CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA: AN OVERVIEW[1]

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ABSTRACT

The following are my thoughts drawn from my years as a diplomat. I attempt to make a coherent picture of the state and condition of countries in this region and to make some wise conclusions, even if tentative of whether we are going forward as countries or a group of countries in the context of globalization and all the changes swirling around us. This is easier said than done.

INTRODUCTION

Even as we speak, countries are being indexed on a whole host of performance index on governance, social justice, terrorism, human rights, corruption, environment, social liberties etc. Rating bodies like Bloomberg and the lot determine how reliable countries' economies are with direct impact on their borrowing capacity and investment potential. Recently also one or two of our universities got re-rated in an international rating, which is a disappointment.

Henry Kissinger used to pontificate that the importance of a country can be worked out by looking at a world map and if one erases off a particular country, what would happen to the rest of the world, meaning of course the Western world and the major powers. I assume Henry Kissinger could easily have erased off a number of countries in Africa and Asia in that context.

Then came a different labeling at the end of the Cold War – pivotal states. Examples of these countries are Algeria, Egypt, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, South Africa, Turkey etc, whose rise and fall will have ripple effects across a region if not the globe. The question can be asked as to where Malaysia is placed – always on the radar screen or just a blip, quite inconsequential. The point is no country stands always in one place, barring a few, the rest of us are buffeted, by challenges.

CONFLICTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

As for the region of Southeast Asia, measured in terms of conflict events over the last 15 years since the end of the Cold War, the inter and intra state conflicts in Southeast Asia have certainly been declining. There has been

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sound progress since the Cambodian conflict, the internecine dispute over the South China Sea, the blood bath over East Timor and the challenge in Southern Philippines.

Each of these conflicts has either ended (through the Paris Peace Accord in 1991), wound down (as facilitated by possibilities of joint development between the various claimants in South China Sea), resulted in the independence of East Timor (from Indonesia in 1999). Despite the human tragedy of tsunami, the 30 year conflict in Aceh in Indonesia has also inched towards certain progress and resolution for which the leadership of President Susilo and Yusof Kalla must be congratulated.

There is therefore sufficient basis to believe that other or new conflicts may yet be resolved in the region. Indeed, not until the sudden purge and exit of Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt in the Military Intelligence in Myanmar last October 2004, that even Yangon held out some hope for progress.

Some political prisoners were being released, even Aung San Suu Kyi's situation was not as precarious as a decade ago; before she was re-arrested and placed under house arrest for the second time since May 2004. Now, her detention has been further extended, despite the appeals of the international community and increasing concern from other ASEAN countries.

In the 1980s to 1990s, the tension in Southern Thailand was relatively contained by Bangkok. This was no small achievement in a period when Thailand was undergoing various wrenching upheavals, such as the student demonstration in 1992, which resulted in hundreds of students being killed, and the even more volatile Asian financial crisis between 1997 and 1999.

Yet, today, the 'opening' of Myanmar i.e. national reconciliation and firm steps towards democracy have clearly stalled, while the number of fatalities in Southern Thailand has reached more than 1000 over the last one and a half years, with no sign of any abatement.

Incidents like the raid at the Krue Se Mosque in May 2004, and the massacre in Tak Bai in October 2004, including the most recent spill-over of 131 Thai (Muslim) refugees to Malaysia, have certainly done much to put a question mark on relations between Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur and bedeviled the whole issue.

Thus, what explains the decline of one set of conflicts, only to see seemingly pacific locales either showing enormous intransigence in moving towards any form of peace, or heading towards separatists' violence?

The answer, perhaps, lies in the 'poor fit' between the prevailing regime type and the populist expectations of various sub-groups who have never felt wanted, needed, for that matter, at all integrated, into the prevailing structures of power. This can be argued as an over generalization but it has relevance and application in almost all countries in the region and to a degree also in Malaysia.

Take the Muslim Rohingyas in Myanmar, for instance. In 1995, when the world began to learn about the wretched state of the minority group, no one gave it any sustained attention. To this date, more than 5 million Rohingyas are denied the most basic form of citizenship in Myanmar, let alone human rights. Circa 2005, the livelihood of Rohingyas has not improved

one bit. One day, there is a possibility that even the generally peaceful Rohingyas who straddle between the borders of Myanmar and Bangladesh and parts of India, may also take up arms. When this happens, the international community may then point to radical Islam again, when in fact the root causes are due to dispossession, and systemic discrimination, giving the Rohingyas practically no way out.

The same can be said about Pattani Muslims, whose alienation from Bangkok, though not as severe as Rohingyas, have certainly riled some elements within the provinces to consort with organized crime and other seedy elements to launch various forms of killings against the Thai military, police and certain Buddhists.

The re-election of Thaksin, and the threats of the removal of economic aid in 2002 by Thai Rak Thai party has aggravated the feelings of the Pattani Muslims in the south. The quality of life in the south pales in comparison to their northern countrymen to begin with. Much of the lands in the south belong to owners in the north. Bangkok is making the mistake of trying to assimilate the Muslims of Southern Thailand.

Over in Indonesia, while the containment of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has certainly been consistent, the random bombings have not stopped. Since the Kuta bombings in October 2002, coupled with the JW Marriot bombing in 2003 and the Australian embassy bombing in 2004, the remnants of JI remain active.

Certainly, there are signs that conflicts in Southeast Asia, especially those in southern Thailand and Indonesia, may acquire an 'extremist-religious trajectory' though it is not conceivable that their efforts will remove or change governments. But terrorism obtains a certain pleasure in defying the odds. In the case of Myanmar, there are reasons for fear the occurrence of serious humanitarian crisis through increasing HIV and tuberculosis as well as ethnic unrest.

As Southeast Asia moves into the 21st century ready to embrace globalization – with no real plans on the part of ASEAN on how to cushion the livelihoods of the millions who will also be dispossessed by globalization – it should also be ready to accept the inevitability of coming face to face with political and amoral form of political violence.

In South Asia, for instance, it has begun to dawn on Islamabad and New Delhi that they have to stay engaged in their peace process, even if the dispute over Kashmir remains a key bone of contention. If anything, their nuclear status compel them to exercise greater restraint, lest terrorist elements provoke the two into an unnecessary dogfight, though there are many loose elements that cannot be all taken account of in that subcontinent.

The future conflicts in Southeast Asia may well be animated by what Charles Morrison of East West Center calls root causes. These are:

1. Disaffection with the regime type and authorities in the regimes;
2. Displeasure with the authoritarian excesses of the regimes'
3. The belief that change cannot occur unless through violence.

But there are three aggravating factors too, such as,
a.   Endemic poverty
b.   Persistent discrimination
c.   Indirect empowerment from trans-organised networks of criminal groups. For example the United Wa State Army working with criminals in opium trafficking in Myanmar.

These factors combined will see the conflicts being perpetuated partly by violence in the name of religion and launched with the aid of international criminal groups or gun running networks. And the populations in those affected areas are helplessly under the pressure of these elements. In the case of Myanmar, there are tens of thousands of internally displaced persons and equally numerous refugees along the Thai/Myanmar border.

In the future, the conflicts will not necessarily change as they will go underground. Due to the asymmetry of power, information, resources and other factors between the regime and the aggrieved individuals/groups, violence will certainly go under ground. It will become a form of 'garage terrorism', where groups find everything at their disposals to maim and kill, often through home made materials.

Invariably any attempt to use purist military solutions to solve what are essentially political problems, such as the imbroglio in Southern Thailand, will see groups splintering into smaller, but by necessity, deadlier cells. These cells will probably have narrow membership, be intensely loyal to one another and are not afraid of learning the deadliest methods to further their causes. It is a moot point whether these elements are learning from Sri Lanka, the original users of suicide missions or are inspired by violence and techniques in Iraq, perpetrated also by the United States.

To prevent crazed groups from becoming lethal cells, the interventionist and developmental efforts of the government must not only concentrate on groups but be able to restore the dignity, independence, and honour of the individuals too, in other words, to win their hearts and minds.

RESOLVING CONFLICTS EFFECTIVELY

This requires a move – not towards authoritarianism – but a political culture that celebrates human rights, and protects human dignity. Only when citizens have human rights and honour would they then be able to call the bluff of the suicide recruiters. This also requires recognition of remedial steps to reduce the increasing wealth gap between those in the region getting richer and those getting poorer. In Myanmar, clearly the regime is moving towards entrenchment of military control, even if with some nominated civilian elements. The tragedy would be the further marginalization of the people of Myanmar, 52 million, who see their neighbours far ahead of them in development and opportunities to prosper. The other tragedy will be ASEAN, being stigmatized by Myanmar.

At a time when globalization is intensifying, countries should develop capacities to solve conflicts fairly and effectively. In other words, conflicts

should be solved with comprehensive political and economic package. This is because once conflicts flare into the open, there are bound to be all sorts of implications over the long term as in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Iraq which will drag on with increasing casualties also for the US.

Solutions must be tailor-made in a way to be comprehensive and holistic. To achieve this outcome, however, the state must seek to reform itself just as completely too. In fact, contrary to the local roots of the conflicts, often times the trigger is due to the inability of the state to ensure proper governance. In Indonesia, although the conflicts that flared up after the Asian financial crisis in 1997-1998 are due to economic adversity, some of the conflicts in Maluku, Polo, and Irian Jaya are also due to the iron-fisted rule of the regime since the 1960s. In fact, the malfeasance and predatory nature of the state often plant the sources of conflict in the first place.

In Myanmar, although there have been 17 cease-fire agreements with different ethnic groups since 1997, the likelihood with which these armistice could hold depends on the behaviour and integrity of the regime too. If the regime were to collapse or undergo any form of wrenching internal problems, the brittle peace with different ethnic groups, especially the Shan and Karen national fighters, could break down.

That the state is both the source and the solution of the conflicts imply that leaders must exercise good strategic sense to end the conflicts permanently. They have to clean up their act as well as the military and bureaucracy, which may have gained from the conflicts. This is not an easy job because the political economy of war usually suggests that the police, the generals and the bureaucrats may have developed entwined interest in the conflicts. Allowing the conflicts to slow burn could well serve their interest more than is otherwise the case. It is here where leaders must lay down clear ground rules and time-tables as to how and when the conflicts must end. Third parties could also help by allowing the disputants to appoint their peacemakers, or by proxy, to negotiate the solutions. But whatever that is decided, both the leaders and insurgents must show the enlightened leadership to end the conflicts with comprehensive solutions.

It was once said, especially at the height of the Cold War, that Southeast Asia is the cockpit of great power rivalry. After all, it came close to being Balkanized by different powers in the 1960s. Remember we were fed with the spectre of the Yellow Peril from Chinese communism when in fact we had as much to fear from neocolonialism of the West in the name of the "free world".

By 1968, the United States had stationed more than 500,000 troops in south Vietnam, followed by attempts by China and the Soviet Union to counter this influence by supporting various insurgencies in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

The conflicts observed in Asia were mainly "imported" from abroad. The Vietnam War was due to the ideological conflict between US and the Soviet Union. In the years to come, Southeast Asia cannot avoid such international dimensions completely, given that Southeast Asia cannot effectively insulate itself from the pressures of great powers completely.

Consider also the immense powers of global companies and multinationals of industrialized countries; Walmart is bigger than Indonesia, General Motors has the combined earnings of Ireland, New Zealand and Hungary. These MNCs are acquiring firms in various regions to strengthen their supply chain, protect their proprietary technology and to wipe out competition as globalization proceeds.

In future, Southeast Asia will find itself pressured by the US to conform to its grand strategy in Asia and possibly the world, courted by China (such as the Free Trade Agreement) to jettison it, and coaxed by India to allow New Delhi to play a greater role in East Asia.

These three cross currents may, or may not, neutralize each other. But it is the geopolitical fate – one might say, *karma* – of Southeast Asia to have to deal ably with all three. At this moment the Summit of East Asian countries are bringing out the dynamics that will play out whether ASEAN countries can continue to be in the driving seat or more probably, countries like China, India and Japan calling the tune.

And, one has to include to an extent, Australia too. So, Southeast Asia will find itself in the unique position of being 'cornered' by all, a mix of the political, economic and value strategies that will influence Southeast Asian governments.

The problem with being the centre of attention is that one tends to believe that geopolitics alone can make one survive. This is a fallacy. Southeast Asia has hundreds of millions of mouths to feed – 480 million by one count – it cannot indulge in playing this great game without reforming its economy, making sure it can confront globalization, and can produce healthy and equitable economic growth for its relatively young population.

If anything, the powers above already possess the mission – and vision – to forge ahead. They will try to compete among themselves geo-politically and economically. The effect of such a situation is that their citizens would stand a better chance of dealing with the pressures of hyper competition. Indian and Chinese graduates, for instance, are already more employable than those in Southeast Asia, even though Southeast Asia has had a head start of nearly 35 years.

THE CHALLENGES FOR ASEAN

Cynics can argue that the ASEAN Security Community, the ASEAN economic and the ASEAN Cultural community, all of which should be achieved by 2020 can turn out to be mere pieces of paper. ASEAN's separate parts, the nation states, some of them like Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, are stronger in their own entity than the total sum of ASEAN. This is an in-built mechanism within ASEAN countries. Member countries compete intensely against each other despite agreeing to AFTA. Earlier visions of complementary industries have not been translated to realities. But economic initiatives alone, it can be argued, will not attract high levels of investor confidence, especially in view of terrorist bombings and the outbreak of SARS. Related to this is the concern that ASEAN will loose in diplomatic

influence if it shows itself unwilling to take on difficult issues involving member countries. This is seen as a major constraint on ASEAN's development as a key player in international fora. ASEAN lacks an authoritative coordinating mechanism to provide policy direction and leadership. ASEAN's lack of cohesiveness and its reliance on ad hoc responses to security issues in particular, limits its ability to influence international policies in accordance with its own objectives.

Not all members share the perception that a measure of political integration is required. There is no consensus on how ASEAN might pursue a strong proactive role in conflict prevention and peace-building initiatives. It can be argued that this cautious approach is reflective of a lack of common purpose and vision in the integration process as a whole. While all members may agree that some degree of regional integration is inevitable particularly given the economic benefits from close cooperation, there are different perceptions of what is possible and necessary.

Is there a willingness on the part of the member states to countenance the creation of a stronger regional institution, invariably one that would further harness the process of integration that is already at work in the region? The question should be posed primarily to the Indochina countries, including Myanmar. While it is laudable to steer ASEAN towards the direction of an ASEAN Charter, it is equally crucial to address some of the cultural and organizational issues within ASEAN that have hindered its true growth. Only when such systematic reforms are undertaken would the ASEAN Charter acquire its true meaning.

In Southeast Asia, the language and vocabulary that define its search for security remain trapped in conservative measures. One wonders if such conservatism is enough for a world that is spinning and changing at warp speed, especially given the increasing importance of digitization, deregulation and democratization.

My experience as a diplomat tells me that global processes do not take prisoners. When things begin to change, they change wildly and rapidly. Take environmental issues, for instance.

Over the last few years, the regularity and intensity of environmental catastrophe have increased. By 2010, the United Nations expect 50 million more environmental refugees all over the world due to global warming. The Katrina Hurricane has shown the devastating impact of the force of nature, just as the Indian Ocean tsunami affected more than 14 countries in less than 2 hours it took for the gigantic waves to disperse.

Right now, there exist no visionary or great leaders to provide the necessary direction for the ASEAN region. It is unfair to say that the political language of the current leaders is still linked to the age-old nationalism, when in fact regionalism and cosmopolitanism are truly needed. Yet no leaders have stood out to vouch for the importance of human rights, or to build institutions that would strengthen the modernization and upgrading of values for the region as a whole.

All said, we live in an age where power and wealth are concentrated in very few countries, and clusters of companies. These trends will not change

in the foreseeable future. Whether the priorities of countries are in wealth accumulation or human development, they must not impose their agendas from top down. These are decisions that can affect the lives of millions. The people have to be consulted, which is why democracy, elections, and the rule of law are crucial.

ENDNOTES

[1] Keynote speech delivered at the International Conference on Southeast Asia (ICONSEA), Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, 13 Dec 2005.