

***The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace.* By Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffrey Sng. Singapore: Ridge Books, NUS Press, 2017. Hardcover: 264pp.**

Published in the year in which the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) celebrates its golden jubilee, Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffrey Sng opine that ASEAN deserves the Nobel Peace Prize on the grounds that it has been the most successful regional organization next to the European Union (EU). Stripped of its hyperbole, the book presents a highly readable account of ASEAN's achievements, its remarkable consolidation of interstate peaceful coexistence in a geographical area previously wracked by political turmoil in, arguably, the most culturally diverse region of the world. The authors also demonstrate persuasively the indispensable role of ASEAN in the Asia-Pacific region as a foil to check major power excesses. Although the authors lament the lack of recognition of the "ASEAN miracle" by contemporary observers, they are quick to add that ASEAN is not without its weaknesses. Let me examine some of the book's truth claims and point out some of its weaknesses and finally present my own view on ASEAN.

ASEAN's success was due to fear, luck and leadership (Chapter Two). Political divisions engendered by the Cold War were resolved when the fear of communism was overcome by the absorption of the communist states into the regional body in the second half of the 1990s. Such a move demonstrated the wisdom of its founding leaders to "hang together or hang separately" in the words of Singapore's former foreign minister, S. Rajaratnam. Having trumped communism and embraced the market economy, ASEAN was on its way to develop a dense regional network for an "ecosystem of peace" (p. 48 ff.). ASEAN initiatives included the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 1996, ASEAN Plus Three (APT) in 1997 and the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005.

The book shows that dealing with the major powers has been both ASEAN's forte as well as its Achilles heel (Chapter Three). Mahbubani draws on his considerable experience as one of Singapore's foremost diplomats to deliver a hard-hitting analysis highlighting how major powers such as the United States, China, Japan and India could have done better in dealing with ASEAN. He singles out the EU and its Myanmar policy as being misconceived. In Mahbubani's opinion, Myanmar's transition to democracy is

an indictment of the EU policy of sanctions and a vindication of ASEAN's stance of continuous engagement with the military regime (p. 115).

A major criticism of the authors regarding the US–ASEAN relationship was that short-term domestic US considerations often outweighed ASEAN's long-term interests. Even the ASEAN-friendly administration of US President Barack Obama cancelled several trans-Pacific trips and failed to capitalize on his special relationship with Indonesia. Mahbubani is emphatic that America should also refrain from using ASEAN as a “weapon” against China and, in particular, embarrass China regarding the South China Sea dispute (pp. 94–96).

With respect to China, the authors pose three questions: Is China better off with a weak or strong ASEAN? Would China benefit from a more positive bilateral relationship? How should ASEAN adjust to China as the emerging paramount power? The discussion of issues around the first two questions were useful and conclude that ASEAN could and should be used as a platform for China to hone its diplomacy and to develop an effective model of major power engagement with middle and small powers. As to how ASEAN should respond to the counterfactual of “China as Number One”, the book falls rather short, merely indicating that individual ASEAN countries have reached different conclusions about how relations with China should be managed and will act accordingly to their own perceived national interests (pp. 108ff).

An important development since the book was published has been China's aggressive push of President Xi Jinping's “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) initiative. ASEAN countries are responding individually to this initiative rather than as a group. Myanmar has been a beneficiary of a now operational China-built oil and gas pipeline to Kunming; Thailand will be the site of a rail link to the China border; and Malaysia, the target for multiple port developments and an East–West Railway Link from the Straits of Malacca to the South China Sea, to be bankrolled by China. National economic interests seem to prevail over ASEAN solidarity.

The final two chapters of the book undertake a standard SWOT (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of ASEAN. The authors conclude that ASEAN's strengths outweigh its weaknesses, but what stands out is its lack of institutional robustness (my term, not the authors'). This is so in spite of its dense network of institutional arrangements. The role of the Eminent Persons

Group (EPG) and the High Level Task Force (HLTF), coming late in the day, in formulating the 2008 ASEAN Charter was particularly crucial to the ASEAN process of institution building. The authors suggest that a second EPG should be set up and tasked with turning ASEAN into a truly vibrant regional body by 2067.

A major problem with ASEAN is its lack of a “natural custodian”, with Indonesia still somewhat unable to perform such a role. Ownership of ASEAN must ultimately devolve to its people, say the authors, through a strategy of including ASEAN as a subject of national education and through more intense people-to-people relations.

In terms of institutional development, the authors lament the state of a stunted ASEAN Secretariat, suggesting that its miniscule budget should be raised tenfold to US\$220 million, which would still be tiny compared to the EU’s US\$159 billion budget. For wealthy Singapore its contribution would constitute a mere pittance: US\$56.78 million (p. 228). The book ends with a flourish calling for ASEAN to become a “new beacon for humanity” as the hub for a multi-civilizational world now being challenged by global cultural intolerance, symbolized by the election of US President Donald Trump in 2016.

Mahbubani and Sng show that ASEAN as an intergovernmental regional organization — as opposed to a supranational entity such as the EU — has appropriately served Southeast Asia and kept the peace. What the authors have not shown is that beyond interstate conflict, Southeast Asia remains afflicted by stalled democratization in all of its members, protracted internal religious wars, egregious human rights abuses and the intractable problem of undocumented migrant labour. Resolving such problems, which spill across ASEAN borders, surely require a greater institutional robustness on the part of ASEAN than the authors have suggested in their book.

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