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Panel III: Remarks

Dr Marty Natalegawa
Member of the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation
and
Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Indonesia (2009–2014)

I would like to begin by sharing with you some of my general impressions about the situation that confronts us today — I must emphasise that it might come across as almost a caricature and stands the risk of oversimplification.

First, there is a convergence of the local, national, regional and global. In a way, we are all used to thinking in terms of these different levels, especially those of us who are involved in foreign policy. But convergence between these levels is becoming an increasingly dominant feature. For instance, one may have a phenomenon that begins initially at the local level that quickly spirals out of control to become nationwide, region-wide and globally. The most dramatic example of this would be developments in the Middle East. The initial optimism associated with the so-called Arab Spring, taking place at the local level in countries such as Tunisia, quickly enveloped entire countries and then the whole region and beyond, becoming a "perfect storm" of geopolitical tensions.

The second convergence — again, at the risk of oversimplification — is that between the political, economic, security and social domains. While all of us are trained and encouraged to think as if these are clearly identifiable pursuits, as a matter of fact, they affect one another and the resolution of one issue tends to require a holistic and comprehensive perspective of all related issues.

Finally, and not least, is the quality of change. If there is one feature of our world today, it is how change is essentially a permanent condition. Uncertainty is a given. However, there is an important qualitative difference between recognising uncertainty and being in a state of drift. A state of drift results from the lack of policy coordination. It is a consequence of policy incoherence and policy inconsistencies.

Crucially, the three features that I mentioned — convergence of the local, national, regional and global; convergence of economic, political and social domains; and the element of constant change — have not led to a world that is increasingly more connected. Logic suggests that we should be promoting a greater sense of cooperative partnership, but actually, somewhat worryingly, what we are seeing at

the moment is greater divergence. Connectivity of the type I mentioned earlier, is not leading to multilateralism and cooperative partnership, but more unilateral tendencies — a “Me-first” orientation — on the part of countries.

Earlier this morning, Pak George Yeo spoke eloquently of the decline of multilateralism. I would wholeheartedly agree with that, except to add that, in my view, it is not only multilateralism versus unilateralism. It is the entire pursuit of managing issues through diplomacy that appears to be in decline. The art of managing disputes through diplomacy, through communications, is increasingly being lost. We had a time when differences were accepted as a fact of life, but we managed those differences. But now, we have situations where countries differ, but they communicate by means other than diplomacy. Words matter and yet, somehow, words have become increasingly side-lined in the management of relations among nations. This is particularly so in the context of rising geopolitical tensions, especially in our part of the world.

In my view, whether it be countries like Singapore or Indonesia, or regional groupings like ASEAN, we must find a way of managing the nexus, the inter-linkages, between the different layers and the different themes. Unless we have a way of managing them, synergising them in a coherent manner, we will be further challenged as a result.

On geopolitical dynamics, I will not spend much time on the US-China dimension because it was extensively discussed this morning. It is a reality that is much recognised. The manifestation is obvious to all of us, whether it be in trade, currency, technology, or geopolitics — South China Sea, East China Sea, cross-Straits developments, the Korean Peninsula etc. The manifestation is crystal clear.

As for the implications for ASEAN, all of us are well aware of how such a push and pull, without an alternative vision from ASEAN, can pull ASEAN apart. But, in my view, the future is not one where one of these sides, either the United States (US) or China, will obtain permanent or definitive ascendancy over the other. I think it is a false choice, for us to predict, as if one will be pre-eminent and therefore we must be on the right side of this competition. I believe that the region — as it has been in the past — has defied dominance of any one particular power, and there is no reason to believe that the future will be otherwise.

More importantly, in the 21st century, the nature of power itself has changed. The currency of power is no longer solely military or economic in the traditional sense. Power is more diffused and is more situation-specific. Therefore, when we speak of, say, the US or China, it is not about anticipating which of them will prevail but about readying ourselves for a period of sustained turbulence. One will sometimes obtain an ascendancy over the other in some areas and then, in different situations, vice versa. In other words, for us in the region, we have to be smart in identifying intent, and not to speak of “balance of power” but to speak of “dynamics of power.” We should not be too preoccupied with looking at quantitative, measurable capacities, but instead apply ourselves to deciphering intent. This is where diplomacy becomes extremely important, to enable us to truly understand what makes the United States and China tick.

My second point on geopolitics is that there are other “bilaterals” out there. Yes, of course, US-China dynamics are extremely important, extremely defining, and of almost existential importance to many countries. But what of US-Russia relations? We are seeing evidence of the return to cold war dynamics in other parts of the world, but thankfully not quite in this part of the world yet. What of China and Japan? Over the past few weeks, we have begun to see fragile evidence of a potential *rapprochement* between the two countries. Surely this is a window of opportunity that ASEAN countries must quickly lock in, or help to lock in. China-Japan relations, be it positive or negative, will have an equally important impact on us compared to the often discussed US-China relations. What about India-China relations and Japan-Republic of Korea relations? In the past couple of days, we have witnessed some episodes between the two countries. These developments matter to us. In other words, without going through the list, we should broaden our horizon. Let us have instruments to deal not only with US-China relations. We should invest in mechanisms and modalities to deal with all these other “bilaterals” that will be confronting us in the future.

This leads me to the last segment of my remarks, which has to do with the policy response by ASEAN. In my view, passivism is not a smart option for ASEAN. ASEAN in the past had demonstrated its capacity to be transformative — the formation of ASEAN itself in 1967 for instance, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 1976, the expansion of ASEAN, and the ASEAN Community project — all have one overriding quality — the quality of a can-do spirit. ASEAN leaders did not simply take the situation as it was but had a bit more of an aspirational and transformative outlook and were often ahead of their time. Sometimes, the moves proved to be redundant, to be not quite what was needed, but we could not be accused of being passive.

Even in our so-called external affairs, ASEAN was growing in confidence, initially in promoting the idea of neutrality for Southeast Asia. The original Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) idea spoke of Southeast Asia as being neutralised - imagine that - it is an active term. We were seeking to have countries neutralise us because the world was too complicated, and we did not want to be torn apart. But then, we went on to develop the idea of resilience for the region. We developed the more ambitious idea of centrality. The vehicles are well known, for instance — the ASEAN Plus Three, the ASEAN Plus Group, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the East Asian Summit process.

My point is that ASEAN has demonstrated that it has more to offer than just its convening power. We created a home for countries to meet and to deliberate, but more than simply being an efficient event organiser, we also provided intellectual and geopolitical leadership. We shaped and moulded the TAC, and that was externalised. We pushed the non-ASEAN countries into a competitive benign dynamic to compete with one another — to outdo one another — to accede to the TAC.

I believe we can do more of this. The Indo-Pacific notion, for instance, that is now much talked about is actually provided for within the East Asia Summit. I recall that when we first discussed the various permutations of the East Asia Summit back in the early 2000s, it was a lengthy debate but we eventually formed the East Asia

Summit which included countries like India, Australia and New Zealand — we were clearly, inherently, and purposefully Indo-Pacific in our outlook.

Now, I return to my point on ASEAN's policy response at this critical and very extremely uncertain juncture. Asking very general "meaning-of-life" questions about what is the Indo-Pacific and what is not the Indo-Pacific is not useful. Instead, we should empower the East Asian Summit and then we can really deliver on ASEAN centrality. Because we already have it. All the countries, and the principles of the Indo-Pacific are in the East Asia Summit. The ASEAN Regional Forum, which we already have, also contains many countries of both the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. But we need to deliver on substance.

We need to make it worthwhile for leaders to come to our capitals every year, beyond discussing procedural issues. On empowering forums such as the East Asia Summit, I believe ASEAN must be crystal clear in identifying what the nature of the problems are, otherwise we will have wonderful proposals and suggestions looking for problems. The problems must be identified before we come to the instruments. In my view, the key problems include the trust deficit amongst nations and the lack of crisis management capacity in this part of the world. I mentioned earlier that there was an episode between Japan and the Republic of Korea, and an episode elsewhere involving countries of Northeast Asia, and, yet, there is a lacuna of action and a time-sensitive forum that can discuss these developments. We have to wait for the next scheduled meeting towards the end of the year in the case of the East Asia Summit. Things happen during the year. We cannot wait for the summit at the end of the year before we can begin to discuss these matters.

All in all, it is a challenging environment. But ASEAN had, in the past, whenever doubts were raised about its continued relevance, managed to reinvent itself and prove its relevance. Over the past year, Singapore has not only chaired ASEAN, but it has also shown tremendous leadership of ASEAN, introducing new areas of cooperation hitherto absent, which is a mark of leadership for member states of ASEAN.

Thank you very much for your time.

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