

**HONG SIEW CHING LECTURE AT
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SECURING PEACE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC IN THE AGE OF GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS

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I should like to begin by thanking the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy for its invitation for me to speak at this Hong Siew Ching Lecture on the theme “Securing Peace in the Indo-Pacific in the age of geopolitical shifts”.

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The age of geopolitics is well and truly back in the Indo-Pacific.

An increasingly familiar narrative is often detailed:

- Of the ever intensifying US-China rivalries. Each seeing in the other as a competitor, rival and even an adversary;
- Of the ever-widening fields in which such rivalries are being played out: beyond the traditional military and security domains into the economy, trade, finance, technology, including cyberspace and even public health;
- Of the reawakening of long-known regional hotspots where open conflicts – intended or unintended – may break;

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- Of the return of security, defence and military alliances and partnerships as responses to maintain a so-called “balance of power” in the region;
- Of headwinds against diplomacy – formal and informal - as means to manage potentials for conflict;
- Of the fragility of cooperation on global common issues that demand cooperative partnership: health and climate, to cite a few.

Indeed, while attention seemed focused on the US-China rivalry, both its various manifestations and potential ramifications, it is well to recognize of other bilateral and regional geopolitical dynamics whose trajectories may also have significant implications on the Indo-Pacific’s present and future:

- The increasingly competitive China-India ties, marred not only by the long unresolved land border issues, rather one that is also being increasingly manifested in the Indian Ocean’s maritime domain;
- The not to be neglected US-Russia relations, two of the world’s heaviest nuclear weapon-armed states, with the attendant capacity to severely impact the region’s peace and security;
- The repercussions of China-Russia relations, whether predominantly imbued by a spirit of partnership as in recent years - as they encounter a perceived common competitor in the US - or whether of potential future schisms as divergent interests surface;
- The complex and volatile web of geopolitical dynamics that is Northeast Asia: the ever vacillating Korean Peninsula dynamics with an unpredictable DPRK at its centre and the uncertain China-Japan, China-Republic of Korea, Japan-Russia, Japan-Republic of Korea ties, in a sub-region devoid of any meaningful regional cooperative framework.

Further, there is no shortage of issues upon which all these complex geopolitical dynamics may be superimposed. For instance, the competing

claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea; the risk-prone Cross-Strait dynamic; the powder keg that is the Korean Peninsula; the land border disputes between India and China, and further afield, between India and Pakistan; the emergence of the Southwest Pacific as a contested geopolitical space, with China's increasing assertiveness and Australia's recent unambiguous tilt towards the US; and the increased attention to the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea as key lifelines of global commerce between the Indian and Pacific oceans.

And not to be ignored, the prevalence of complex internal situations, with potential for region-wide repercussions, upon which divergent geopolitical interests may be projected. The current situation in Myanmar being the most recent example.

Given their potential ramifications, how are countries of Southeast Asia – of ASEAN – to respond to these geopolitical shifts?

How can ASEAN proceed beyond simply describing these conditions; and alternatively expressing concern over them and hoping that somehow the geopolitical tensions may be ameliorated?

Is there more that countries of ASEAN can do other than appealing for restraint; expressing preference not to be forced to choose sides, and reciting the often expressed ASEAN “centrality”?

Perhaps, before I proceed, I need to address a salient school of thought within the region which holds that expectation of ASEAN should be tempered; that ASEAN should not be tasked with responsibilities that are not for it to shoulder to begin with, namely the management of the region's geopolitical common.

Certainly, the broad spectrum or differences in foreign policy orientations of ASEAN Member States, devoid of uniformity, adds weight to this view. In essence, suggesting that it would be unrealistic to expect more from ASEAN than the type of broad appeals for restraint that it has recently made. And that the best and most realistic course of action for ASEAN would be to avoid being drawn-in to the current geopolitical vortex.

These are certainly legitimate concerns.

However, as a matter of fact, the variation in ASEAN Member States' foreign policy orientations – some aligned to differing extra regional powers, others professing independent orientation – has not in the past precluded ASEAN from projecting a measure of common external outlook and policies in the interest of the region as a whole. While ASEAN has purposefully avoided from interjecting in the foreign policy orientations of its Member States, at the same time it has managed to strike a common approach on how extra-regional states should interact with the region and, though less successfully perhaps, how they should interact with one another in the region.

ASEAN's very founding document – the 1967 Bangkok Declaration – did not shy away in stipulating the newly formed Association's views on the wider region's geopolitics, referring to the temporary nature of foreign military bases, for instance.

Indeed, ever since, we have been witness to a steady evolution of ASEAN's external outlook and ambitions even – from neutrality, emphasis on regional resilience and, later, centrality - as seminal declarations and treaties such as ZOPFAN (1971); TAC (1976); SEANWFZ (1987), the ASEAN Charter; the three Bali Concord and the 2011 EAS Bali Principles, as well as processes such as the ASEAN Plus with the Dialogue Partners, ASEAN + 3, ARF, EAS and RCEP all attest to ASEAN's confidence in not only being engaged actively in the discourse of the region's peace and security, rather also in taking thought and policy leadership, giving substance as well as concrete meaning to the notion of ASEAN centrality. ASEAN-initiated regional security architectures often became the only platforms where extra regional states – otherwise disengaged from one another – can exchange views, sometimes in robust manner - on regional issues of common concern.

Significantly, more than mere convening power, ASEAN projected thought leadership by offering norms and principles guiding states' conduct in the

region. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the ever increasing numbers of countries acceding to the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

By traditional indices of power, perhaps one is more often reminded of ASEAN's limitations, certainly compared to the other countries in its surround. Also, given the reality of the varying foreign policy orientations of ASEAN member states, it would not be unnatural to succumb to the notion that a common external approach is beyond ASEAN.

However, ASEAN's past of "earned" centrality reminded of one quality that ASEAN possesses in great abundance that others lack: namely the confidence and trust – or in ASEAN parlance, "comfort level" - other countries have in the past of ASEAN's capacity and impartiality to provide the wherewithal for the effective management of the regional commons; namely its security and stability, in the interest of all.

Moreover, the variation in ASEAN Member States' foreign policy orientations have not always been a recipe for divisions or inaction in the face of extra regional states' rivalries. Rather, as an asset to ASEAN, giving it the capacity to develop a multi-pronged relationship with extra-regional powers with varying interests. And not least of all, despite the differing foreign policy orientations of ASEAN member states, they have all shared a common and overriding interest in safeguarding the region's peace and stability that have been prerequisites to its prosperity.

I thought it relevant to recall of such past ASEAN constructive activism and the unique qualities ASEAN possesses to dispel any sense of resignation in the face of recent challenging geopolitical environment. Self-doubts about ASEAN's capacity to effect change might self-fulfill to render an ineffective ASEAN. A passive ASEAN, silent and inactive, and at best reactive, in the face of a region marked by constant geopolitical shifts and change, risks an organization consigned to irrelevance and adrift. Worse still, it may portend a divided ASEAN as one by one, ASEAN Member States are picked out by the contending extra regional powers to join their ranks leaving the region as divided as it once was.

And lest there be some doubts, given the indivisibility of peace, linking the various sub-regions, today epitomized by the term Indo-Pacific, ASEAN cannot afford to maintain an exclusively Southeast Asia focus. Peace in our region – and the precious peace dividend we have all enjoyed as a result – cannot be secured in isolation from the wider regions.

In short, our past and, not least, our future, instruct that ASEAN respond proactively and urgently to the geopolitical challenges, and opportunities, before it. There really is no “opting out” option.

At the risk of oversimplification, in the face of the current renewed geopolitical challenges, I believe it important that ASEAN provides two-level types or responses: conceptual and policies, each reinforcing the other.

Of the first, I would consider it important for ASEAN to offer an alternative and its own perspective on the management of geopolitical shifts that is fit for the contemporary age and the future. A perspective that secures and consolidates the relevance of the countries of ASEAN in the wider regions’ affairs.

To offer alternative, for instance, to the often-cited notion of balance of power that relies on a stratified idea of power among states and has instead arguably been recipe for the search for preponderance of power by some over the other; providing a catalyst for a chain of action-reaction leading to greater risk of miscalculation. Instead, to recognize, perhaps, that geopolitical shifts and change are permanent features, and that therefore it may be more pertinent to speak of “dynamics of power” rather than “balance of power”, where deciphering states’ intent through intensified diplomacy becomes as equally important as analyzing their military potential.

To offer alternative, for instance, to the notion of security that has innate focus on military capacities and, significantly, is far too often seen as one to be secured at the expense of the other; providing trigger for regional arms race and yet ending up with less sense of security all around. To speak instead of common security, one anchored on recognition that to be sustained and stable, security is a public good to be enjoyed by all states.

To reject that old-age maxim “might is right” and assert instead the sovereign equality of states, large and small. To recognize as well that in this 21st Century, threats to human security take non-traditional form – the current pandemic and climate change challenges for instance - that defy national solution alone and demand cooperative partnership among states. Comprehensive security.

And to offer an alternative to increasingly tiresome debate between proponents of various so-called international “order” which are often viewed with suspicion by the contending parties. Instead, to refer to the common interests states in the region share, without prejudice to the strongly held positions they have on specific dispute situations, to promote predictability of states’ conduct and behaviour aimed at avoiding miscalculations and unintended conflict.

In years past, I used the term “dynamic equilibrium” to describe such alternative perspective and state of affairs. Inherent within it is recognition of the constantly changing nature of power dynamics in the region and the futility of attempts at freeze-framing a particular power constellation as it would falsely set states into two categories, those in favour of retaining the status quo and those determined to revise it and set off a self fulfilling competitive dynamic between them. At the same time, the term “equilibrium” offers acknowledgement that amidst such constantly changing and evolving power dynamic, some degree of stability and predictability of states’ behaviour are still needed. Agreed norms and principles of states’ conduct, anchored on the notion of comprehensive and common security, would guard against an anarchical state of affairs in our region.

However, a perspective such as this, or others for that matter, that ASEAN may rally around, must find manifestation in concrete and relevant steps. The former reminds that ASEAN’s efforts cannot pause as a mere outlook. The latter reminds that ASEAN’s efforts must be responsive to actual prevailing challenges. Any paucity in ASEAN’s timely and relevant response to the region’s perceived challenges guarantees that others would take the mantle: the Quad, AUKUS, intensified China-Russia security cooperation provided only the most recent examples.

This leads me to the second of the two-level types of responses I cited earlier: policies.

While the Indo-Pacific is replete with challenges, on this occasion I merely wish to cite two that are deserving of attention and concrete policy response by ASEAN.

First, the ever-deepening trust deficit among states of the region.

Second, the prevalence of case situations where a relatively minor incident could escalate into major crisis, and even, as a result of miscalculation and a chain of action-reaction, to unintended open conflict.

The renewed trust deficit among key states of the region – cited earlier – have occurred despite decades-long confidence and trust-building efforts by ASEAN. ASEAN-initiated regional processes, including the ARF, the ASEAN dialogue partner relations, the ASEAN+3, EAS, the ADMM Plus, the expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum and the ASEAN-China efforts on the South China Sea have certainly played critical part in providing the wherewithal for establishing communications and, habit of cooperation even, where none existed before. They have also played key role in facilitating the region's transition at the end of the Cold War.

However, it must be said, as these processes acquire more regular and routine character – each with its own well charted plans of actions and programmes – it is difficult to avoid the impression that they have become increasingly disconnected from actual developments on the ground – the South China Sea comes to mind – or from the increasingly tense geopolitical ties in the region, for instance the China-US divisions. The routine annual meeting of the EAS – purposely encompassing the key states of the Indo-Pacific, rather than simply East Asia, and deliberately described as being leaders-led forum - struggles to earn relevance in the face of fast changing geopolitical dynamic and deepening trust deficit.

In my view, ASEAN must empower and utilize the various modalities and processes it has initiated in the past decades that were after all designed

precisely in anticipation of renewed geopolitical rivalries. More specifically, to address the present trust-deficit, the time is ripe for ASEAN to push for a renewed highest-level commitment by states of the Indo-Pacific to the region's peace and security, notwithstanding the real and genuine differences they have. For leaders of states in the Indo-Pacific to take personal charge of the management of the region's commons and place diplomacy at the forefront.

ASEAN has a potential role to play by extrapolating its own experience. The 1976 TAC – setting aside the use of force in settling disputes among signatory countries of Southeast Asia, preferring instead the path of dialogue and diplomacy – has been transformational in gradually ushering strategic trust amongst countries of Southeast Asia and ridding of the trust deficit previously prevalent.

I believe it important for ASEAN to push for similar reaffirmation – at the highest level – of the peaceful intent of states in the Indo-Pacific. Essentially, however complex and intractable some of the disputes and differences between countries of the Indo-Pacific, they are committed to their peaceful management or settlement.

ASEAN already possesses some promising basis. The earlier mentioned TAC has been acceded by significant number of key states in the Indo-Pacific. Speaking only of the past, for Indonesia this situation did not come about by accident. Convinced of the need to broaden the TAC principles to the wider region, Indonesia insisted that accession to the TAC is set as one of the precondition for participation in the EAS. As a result, ASEAN witnessed a positive competitive dynamic, with countries readily acceding to the TAC as they seek participation in the EAS. Further, and not without considerable thought, as Chair of ASEAN in 2011 Indonesia initiated an effort that resulted in the adoption by the leaders of the EAS of the 2011 Declaration of the East Asia Summit on the Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations (“EAS Bali Principles”). Notably, among the twelve principles cited were renunciation of threat of use of force or use of force against another state, consistent with the UN Charter, and settlement of differences and disputes by peaceful means.

Indonesia's goal, at the time, was clear: to apply a TAC-like commitment, this time not only between countries of Southeast Asia, rather also between countries of the EAS as a whole. To project to the wider region ASEAN's own transformative experience in converting trust deficit to strategic trust.

In this connection, I believe it timely for ASEAN to renew the EAS Bali Principles commitment, and more significantly still, to elevate it to a binding commitment in the form of a possible EAS treaty for friendship and cooperation. While a treaty-level commitment may be the ultimate objective, ASEAN may perhaps initially choose to rally the countries of the EAS around their already made commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes. I believe that a renewed highest-level political reaffirmation of peaceful intent would be invaluable in arresting the current ever deepening trust deficit among states of the Indo-Pacific. There cannot be business as usual in the face of the ever deepening geopolitical divides in the Indo-Pacific.

Second, the risk of miscalculation – the misreading of intent - leading to unintended conflict in the Indo-Pacific also deserves attention. The risks have certainly heightened. The prevalence of scenarios involving possibility of nuclear weapon use in the event of the failure of nuclear deterrence and the development and proliferation of new missiles technology and hypersonic weapons, for instance, remind of the immense consequences of miscalculation and also of the further compressed window for decision making during crisis. While cyber attacks – state or non-state – undermine communication systems so critical in managing crisis.

The truth of the matter is, notwithstanding the plethora of regional cooperation processes that ASEAN has given rise to over the years, there is still arguably an absence of a crisis management and response capacity that encompass the Indo-Pacific region and one able to be applied to an emerging crisis in timely manner. There is in a sense, a paradox of plenty.

Preexisting processes, while invaluable in providing regular (in most cases annual) opportunity to exchange views on developments in the region, have been less than effective in responding to fast-developing crisis

situation in a timely manner. In the absence of such regional crisis response capacity, communication between the parties embroiled in a crisis - political, diplomatic or military-to-military - so essential to stabilizing the situation and prevent miscalculation, often quickly fall by the wayside.

I believe it important for ASEAN to initiate the establishment of an effective region-wide crisis response and management capacity. In this, the EAS offers promise. A peace and security council of the EAS, made up of the Permanent Representatives of the EAS countries to ASEAN, may be tasked to deliberate on emerging crisis and given the authority to recommend elevating consideration to the ministerial level and summit level as the situation require. Concurrently, efforts to strengthen military-to-military relations must be enhanced. The existing seven areas for practical cooperation among the ADMM Plus², while invaluable, need to be complemented by the development of a reliable and time-sensitive collective hotline capacity among the participating countries.

Both these steps – reaffirmation of peaceful intent and crisis management capacity – are not premised on an overly optimistic notion of a geopolitical *rapprochement* and reconciliation among the so-called major powers. Nor do they rely on a uniform foreign policy outlook by ASEAN Member States. Rather, they are anchored on the conviction that although geopolitical shifts and rivalries are here to stay, states in the region share a common interest in promoting strategic stability and avoiding unintended conflict. They also suggest that to remain central and relevant, ASEAN cannot simply exhort others to respect their strategic autonomy, rather they must manifest their centrality in concrete policies.

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During its more than five decades existence, obituaries on ASEAN's demise have been written many times over. Yet, time and again ASEAN proved its resilience and emerged from severe tests stronger. Today, it is yet again facing strong headwinds; of twin challenges. The first is the one I have expended on: namely, how to respond to complex geopolitical shifts. The

² Maritime security, counter terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster management, peacekeeping operation, military medicine, humanitarian mine action and cyber security.

second, equally significant, is how to respond to the reality of increasing convergence between the internal or national, and external or international domains. The reality, currently demonstrated on the issue of Myanmar, that developments in its member states, while internal in nature, might have regional repercussions.

Whatever the nature of challenges, whether ASEAN wither or prosper will singularly depend on its own Member States. A confident ASEAN, transformative in its outlook, proactively shaping and molding the region's development through the power of its ideas and initiatives, relentlessly pursued by the resilience and perseverance of its diplomatic efforts, is one that will help ensure an ASEAN that continues to matter. Of an ASEAN waging peace.

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