia to be on fire, to be having conflicts and fighting each other. And instead, Southeast Asia has ended up as one of the most peaceful and prosperous corners of planet Earth.

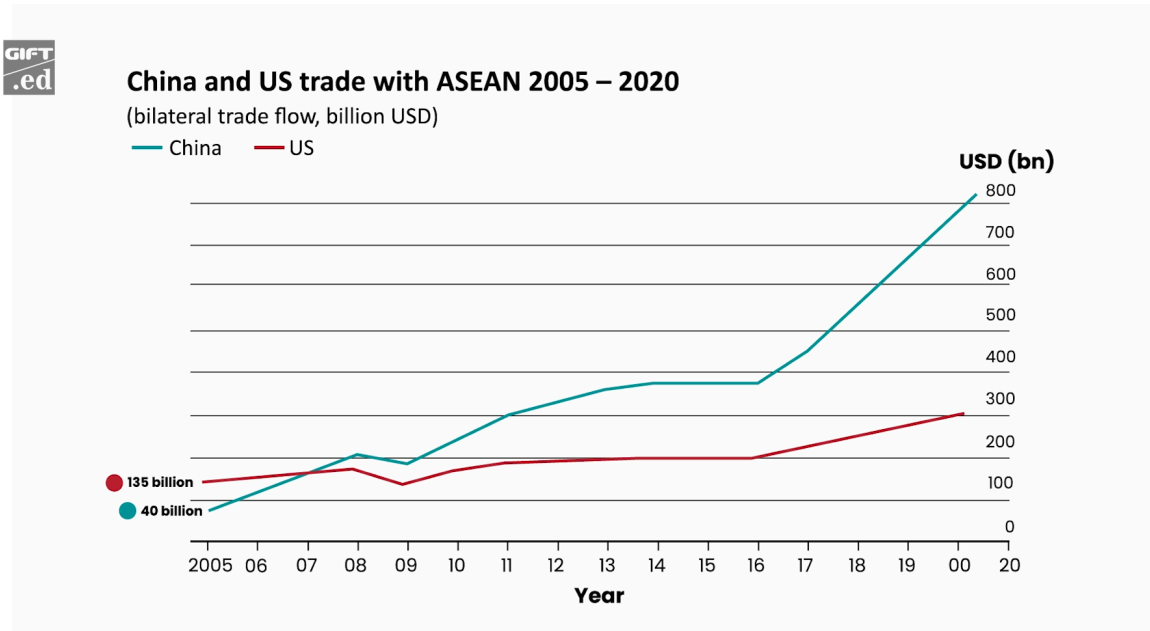


And this is where, frankly, the rest of the world should try to understand why ASEAN succeeded. What are the lessons of ASEAN for the rest of the world? And perhaps the ASEAN success can provide a model for a world, as you know, that is becoming increasingly divided and polarised. All great powers should come to ASEAN to learn the lessons from us.

ASEAN: From Founding to Present

I think we are certainly experiencing great power shifts. And as we know, in the Cold War, the United States was far more influential in Southeast Asia than any other great power. The shocking thing that many Americans do not know is that ASEAN was a pro-American creation. In fact, it was set up in the Cold War to lean on the side of the United States against the Soviet

Union. And if you want proof, look at what the Soviet Union and China said on 8 August 1967, on the day when ASEAN was created. They condemned the creation of ASEAN. So there's so many reservoirs of goodwill towards the United States of America in Southeast Asia, which is why the United States should pay greater attention to Southeast Asia. But unfortunately, after winning the Cold War, the United States lost interest in Southeast Asia and moved away. And as a result of that, China has stepped up its links with Southeast Asia.



So to give you one figure that points out how much closer ASEAN has become to China. In the year 2000, US trade with ASEAN was \$135 billion, more than three times China's trade of \$40 billion. By 2020, US trade with ASEAN had grown from 135 billion to over 300 billion. So an increase of two and a half times. But China's trade with ASEAN, especially after the China-ASEAN free trade agreement was signed, increased from 40 billion to 800 billion, an increase of 20 times. So US trade with ASEAN used to be more than three times China's trade with ASEAN. Now China's trade with ASEAN is more than double American trade with ASEAN. That's an example of how things have shifted.

But I want to emphasise that the ASEAN countries want to have good ties with China and they want to have good ties with the United States. And they would actually welcome the United States signing a free trade agreement with the ASEAN countries.

But as you know, in the US today, free trade agreements have become so politically toxic. It's impossible for the United States to even propose a free trade agreement with the ASEAN

countries. And that's tragic, because if the United States did so, I think the ASEAN countries would be very happy and they would welcome it very strongly.

The one big lesson that the European Union should pick up from ASEAN is that it is possible to collaborate closely with societies that come from other cultures, other religions, other civilisations.

As you know, Turkey has applied for membership of the European Union much earlier than many of the Eastern European states have. And in many ways, I would say Turkey could have qualified for membership of the European Union. But there was one fundamental reason why Turkey was never admitted into the European Union is because Turkey is Muslim and the European Union states are all Christian. And, you know, these Christian states cannot accept the idea that they can collaborate with a non-Christian state like Turkey. Now, frankly, that's very unwise of the European Union.

So the European Union should find ways and means of getting closer to its Islamic neighbours. Not just Turkey, but the countries in North Africa - Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, even Egypt and Libya are very, very close to Europe. But they have never been embraced by Europe in any kind of regional organisation where they are accepted as equals or treated as equals. And this is where it's a mistake for the European Union because, the long term threat to the European Union is not going to come from Russian tanks. Even though there's a war in Ukraine, Russian tanks are not poised to enter Europe in any significant way. They don't pose any kind of immediate threat to Europe.

But in the long run, the biggest threat to Europe is going to come from the demographic explosion in Africa, both in Sub-Saharan Africa and in North Africa. And so it'd be wiser for the European Union to find ways and means of developing Africa, working with Africa. And if the European Union wants to learn how to work with cultures and civilisations that are so different, the European Union should come and learn lessons from the ASEAN countries.

Rohan Hazell:

Although ten countries make up the Association of SouthEast Asian Nations, ASEAN, it remains one of the most peaceful places on Earth, despite expectations of conflict due to its unparalleled diversity.

It has also successfully balanced geopolitical and economic relations with the West and rising powers like China and India, meaning the region is becoming increasingly prosperous.

Professor Mahbubani has called this the “ASEAN Miracle” and suggests that ASEAN’s success can provide a model for cooperation in a world that is becoming increasingly polarised.