

GEOPOLITICAL SCENARIO OF THE ASEAN REGION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Qasim Ahmad

Introduction

ASEAN was founded in 1967 as a five member economic regional grouping. At that time the Cold War, or its very manifestation, was raging at ASEAN's very doorstep. But ASEAN had always wanted to play down any political aspect of the organization. This political restraint was so designed because the founding members (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) 'did not want ASEAN to be mistaken for a military grouping among political allies - as some of its predecessors had been. ¹

ASEAN, from the very beginning had also strived to keep itself out of any big power conflict. This aspiration was embodied in the November 1971 Kuala Lumpur Declaration proclaiming ASEAN as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality. In this connection, the ASEAN members took it upon themselves to ensure that the region would be 'free from any manner of interference by outside powers. ²

Concentrating on trade and economics, eschewing any form of excessive military buildup or overt internal arms race, with no member state basing its national interest and policy on any overt political ideology, shying away from any form of conspicuous alignment with any of the then two reigning superpowers, the organization had little difficulty in maintaining its independent stance. The Philippines's hosting of the American forces stationed at the Clark Bay until the 1980s was possibly the only real and very notable exception to this.

But of course the ASEAN 5 then was more than sympathetic to the American effort of trying to prevent the actualization of the much bandied around domino theory. It was just that Asean could

¹ Association of Southeast Asian Nations: Overview, <http://www.aseansec.org/92.htm> p.1.

² *Ibid.* p.2.

not afford to be ensnared into the military exercise, the indirect assistance to the Americans given by some of its members notwithstanding.

The regional body further cosseted itself from any possible danger of interlocking dispute by tenaciously adhering to the principle of non-interference in the conduct of inter-state affairs. The ASEAN policy towards the Cambodian conflict in the 1980s must surely count amongst the most visible signs, if not the very epitome, of this policy. Repugnant though the Pol Pot regime was in more ways than one, the organization could not bring itself to approve of the Vietnamese incursion into Cambodia to dislodge the Khmer Rouge dictatorship. That the ASEAN leaders found themselves to be in the same position as the Americans and in opposition to that of the Communist block on the Issue was, presumably, to them but an unintended coincidence.

The Post Cold War Era

The fall of Communism in Eastern Europe saw the end of the role of the USSR as a superpower. With that and with China slowly but steadily imbibing the philosophy and practice of free market economy, Communism ceased to be the ever dreaded threat or bogey that it once was, the Damocles sword waiting to fall! The new era paved the way for ASEAN to open up its membership to the Communist state of Vietnam which eventually joined the organization in July 1995, twenty years after the end of the Vietnam War and eleven years after Brunei Darussalam was accepted into ASEAN. In 1997, Laos and Myanmar followed suit and with the entry of Cambodia in 1999 ASEAN has become a ten member organization that it is now.

If the entry of Vietnam had emphasized the non ideological nature of ASEAN, the membership of Myanmar had underlined the other maxim that had guided the affairs of ASEAN all along: that of non-interference in the affairs of any of its member, or potential member, states. ASEAN leaders, especially the Malaysian Prime Minister, YAB Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, had to fight a running diplomatic battle with spokesmen for the ED and the United States, two parties which vehemently opposed ASEAN's plan to accord Myanmar a place in the regional body. To both Washington and Brussels, Myanmar, because of its poor human rights record and tainted democratic credentials, does not deserve to be admitted into ASEAN as a full-fledged member. Dr. Mahathir brushed aside such criticisms. In an interview the transcript of which was published

in May 1997, two months before Myanmar became a member of ASEAN, the Prime Minister reiterated his stand on the issue,

*I see no reason why we should take into consideration internal matters when we come together. We, too, have been guilty of the same things these other countries are accused of. For example, during the Ferdinand Marcos period there was no democracy in the Philippines, but we never asked them to leave ASEAN. There was a time in Thailand when there was a military leadership, yet we did not ask them to leave. And our democracies are not the same. We have different concepts of democracy. I don't think we should hold this against any member country.*³

Post September 11 2001

There is no denying that the September 11 incident had wrought changes to world politics, the full implication of which has yet to be fully witnessed and understood. At the outset it does seem that the sole remaining superpower, or the hyper power, has found a new adversary in place of Communism of the Cold War era. The new enemy is terrorism, in whatever guises as perceived by Capitol Hill. In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 incident President Bush had bellowed out a call to rally all and sundry to the American side with his 'you are either with us or against us' ultimatum. It was a curt choice or an unambiguous usage of words that was none too pleasing to the ears of many and even resented by some. It, some might argue, borders on both a gross simplification of the political situation in the real world and burning vengeance on the part of the US. However now, long after the dust of the World Trade Center has settled but the incessant bombardment of Iraq still fresh in our collective memory, we might want to reflect again upon those very words of Mr. Bush. What could be the underlying or overriding message that he wants to convey to the world at large? A message that the world, ASEAN included, like it or not, has but to take due cognizance of.

Realpolitik

It is a popular tenet, or rather the norm, even if one does not fully approve of it, that whoever wins the war shapes the ensuing peace. Thus following the First World War (1914-18) the

³ ASIaweek, 9.5. 1997, <http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/97/0509/cs2.html>

political map of Europe and beyond was redrawn by the victors. The United States which came to the war at its tail end but played a critical role in bringing about the triumph of the Triple Alliance (Britain, France and Italy) left its defining influence upon the peace settlement that followed. The principle of 'right to self-determination' as espoused in the Woodrow Wilson Fourteen Points became a basis upon which the decision that saw the emergence of a number of new nation-states after the war was made.⁴

Similarly it was the victors of the Second World War (1939-45) and their allies that divided Europe (and later by extension and proxy the world) into their respective spheres of influence. They too lay the framework and the ground rules for the United Nations established in the aftermath of that war. It is the victors or those closely allied to them that manned the Security Council and are bestowed with the all important veto power. The other members of the United Nations can protest all they like about the undemocratic nature of this particular institution of the world body; the battering ram hammered at the door is not likely going to force the veto wielding members of the Security Council to relinquish their shared privilege. The fact that they have found themselves to be where they are, in an elevated political position, has got nothing to do with any democratic process but everything with power. It is a question of *realpolitik*.

The West or the US won the Cold War because, as Martin Walker puts it, unlike the USSR, 'its economy proved able to supply guns as well as butter, aircraft carriers *and* private cars, rockets as well as foreign holidays for an ever increasing proportion of its

taxpayers.⁵ It would be imprudent, or simply crass political naivety, to expect that the US would now studiously refrain from utilizing for her own benefit the victory that she had secured over her long-time political rival, a triumph that had come about as a result of great effort and immense expenditure. Call it what one may, 'a new world order' or whatever, the post-Cold War world has to bear the stamp of American power and hegemony. Indirectly the US had already benefited from the defeat of the Soviet Union: the Kremlin's sphere of influence has all but gone. As for the rules of the UN Security Council, they were already in tatters even before the war on

⁴ See Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914 – 1991* (London: Abacus, 1994). P.31.

⁵ Martin Walker, *The Cold War And The Making of the Modern World* (London: Vintage, 1994) P.1.

Iraq started. With the new found and unchallengeable might of the US, they (the Security Council rules) have become rather irrelevant. For the US the inability of anyone else to restrain its power has become, an added prize for winning the Cold War.

The American Century?

How would the US further shape and utilize the peace or the period of the post Cold War and now of the post Iraqi War? The answer cannot be more obvious and simple: in a way that would serve its own national interest of course. And surely that interest could best be served if the US continues to hold the ultimate power unchallenged. There is nothing to be apologetic about this as should another country be in the position that the US is in now, she (the other country) would also, certainly, want to consider and uphold her very own national interest paramount.

As to how the US national interest is to be framed and as to whether that interest is being threatened directly or indirectly, in the immediate future or in the long run and as to how best should the US respond to any real or perceived threat are questions that are best left to the US alone to grapple with and answer. Surely only the US alone, or the relevant policy makers in the US, can be trusted to weigh and answer these questions in the appropriate manner. The ultimate fate and very survival of the US power and hegemony could not be left to the deliberations at the UN Security Council nor the council of 'Old Europe' or any other multi-lateral arrangement.

The Geopolitical Scenario of the ASEAN Region

Geopolitics, from the German *geopolitik*, stresses on the critical influence that geographical variables like location, size, topography, demography, natural resources, environment and the like has on the conduct of foreign policy or international relations. Factors like technological development and potential are also taken into consideration. The geopolitical approach to international affairs is also normally or heavily couched in the lexicons of *realpolitik* and is therefore very much concerned with security, survival and the long-term political scenario. It is all about power utilization and mechanism, unhindered by and not the least tempered with any moral notions or underpinnings.

Renyi Cao in one of his writings has defined geopolitics to mean 'the social and political relationship among the people or countries which live or are located in the same region or geopolitical environment.'⁶ The region in which the ASEAN countries are located is that of the Asian Pacific. Asia-Pacific can further be subdivided into Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and West Pacific. Surveying this region in 2000, Renyi Cao sees it as consisting of one superpower (the US), two economic powers (the US and Japan), four military powers (the US, Russia, China and Japan) and five political forces (the US, Russia, China, Japan and ASEAN).⁷ Now, three years later, one might want to dispute this classification what with China fast emerging as an economic power, the absence from the list of the two new nuclear powers in South Asia as well as the US close ally, Australia, and the recent and incessant saber rattling by North Korea.

The Moderate Stance of ASEAN

Given that ASEAN is only a force and not a power in whatever sense (political, economic or military) and that the organization itself was not founded, in the first place, on any specific ideological base, with a scripted political goal to pursue, it is unlikely that it is ever going to attempt to directly challenge let alone confront any agenda that the US has laid down for itself within or beyond the region. It is, in a way, a simple case of ASEAN needing the US more than the US ASEAN. ASEAN as a whole had no problem in going along with the US policy onslaught against terrorism. There might be regrets at the fact that the US does not seem to be too keen to go to the roots of terrorism and there might also be an uneasiness at the choice of the word 'crusade' to describe the American led endeavour but the regrets and uneasiness are not about to unleash ASEAN from the Os project.

Understandably it is Indonesia and Malaysia, ASEAN members with dominant Muslim populace, that have found it difficult to accept the US anti terrorism policy wholesale. Yet their commitment towards combating terrorism has not been in doubt, even though another ASEAN member, Singapore, had openly voiced its dissatisfaction or concern at what it saw as the not so combative a stand of the Indonesians on the matter.

⁶ Renyi Cao 'Vision of Security of the Asian-Pacific Region' ACDIS Occasional Paper, http://www.acdis.uiuc.edu/hompage_docs/PDF_Files/Cao%20...

⁷ *Ibid.*

Malaysia's position on the issue, on the other hand, has been acknowledged by President George W. Bush. On the occasion of Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir's visit to Washington in

May 2002 the US President took the opportunity to 'thank the Prime Minister for his strong support in the war against terror.'⁸

While many were still rankling over the appropriate definition of the term 'terrorism' and the effective way of tackling it, the war on Iraq erupted in the third week of March 2003. The way the US went about conducting the war, by bypassing the UN Security Council, understandably created further and weightier problems for ASEAN member states like Indonesia and Malaysia. Both countries had voiced their opposition to the US fiery initiative while Singapore and the Philippines backed the Washington action. The political division in ASEAN, like the one in EU, could not be clearer. The meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers held in Karambunai Sabah on the eve of the war on Iraq failed, not surprisingly, to elicit any joint ASEAN statement on the issue.

Could this resistance to or uneasiness with an important aspect of the US foreign policy amongst some members of ASEAN cause problems to the otherwise or hitherto excellent ASEAN-US relations? Admittedly the ASEAN-US relations had by no means been free of discord prior to September 11 2001. The most discernible political irritant in the relations arguably has been the Myanmar/Burma problem. The Myanmar/Burma issue of course pre-dated September 11. However, there is one significant difference between the two issues: in the case of Myanmar/Burma issue ASEAN has a united stand but in that of Iraq it has none.

Pragmatism

As the dissonance with the US veers towards becoming more complicated, ASEAN (or at least those members of ASEAN directly entangled in it) needs to exercise more caution. This

⁸ *New Straits Times*, May 16, 2002, p. 1. Coinciding with the Washington visit, the two countries signed a declaration on co-operation to combat international terrorism. *Ibid.* p. 2.

obviously has been done and seems to have been appreciated, as far as it could be discerned thus far,' across both sides of the divide. The guiding principle behind this move, it seems, is sheer pragmatism.

Datuk Abdullah Badawi, who was the Malaysian Acting Prime Minister when the war in Iraq broke out, clearly emphasized that Malaysia was against the specific unilateral military action of the US in Iraq and not against the US *per se*. In his address to the nation he cautioned Malaysians, Muslim Malaysians no doubt, against responding to the development in Iraq in a rash or emotional manner. Malaysia's Defence Minister, Dato' Mohd. Najib Tun Razak, while saying that the country could not prevent Malaysians who on their own want to go to Iraq to fight in the battle, nevertheless stressed that helping the Iraqi war victims through donations to lighten their sufferings is also a form of *jihad*.⁹

Like the Malaysian leadership, Megawati of Indonesia was equally upset and disturbed at the event in Iraq. The public rallies against the war had seen thousands of Indonesians venting their anger against the Bush administration. But Jakarta was quick to dismiss the call, reminiscent of a previous era, for Indonesia to quit the United Nations (presumably in protest against the apparent ineffectiveness of the world body in handling the Iraqi conflict.)

Malaysia's pragmatism no doubt is driven by the consideration of trade and investment. Malaysia currently is the 10th largest source of imports for the US, the world biggest economy. In recent years the US annual import from Malaysia is worth around US20 billion dollars. Besides an important trading partner the US also has a great deal of investment in Malaysia. The US ambassador to Malaysia, Marie T. Huhtala has indicated her understanding of Malaysia's delicate tight rope walking in the matter. In a recent interview she has this to say,

We are looking to our traditional friends like Malaysia to stay friendly with us. In the case of Malaysia, we understand that the Government does not support the

⁹ See *Daily Express*, 4.4.2003, p.4 and *Harian Ekspres*, 4.4.2003, p.2.

*war, but we hope that we can count on the Government to be mindful of the very important interests that we have between our countries.*¹⁰

The Risk In Rhetoric

As long as the varied posturings in the conduct of foreign policies are understood for what they are by all parties involved, there is no danger of it getting out of control. The other members of ASEAN might want Indonesia and Malaysia to respond to a conflict in the Middle East (or West Asia) not so much as Islamic states would but more as Southeast Asian nation-states, which are also members of ASEAN, located as it is in a different part of the world. Short of saying so openly, they might want each and every member of the regional organization to view its own respective national interest and the collective interest of the regional body in the traditional and strictest sense of the Westphalian concept of the nation-state.

The upholding of the state interest ideology and one that is Southeast Asian region based might not be easy for both Malaysia and Indonesia as the two are also members of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Currently Malaysia is also the Chairman of the Non Alignment Movement and because of that she might also think that she has to be somewhat vocal on such a high profile international question. It does help in a way that the OIC members have not all reacted in the same way to the war in Iraq even though all, or almost all, are against it. It might make it just possible, in this sense, for Malaysia and Indonesia to be anti America in a selective and restricted manner. Their overlapping membership of ASEAN and OIC requires them to be astutely dexterous diplomatically, donning the OIC chador when protesting against the US policy on a specific political issue and the ASEAN *tudung* when dealing with the US in terms of the broad economic field.

The posturing, with an eye to different constituencies and sub constituencies, domestic and international, could only be sustained, one might hazard, if the US understands and is willing to tolerate it. On the other hand, it could also, should the situation changes and if the US so wishes, be used against the very parties attempting to have their cake and eat it too. Anyhow, these very powers could not perhaps enjoy a relationship with the US as expedient as the one enjoyed by

¹⁰ See *New Straits Times*, 7.4. 2003, p.2.

others that have always had a straightforward and consistent pro US position. Therein lies the risk involved in the practice of posturing, an art though it is. Considering the risk, no matter how remote one might think it is, it is judicious therefore not to overplay it.¹¹ At the same time every attempt should be made to nip in the bud any development of a situation that might call for it (the posturing) to be utilized or exercised.

To Fall In Line: Knowing One's Station In Life

After the fall of Iraq, an official US spokesman let out a gentle message that, depending on how one reads into it, has a very far-reaching implication. He said that the US expects other nations in the region to take the necessary cue from the event in Iraq. The US, he says, does not wish to repeat the exercise in Iraq elsewhere but does hope that other nations in the region do change in the way that Iraq is going to change. As one correspondent puts it the US is not going to allow, from now on, any nation the luxury of even or ever thinking of threatening the US interest.

Respecting, pandering to or looking after the US interest by any party should not be conceived as being subservient to the US. From the vantage point of Washington, if not middle America, whatever mores that the US brings to the periphery could only be for the general good of all. For the US, or for that matter any leading nation at any particular period of human history, abandoning such a belief would tantamount to discarding the very *raison detre* for leadership. The US, one can safely imagine, is not about to embark on such a journey. Accepting such a premise must be the starting point of any exercise that hopes to nip in the bud any development that could irritate the US and invite its fury.

Admittedly, different parties will draw different lessons from what had happened in Iraq.¹² To the North Koreans, already embarking on the last leg of its nuclear programme, what had happened to Baghdad is seen as a vindication of its own defence build-up. But of course ASEAN is not North Korea and cannot be one.

¹¹ See *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 10, 2003, p.8.

¹² See Jonathan Freed land, 'Are tyrants shocked, awed or stocking up on nukes?' *The Guardian*, April 12, 2003. *Guardian Unlimited* <http://guardian.co.uk>.

Internal Conflict Within ASEAN

If some members of ASEAN can hope to deftly maneuver their diplomatic positions with regard to disputes or conflicts outside or far away from the ASEAN region, the exercise or task might not be that easy if the crisis is in ASEAN itself or involves its member states. The whole thing could become even more complicated if big power interests or considerations of long term security are dragged into it as well. In such a scenario it might render it difficult for the US to simply stay on the sidelines. To forestall such an eventuality, something that might negate ASEAN's aspiration of maintaining the region as a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality, it is incumbent for ASEAN to resolve whatever festering conflict or running dispute still in existence in any part of ASEAN.

Conflicts And Crises Within ASEAN

Besides the Myanmar issue already mentioned above, other crises within ASEAN include the fighting in southern Philippines and the Spratly Islands dispute. The Myanmar impasse is, in many respects, internally directed in that the military leaders running the country are not known for backing or championing anti US causes. While the US has imposed economic sanctions on Myanmar and has openly supported the Aung San Suu Kyi led National Democratic League, the US does not seem at the moment to be, relatively speaking, too preoccupied with the issue.

The conflict in southern Philippines is decidedly in a different mould altogether. It differs in many ways from the one in Myanmar. It involves fighters that are held (by the US) to have connections with anti-US militants. It is not surprising therefore that the US has taken a more direct interest in what is happening there - even to the extent of sending its forces to the area. In the post -Iraqi war situation that we are in now there would surely be voices calling for, if not pressures exerted towards, the speedier resolution of this conflict.

The US military presence in the Philippines is a bi-lateral matter between the Philippines and the US. For the rest of the ASEAN members, abiding by the non-interference in the affairs of other states principle, the presence of about 300 US troops in the Philippines is, strictly speaking, a non issue.

The Spratly Islands Dispute

Unlike many other crises in the region the Spratly Islands dispute, directly drags not only a number of ASEAN member-states but also a country outside the organization, China. This requires the issue to be handled in a delicate way so as to prevent it from ever spilling over into a bigger arena.

In terms of geopolitics the sea-lanes of Southeast Asia is of great importance to many countries, both within the region and beyond. It is estimated that in anyone year these sea-lanes handle over US\$ 1 trillion worth of trade. China's share of this trade is around US\$ 100 billion annually or about 16% of her GDP. China is not expected to embark on or risk any conventional war in Southeast Asia, which inadvertently could also be a prelude to a US entanglement. A conflict of that dimension could derail her current and booming economic development. This kind of political assessment fits in well surely with the perception of observers who view China as a non-aggressive power.

If a conventional war initiated by China seems unlikely, debatable though the contention is, there remains the fear that the dispute over the Spratly Islands could just get out of hand and the spark could come from any of the disputants: Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. (Indonesia is not one of the claimants but her position regarding jurisdiction over the waters near the Natuna Islands is being compromised or threatened by the Chinese claims.) Anyone of the disputants might simply, for whatever reason, not have enough confidence in China's profession of or commitment to an amicable settlement to the dispute and might therefore want to seek leverage from the US. This skepticism can arise because it has been said that 'China's notion of a settlement is one that endorses China's claims, and Beijing's definition of "joint development" is foreign participation in the exploitation of China's resources.'¹³

There is also the possibility that the US, in order to square off whatever differences that might occur in her future relations with China, or to pursue an intermediate or distant geopolitical

¹³Evan A. Feigenbaum, Chapter Three' China's Potential Military Threat To Southeast Asia' www.rand.org/publications/MR/MRI170/MI170 p. 21 and Leszek Buszynski, ASEAN Security Dilemmas,' *Survival*, Vo1.39, No.4, Winter 1992- 1993.

interest, might find it convenient to get involved in the conflict, with or without encouragement and/or invitation from anyone of the disputants.

Conclusion

In the new international scenario now unfolding, the least that ASEAN can do to strengthen its commitment towards ensuring that the region remains a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality is to make sure that whatever internal dispute that exists within its borders is resolved amicably and perhaps also swiftly. Steps towards such an end should be seriously pursued in order to avoid the possibility of it (the conflict) being exacerbated and/or spilling over beyond the borders of ASEAN. Theoretically, there is little that ASEAN could do to ward off any physical foreign encroachment that is both massive and sustained. However, the creation of a situation that can discourage it is, hopefully, not something that ASEAN is incapable of. That perhaps is the very least ASEAN could do in the new era when the consideration of geopolitics has become such an important factor, and in all likelihood would continue to be so, in international relations.

qasim@salam.uitm.edu.my