

Can ASEAN be Indo-Pacific Manager?



Interview with Bilahari Kausikan

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1. Pak Bila, we are going to talk about the Indo-Pacific but also more specifically about ASEAN's role in the situation of a very volatile, uncertain, and always changing geopolitical landscape that is found in the region now. So, the basic question of this interview is about: from ASEAN's perspective and angle, can ASEAN be an Indo-Pacific manager? If yes, in what condition and what are the requirements for us to become the Indo-Pacific manager?

First of all, there is an issue of definition. What do you really mean by the Indo-Pacific manager? What do you mean by the manager? I think we obviously have a role to play because we are part of the region whether you want to call it Indo-Pacific or the Asia Pacific, we are there.

Furthermore, we are in a very crucial position as the connecting point between the Indian and Pacific oceans from which the Indo-Pacific takes its name. So, I think we have a role, but whether our role is that of 'manager' is another matter. What do we mean by manager? I think we should confront and we should not deny a very important fact. Even though it is not something that is very pleasant.

While we have a crucial location as the connecting point. I think it is a fact, it has always been a fact that the strategic centre of gravity of this region has been either in the North East or in the South West, in South Asia, it is not Southeast Asia. And the reason for this is a very simple one.

I know Indonesia is a big country, Vietnam is not a small country either, and collectively ASEAN is almost 700 million people. But, first of all, the collectivity of ASEAN is a bit theoretical at present. Perhaps in the future the theory will become a reality, but the present it is more an aspiration and not yet a reality. And while Indonesia and Vietnam are not small countries, and in fact Indonesia, in particular, is a very large country, however, we [Southeast Asian countries] are small, we are all collectively small by comparison to India in South Asia, to China, Japan and Korea. Not maybe in population in the case of China and Korea, but certainly in economic weight and economic clout. And with regards to China, in both population size and economic weight.

So, let's be realistic. We have a role, but if being the manager means that we are directing, our ability is still very limited, that is a fact. I know we have put out our own paper, ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook and I think we also should not forget and we should give full credit to Pak Marty, who wanted perhaps a bit before his time to have some kind of Indo-Pacific treaty, kind of model on the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation but with a wider scope. But I think it was premature. There was not much appetite for it then, and I am frankly still not sure if there is still an appetite for it now.

“ But, are we a manager? I am not so sure. ”

Now, what can we do or should do, in order to broaden our role?

Even though the centre of gravity of our region is in the North East and in South Asia. I think what we can do first is that ASEAN should realize that the strategic environment has fundamentally changed. I do not think we have sufficiently internalized that fact in ASEAN. I am talking about ASEAN both as a collective and as an individual countries.

What are the two main changes of this strategic environment?

China's Rise Changes the Strategic Environment

First is about China's rise and it is not only just China's rise. China was once very careful (around the year of 2008-2009) to talk about its peaceful development.

The word "rise" was a bit too forceful. So, the slogan was modified to a peaceful development. In other words, it was to reassure the whole region and ASEAN countries that China's rise would not be threatening.

I think that [peaceful development] is gone. In fact, you never hear them talk about peaceful development anymore. The slogan has been abandoned. I think the Chinese made the fundamental mistake and that fundamental mistake was to put it crudely to start believing their own propaganda about the inevitability of their [China] rise and consequently of the absolute decline of the US and the West. Now, of course, one country's rise would mean a relative adjustment of power. But, a relative adjustment of power is a very different thing from saying that there is an absolute adjustment of power.

I think because China around that time [2008-2009] when the global financial crisis and they were able to manage better than any western country led them to believe their own propaganda, to put it crudely. So, they made a fundamental mistake to prematurely abandon Deng Xiaoping's very wise policy of hiding your strength and biding your time. They began to behave more assertively, some would say aggressively both in the East China Sea, in the South China Sea, in the Himalayas vis-a-vis India, and in the Taiwan Strait.

They also began to behave in more mercantilist way in economic policy, both internally within China and in external trade policy. Of course, the rhetoric was different. They did not use the word peaceful development or peaceful rise but they started talking about the common destiny of all mankind or words to the effect.

It is a nice slogan, but there was a disconnection between the slogan and the action. Now, do not misunderstand me,

“ China's rise in geopolitical effect cannot be denied. It should not be denied. But how it rises, and what it does with its power, how it uses its power, is important. ”

As far as Southeast Asia is concerned, China's size, economic weight and its direct border with Southeast Asia will always give it significant influence in ASEAN and that is natural. Yet, those same reasons will always cause anxiety in Southeast Asia. After 2010, instead of trying to mitigate the anxieties, China's action particularly in the South China Sea, in the Mekong region, the dam-building has in fact accentuated the anxieties.

Now, I do not think anybody is ever going to shun China. That is impossible and it would be foolish to try to do so. However, at the same time, I do not think there is any country anywhere that does not have some concerns about China. Our concerns may not be exactly the same and the intensity of the concern may also not be exactly the same. But, I am hard-pressed to think of any country without some concerns, even countries that are extremely dependent on China, for example, Laos, Cambodia, or even Pakistan do have an undercurrent of concern.

And that to me is a great mistake, a great failure of Chinese foreign policy. If you think back to the time of the Beijing Olympics 2008, I think China's image, the global perception of China, not just in our region but globally, was generally positive. If you look at the global opinion polls at that time by Pew Research, the polls were generally positive. And look now just a bit of ten years later, they are generally negative according to global opinion polls. At one time, around the time of 2008-2009 or earlier in Japan, which is a country that has a very complicated history with China, to give an example that China was only second in popularity to the United States. You look at the polls in Japan now, China is even less popular than Russia. That is in a sense, a great failure.

If you look at the State of Southeast Asia survey by ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute that has been conducted annually since 2019, if you look at all three surveys, the results are pretty consistent, in the sense that if you ask, "is China influential? Do you think China has a great influence?" The results in all ten ASEAN countries are overwhelmingly "Yes". But, if you ask the question, "do you trust China?" the results in all ASEAN countries are overwhelmingly "No". And this is a phenomenon where every reason that gives China influence is the same reason that causes anxieties for us about China.

The formation of the QUAD and recently AUKUS are responses to these anxieties.

The Importance of the US Presence to Balance Power Politics in The Region.

The other factor, which is equally important but not well-understood in ASEAN is that as anxieties to China have grown [do not forget nobody is going to shun China and even wants to have a close and stable relationship]

“ there is an idea that having a close relationship with the United States is not an alternative to China but a necessary condition. Because, you may lose the autonomy unless you have a close relationship with the United States as well as China. ”

We [ASEAN countries] are all nationalists. In our region, nationalism is not considered as a bad thing as it is in the West, it is a positive thing and a good strong motivating force. And I think that ASEAN is based on that idea – nationalism is actually a positive force and it can be harnessed through national purposes. There used to be an Indonesian slogan, which has somehow fallen from our disuse. Yet, it is a very important slogan. “National resilience enhances regional resilience, and regional reliance enhances national resilience.” That is a neat summary of what ASEAN is all about. But, somehow we do not use it anymore and I think we should revive it.

Singapore, unlike many other ASEAN countries, has not been shy of saying for a very long time since the 1960s that the United States is a vital and irreplaceable component of any balance of power in our region. We have never been tired of saying that and we have been very consistent. This attitude was not shared with the whole ASEAN countries. However, I think there is a better appreciation today of our attitude.

There is a better appreciation that we do need the United States around in order to have a close relationship with China without compromising our autonomy. Because if the United States does not create an overall strategic balance, we may lose autonomy because we are so much smaller than China, and China has been inserting itself more aggressively lately.

I do not want to raise old the issues, but just look at the response of Malaysia and Indonesia to our 1990 MOU allowing the US to use some of our facilities.

Back to Singapore’s point of view on the US presence in the region, this is not just a very eccentric Singaporean attitude, but a strategic reality. We have always believed that it is important, even symbolically for political symbolism, to have some US presence in Southeast Asia. Therefore we offered the use of our facilities.

In 1990 we signed a memorandum of understanding with the United States to allow some of the facilities to be used by the US forces. Of course, it is no replacement for Subic Bay Clark Airfield [in the Philippines] but we thought it was important at least for symbolic reasons to have some US presence in the region.

When we signed the MoU, Indonesia and Malaysia reacted – well, I think I am not exaggerating to say almost hysterically. We received very strong criticism. But it did not stop us. Now compare that to what happened in 2019 when we renewed the MoU. Nothing happened in 2019, I am not sure people even noticed we renewed the MoU. Even before that, compared to what happened in 2005, we signed a very important strategic partnership framework agreement with the United States which extended our defence and security cooperation vastly. Did anything happen? Nothing happened. Why? I think although there are still sensitivities in Indonesia and in Malaysia about the US presence, they mainly have to do with their domestic politics, but there is a better appreciation that the US is a necessary force for balance in our region.

This idea that we have always said that the US is a vital component of the balance of power, and that balance of power is important to allow us to develop our relationship with China has become accepted.

Even though you are not prepared to talk about it [US presence as the balancer] and in fact not many people are prepared to talk about it, and when you talk about it, you may say something quite different. But, I do not think that is [disliking the US presence as the balancer] the deep attitude for some ASEAN countries, I do not think it is the deep attitude of the TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia / Indonesian Military) and the deep attitude of the Malaysian defence establishment either. Even look at Vietnam, Vietnam fought a war against the US for 30 years and now, Vietnam is developing its own defence relationship with the US.

And indeed recently, Indonesia is also developing its own defence relationship with the US and with US’ allies. Recently Indonesia had an important exercise with the (US) and with Japan, it is quite unique compared with Malaysia, Vietnam and even with the Philippines. But there is another aspect of the US which I think people in ASEAN have not yet sufficiently realized.

Now, we all talked about Mr. Trump, the Trump administration has been highly transactional, and so he was. However, Mr. Trump did not invent transactionalism. The fact is, after the end of the cold war, the US was no longer willing to bear any burden and pay any price to

up-hold world order. Why should they? And after the end of the Vietnam war, the US moved from direct intervention in Southeast Asia, in fact in East Asia, to being an offshore balancer.

The US has been extremely consistent in its role as an offshore balancer. But, after the end of the cold war, an offshore balancer requires more friends and partners. It also requires more from them, in terms of upholding common interest in the regional order or in the global order. Now, I think when Mr. Biden talks about having more consultation, and his administration has actually had more consultation. Do not forget, when they consult with us in ASEAN, it happens not because we are such good looking people or such charming people; they consult with us to see what cooperation they can expect from us. In other words, he is much more polite than Mr. Trump, but he is also deeply transactional. That is the new reality and we do not have to do everything that they want us to do but we have to do something.

ASEAN Should Redefine Its Roles: Setting Up Parameters with Great Powers

Conversely, now, we have to do something which is to define some parameters. It is pointless for ASEAN to keep talking about our centrality. We are central in a geographic sense, we do have certain forums such as EAS [East Asia Summit], ARF [ASEAN Regional Forum], ASEAN PLUS Summit, ADMM-Plus [ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting Plus], and so on. But, just talking about centrality is not going to make ASEAN central. Because as I said the strategic centre of gravity, the weight is in the Northeast and South Asia so we have to put some substance in our talk and define parameters of what we are prepared to do with the US.

I have been talking to some Indonesian friends and some Thai friends, who are quite upset, because the Vice President Kamala Harris as well as Secretary of Defence Austin skipped both Indonesia and Thailand. Thailand is particularly upset because they are a treaty ally of the US.

But I have told both the Indonesian friends and Thai friends of this new reality. If you want them to come and visit you, you have to make clear to them what you are prepared to do with them and, equally important, what you are not prepared to do. You have to draw parameters. You can discuss with them [the US], of course, they will want you to do more, maybe you want to do more in something, and maybe they want you to do more in something else.

In recent years, ASEAN has failed in this quite miserably to my mind. We, of course, have meetings with all of our dialogue partners. However, the meetings have been

extremely ritualistic, nothing much of substance is discussed.

“ We need to sit down with our dialogue partners [particularly the US and China] and seriously discuss the parameters of what we [ASEAN] are prepared to do and some redlines of what we are not prepared to do. ”

Because otherwise when they talk about centrality it is just going to be a slogan, they [ASEAN's partner] do not really mean it.

And if we want to play a role in the Indo-Pacific, do not forget it is being driven by these two things, one is a more assertive China, and two is a response by the US and its friends and partners. We have to define our own roles.

While the ASEAN outlook in the Indo-Pacific is not bad in achievement, it is a very general document in my opinion. It is actually a collection of old wine in a new bottle, and that is not good enough, sorry, because the geostrategic environment has changed. And there is no point in complaining and saying you [ASEAN's partner] must come and attend our meeting.

The next summit [38th and 39th ASEAN Summit] is going to be virtual, therefore I suppose there is a better chance of President Biden or Premier Li Keqiang showing their faces on the screen.

I do not take the presence of President Biden, Premier Li Keqiang and other leaders of ASEAN's partners for granted. Because when we as ASEAN sit down with the United States, China, Japan, or even with the QUAD or AUKUS countries, are we prepared to say “We are willing to do this with you, but we are not prepared to do that with you” and “Let's discuss it”? Maybe those ASEAN's partners want ASEAN to do more or maybe ASEAN wants to do less and that is the subject and purpose for consultation. I am afraid too many ASEAN countries look at consultation as a matter of form.

2.Pak Bila, continuing from that point, I am very intrigued by the word “prepared”, what we prepared and what we are not prepared for. In your point of view, what can we actually offer to the Americans, Chinese, Australians, and others?

I think what we are prepared to do collectively and what we are prepared to do nationally are going to be different things however both are complementary. For example, we [Singapore] are prepared to let US naval ships and US aircraft use our facilities. We have a defence strategic partnership framework agreement that allows for a very wide-ranging defence and security intelligence cooperation.

I am not sure Indonesia, which prides itself on its Bebas Aktif foreign policy, is prepared to do that, and there is no reason you should. But there are things you [Indonesia] can be prepared to do, that is for you to decide. Has there been a discussion within Indonesia on what are the parameters of possible cooperation? Parameters meaning what you are prepared for and what you are not prepared and both are important. I am not sure there has been such a discussion within Indonesia.

In fact, I am pretty sure you [Indonesia] have not. I am pretty sure there has not been such a discussion in Thailand even. I am pretty sure there has not been any discussion in Malaysia. I know there has been such a discussion, this is not a static discussion, even for Singapore what we are prepared to do and what we are not prepared to do at one time may change over time. As circumstances change. But that kind of discussion is ongoing in Vietnam, that I know.

But in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand I do not believe they even had such a discussion. And you need it because we should remember that ASEAN is an intergovernmental organization. Although ASEAN is not a supranational organization, it is not impossible on a country basis we have that kind of discussion. What we [ASEAN] are doing now is sitting down there and wringing our hands in despair because we are not taken seriously enough by our partners. We need to be clear about what we are prepared to put on the table and it is not enough to just keep saying “we are central, we are central, we are central” and getting upset because they [big powers] do not treat us centrally. That to me is useless.

3. As we can see there are two approaches to geopolitical structure in the region. First is the hard power politics in the region and second is the constructivist approach by ASEAN. Sometimes, we do not know how to play with it. Even, we see confusion at the national level on how to manage the two geopolitical approaches that have happened. So, as a group, at least now, what can we offer to them?

Okay, I think both the hard balance of power is important and the constructivist is also important. I am not a great fan of international relations theory, because they seem to me to be a bit too mechanical. I see them as complementary. However, unless we are prepared to play some sort of hard power role, and we do not have to do it collectively but nationally, we are not going to have much influence on norms setting. This is the hard fact of life.

Indonesia's Role

I mean, we do not have to, at this stage, ask ASEAN to play a collective hard power role. It can be national as Singapore and Vietnam are doing in a small way. But Singapore and Vietnam are not enough.

“ It is crucial for Indonesia to define such a role with the US and its allies. Indonesia is the heart of Southeast Asia. ”

Indonesia straddles the entire length of Southeast Asia. So, you know,

“ if Indonesia has no position, ASEAN cannot have a position. ”

However, I can understand it is going to be difficult in Indonesia because you have a long tradition of being non-aligned. Beyond non-aligned, you have a long tradition of having a free and active foreign policy. I think that is a good thing. But the definition of what means to be free-active, is not a static one, because circumstances change. And I think Indonesia is slowly changing. Indonesia is not a claimant state in the South China sea dispute, but you are involved. Because Indonesia is an archipelagic state and Indonesia is there. Whether Indonesia likes it or not, Indonesia is involved, and Indonesia got involved, because of the Chinese fishing. So it is not a question of choice.

Now, I do not think Indonesia needs to behave like Malaysia, or Vietnam, or the Philippines. Indonesia has to find your own way. And it is not just a norm-setting way because Indonesia needs to build up some of your capabilities, especially your maritime capabilities.

I have always been of the view that for an archipelagic state, Indonesia has an under-resourced navy and it is not enough. There is a historical reason for that, because TNI was primarily a land force. You have to look at your force structure and ask yourself whether it is adequate for your needs. I do not see it as threatening, but I see it as complementary, because if you are unable to defend your archipelagic sea, defending in a sense of law and order such as against piracy, smuggling, and etc we all are going to suffer as well. But, of course, it is very complicated. I understand these internal dynamics, bureaucratic dynamics, political dynamics, about configuring and reconfiguring TNI.

I think you have started -- the tragedy of the Indonesian submarine, I think shows the urgency of this. Your force is too old, it needs to be modernized, it needs to be expanded. In your own national interest, and in the collective regional interest. That is one thing you can do. But, going back to your point, about how do you balance your constructive, and your, hard power effects.

Balancing Between Constructive and Hard Power Approaches

First of all, both are complimentary. You cannot play a real role in norms setting if you do not have the hard power. Secondly, we have played a certain role in setting norms in a general sense, through the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). But I think that has reached its limits. If you look at we are now stumbling into a different kind of phase,

I think the decision that was taken at the last emergency meeting of ASEAN Foreign Minister is a very important one, because it is the first time we have made such a decision to set norms for ASEAN.

“ I think the idea of non-interference and the idea of decision making by consensus is still very important, we should not abandon it. ”

But, it cannot be static. We need to have some means of saying that certain kinds of behavior are unacceptable. Now, I do not think the three countries that were most forward-looking on Myanmar were Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. I do not think all our reasons are the same. Our reasons are different. But, still we did set a new norm.

If I was Laos and Cambodia, I would pay attention to that. If you remember that months ago, earlier this year, I wrote an article saying that, if Laos and Cambodia are considered to be very recalcitrant, we should consider taking some sanctions against them. And there was a huge uproar in Cambodia in particular because of the article. But now, see what happened. There is an old Chinese saying “you kill a chicken to scare the monkey.” So the monkey better realizes that it is a monkey. It is not only just about Myanmar. We have taken one small but significant step in setting a new kind of norm.

Look, consensus has never meant unanimity. Consensus used to come in Bahasa Indonesia as *musyawarah* and *musyawarah* is not unanimity. It is not unanimity. It is a common voice that is arrived at by a process, a continuous process of discussion. The process of *musyawarah* is difficult to translate in English – it does not have quite the same meaning. Now, there is a consensus on the new definition of consensus after the Myanmar decision. Not everybody is very happy with it, but nobody disagreed, even Myanmar, they expressed a different view. *Musyawarah* does not mean you cannot have a different view. It means you just have to discuss the views. So, we are moving.

[4. Pak Bila, coming back to China and the US, and here in Jakarta, we have discussed much about alignment. In what condition ASEAN's alignment with the US and](#)

China can benefit us?

We are always aligned even if we say we are non-aligned. We are actually always aligned in our own interest. So, we should look very clinically at our relationship with the US, and our relations with China and define our own interests.

When we talk about alignment, we must not forget the fundamental and permanent alignment is in our own interest. Sometimes, on some issues, our interest may lead us to tilt one way, for some other issues, it may lead us to another way. On another issue, it may lead us to go our own way, disregarding both the US and China. And I think all of us have done this. It is nothing new. Now, we should not get panicked. We should be calm. In fact, I think because of the new strategic rivalry between the US and China, there is a certain element of panic in ASEAN discussions, or in the national discussions. Actually, it is nothing new, what is new?

Have we ever encountered great power competition before? In fact, we have encountered more dangerous great power competition in the 60s, 70s, and in 80s. We handled it then, why cannot we handle it now? But we have to understand, and I do not think this is well understood.

The US and China Strategic Competition and Rivalry is Not a Kind of the US and Soviet Cold War

People talk about a new cold war between the US and China. I think this is a very intellectually lazy and misleading way of describing their situation. Look, the US and Soviet Union, the former Soviet Union, they led two different systems, these two systems were connected only on the margin.

The US and China are both vital parts of the single global system. And we are all part of their system, we are all connected to each other, and the US and China are connected to each other by supply chains of a scope, of a density, of a complexity, that is unprecedented in history. Nothing like it has ever existed before. In the cold war there was competition between two systems but the US-China competition is competition within one system. And that is fundamentally different, it is more complicated. Because we all are connected to each other with a supply chain of such complexity, such density, that is never before seen in history.

I do not think the system can split into two, some parts maybe can split partially, or even substantially. Some parts have already split substantially. For example, the internet is effectively divided into two. There are still, it is not complete by the way, they are still close and

connected. But substantially, it is divided as there is the Chinese internet, there is the rest of us, okay? That is not ideal but I do not think you can completely divide the global system into two systems.

I will give you one very stark example. One of the most complicated supply chains in the world is the supply chain of semiconductors. It is quite clear that the semiconductors are a great Chinese vulnerability. They have been trying for 20 years, but they have reached a plateau. And, there are many technical reasons for this, they could be not prepared to be able to make the very high-end semiconductors. And it is a very complicated problem because the vital parts of semiconductor supply chain is held by the US or US allies, and you cannot possibly do it without these parts.

To design high-end semiconductors, you need a particular kind of lithography machine which is the only source in the Netherlands. The Netherlands is a member of NATO. And then, to make the semiconductors, you need certain kinds of materials. Who is the dominant supplier of that material? Japan. And you know, there are only basically three firms in the world that can make these high-end semiconductors.

One is Taiwanese, American, and South Korean. So, the Chinese are in some serious trouble. However, China is 40% of the world's semiconductor market. You cannot cut off your own companies, or the companies of your friends and allies from 40% of the semiconductor market without destroying them. So, you see, it is very complicated, this is why competition within a system is much more complicated than competition between two systems.

How ASEAN should position itself?

Now, of course, it is much more complicated for us to position ourselves too. But, in the complication, there is an agency and it is not a binary choice. It is no longer a binary choice for anybody. So you can tilt this way on something and you can tilt another way on another thing or you can go your own way. Of course, without trying to irrevocably destroy your relationship with either the US or China. Look, I give you, there is another factor which is also important. Southeast Asia is a naturally multi-polar region. Within Southeast Asia, and with the external powers of Southeast Asia. Why? Because it is a strategic crossroad. Strategic crossroads will naturally have many external powers.

“ Now, multipolarity is good for countries like ASEAN countries, because it gives us maneuver space. Imagine if there is only one power, there is no room to move. ”

Two powers give us slightly more room to move. But, multipolarity maximizes our room to move, in principle. Whether we have the brain to see the opportunity and the ability to use it is another matter. But in principle it gives us space to manoeuvre. But look at ASEAN's strategic thinking. It is very superficial. I have always thought, actually Singapore has always thought, this idea of Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), is a very stupid idea.

It is superficially attractive. But, how do we get rid of the major powers? What happens if they refuse to go away? And do not forget there are two major powers that are contiguous to Southeast Asia, China and India. So, even if they want to go away they cannot, they are there, and frankly, Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon - Free Zone (SEANWFZ) is also another silly idea. I spent a lot of my career making sure they were harmless ideas before we agreed to them. Okay, we have these ideas but they do not do any harm provided we do not take them seriously.

What enables ASEAN to operate is an overall stable balance of power. And it should be a multipolar balance of power. Not all poles are equal weight. But, as long as there are many poles it will be better for us. Then, if you think about it in a different way, the fundamental purpose of things like the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting (ADMM) Plus and even ARF. Because we are inviting all the major powers to anchor themselves in a constructive way in Southeast Asia, in our forums, which is actually the diametric opposite of ZOPFAN. ZOPFAN says get out, go away.

This all (EAS, ARF, etc) says “come in, join us”. Of course it is not going to be the main way of engaging Southeast Asia. Their main way is always going to be bilateral but it is better than nothing, and we are creating, we are encouraging, the neutral multipolarity of the region, which is good for us because they give us maneuver space. And that is another way that we can play a role in the Indo-Pacific.

5. ASEAN always comes into very difficult situations when we try to come as an unified voice particularly on the political - security issue. Is it the nature of ASEAN that we often find ourselves in disagreement on political-security issues?

I do not think we should force everybody to come to one view on all issues, because first it is impossible and we will just start a quarrel within ourselves. Look, it is a fact. But we can probably forge a very general view. Let's say for example, on the South China Sea. In 2012 due to the intransigence of Cambodia, we failed for the first time to have a joint communique. However, what people forget is

that due to the tireless efforts of Pak Marty who was then the Foreign Minister of Indonesia, within one week after the meeting in Cambodia we got a consensus on South China Sea. Through the six points drafted by Pak Marty..

These points have, more or less, formed the basis of ASEAN's consensus on the South China Sea since then. Even though it is not going to make a huge real difference to be frank, yet, it has preserved a common position. So, that kind of consensus on certain security issues, we can agree on. And as I said, the starting point where we all agree, although we have different definitions of it, is that autonomy is important, national autonomy is important. All of us want that.

6. How about The US military withdrawal from Afghanistan and AUKUS? Should we come into a unified voice?

I was in the US for a month recently. People keep asking me about Afghanistan. "What does it mean?" About the US, is the US reliable? So I have always answered the same way. I have never said that the US is reliable, because they change their government every four years, even if the same party remains in power. I spent a lot of my career going to the US every few months, and explaining to different people the same things over and over again about Southeast Asia. How can that be reliable? However, the US is indispensable, that is a different question.

Now, as far as Singapore is concerned. Singapore has a very close defense and security relationship with the US. But, we have never ever relied on the US to defend us. We do not believe the US will defend us.

“ We only want the US to do two things for us: one, sell us the weapon so we can defend ourselves. And secondly, maintain the stability of the overall balance of power, because only the US can do that. ”

And without that overall stability, none of us can defend ourselves.

So, I said to all the countries that think the US would shed blood for them is stupid. Why should the US shed blood for us? The US realized they made a mistake in Afghanistan. What vital US interest was involved in Afghanistan? None.

Terrorism is not an existential threat. Terrorism is undoubtedly very dangerous. But it is not an existential threat. Can terrorists destroy Indonesia? I do not think so. Can terrorists destroy Singapore? I do not think so. They can do a lot of damage, yes. But they cannot destroy us, they are not an existential threat. We have to deal with it.

Terrorism is always going to be with us. There is no definitive solution to terrorism. So we all have to take precautions. Whether the US is in Afghanistan, or not in Afghanistan, we have to take precautions. And the US has to take precautions, and it is better that the US rectify the mistake than keep on doing that mistake. Now, it is very tough on the Afghan people, that I do not doubt. And it is going to be a humanitarian tragedy. But a humanitarian tragedy is not a geopolitical disaster.

Nobody should believe any promise that the Taliban makes. In fact, they are already breaking their promises. Do not forget that the Taliban is not a monolithic organization, it is quite clear. And, do not forget also that Afghanistan has never ever had a strong central authority. When has Afghanistan ever had a strong central authority? Tell me when? The answer is never. So it's going to be a source of instability, but is it our problem? Is it an American problem? No, sorry, it is a problem for its immediate neighbors but not for us. And that is a very hard-hearted way of doing it. I feel sorry for Afghan women especially but, if the Afghan people were not prepared to defend themselves, who can do it for them?

So, I looked at it in a hard headed way, and it was a distraction for the US. The main issue is what? The main issues are first, domestic issues for the US. Two, China, and thirdly, things like cybersecurity, climate change which are common problems for everyone, Afghanistan was a distraction from all these things. So, as hard hearted as it may sound, it is better to cut your losses and refocus your direction. AUKUS, again, is like the QUAD, AUKUS is a response to concerns about certain aspects of Chinese behavior.

I think Mr. Biden is as transactional as Mr. Trump, but more polite. And then another thing, he is also prepared "if you are prepared to cooperate with me to meet a common challenge, I am prepared to go further than any other recent administration to give you the tools." That is the importance of their deal to provide nuclear submarine propulsion technology to Australia. The only other country has done so is long ago the UK, so if you are prepared to help me, I will give you the tools to help me because cooperation is a two way street. If you want me to cooperate with you, you have got to cooperate with me, and if you agree with it, depending on what you are prepared to do with me, I am prepared to help you. But there is no free lunch. I think that is the reason.

Now, let's be frank. If one day, suddenly -- Indonesia realizes after the Submarine tragedy, you have to build up the navy -- you have to modernize the submarine fleet in particular. I do not think there is a new arms race. In fact, the arms race started a long time ago. We have been in

the middle of an arms race for many decades in our region, for a long time. There is not just China, or Japan, or the US, it is us ASEAN countries. What do you think we have been doing for a long time? And let's be frank, if suddenly one day the US comes to you and says "look, Pak, if you help me I will offer you nuclear submarine technology?" You think the Indonesian TNI navy is going to say no? It will be controversial, but I am quite sure the TNI navy is not going to say no. Unfortunately nobody is going to offer you or Singapore nuclear submarines.

I think there is one more factor that we should acknowledge. As we have discussed a bit, ASEAN is an intergovernmental organization. Therefore, the most crucial factor affecting ASEAN is the domestic politics of its member states. And it is a fact that the domestic politics of crucial member states: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and even Vietnam, has got more complicated. It is not a politically correct statement. But ASEAN was able to act most boldly when none of us were really democracies. Democracy is complicated, it is hard to get internal consensus. That is a fact. I am not suggesting we go back to the bad old days, we cannot in fact go backwards even if we want to. But we have to learn to manage the new domestic politics of foreign policy in all our countries. I think we are still learning, but it is very complicated.

Thank you, Pak Bila for an insightful, and policy oriented conversation.