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BY PROFESSOR TOMMY KOH  
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## “Will ASEAN Survive the U.S. - China Confrontation?”



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**Dr. Julie Banerjee Mehta:** My first encounter with the inventive, innovative, and inclusive Prof Tommy Koh, as we always call him, was way back in the 1990s and during the Cambodian elections in 1993, if you remember Prof Koh, and you were hands on as always. I was a Features Editor in Singapore Press Holdings and that was my day job. My real interest was Cambodia. I was enthralled by the way the Cambodian classical dance had come back with a handful of seven dancers, the rest being decimated by the Khmer Rouge. When I wanted to bring this limping dance back onto the world stage, it was Professor Tommy Koh who blessed us with the National Arts Council in Singapore collaborating with the Government of Cambodia and my working for about two years before that with Mr. Nouth Narang, the Minister of Culture of Cambodia, whom I think Prof Koh would also remember, and Princess Buppha Devi, a great admirer of Prof Koh's. It was a great success and the dance began to travel, which was what I had originally prayed for. After about eight years, when I finally got to finishing my book on Cambodian dance, it was Prof Koh I turned to for a Foreword, and for that I owe you a huge debt of gratitude Prof Koh. Thank you for all the inspiration that you continue to light for us, Prof Koh.

**Professor Tommy Koh:** Thank you.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** Thank you, Julie. I have a few words to say to welcome Professor Koh. You and I go way back many years when I was a young journalist with the *Business Times* in Singapore and attending your press conferences in the late-1980s. We've kept in touch over the years and I am glad for that. I am also glad to find you in great health and the author of twenty-five books, I guess we're not even counting anymore. So, with those few words, I will request Mr. Aniruddha Lahiri, who is the President of the Rising Asia Foundation, to say a few words of welcome.

**Mr. Aniruddha Lahiri:** Professor Koh we were looking forward to this day. Let me add my own word of welcome to that of Harish and others, to give this opportunity to listen to you, and that, too, at our annual lecture. I have heard a lot of you, I've read your background, and I'm sure that we are going to have an excellent hour of listening to you. So, Professor, in future, I am sure there will be other opportunities to meet you in person but at this point in time let me not stand between you and others who are here, and my welcome to all the others who've joined this lecture. Thank you very much.

**Prof Tommy Koh:** Thank you for your kind words. I would like to begin by thanking my old friends, Harish and Julie Mehta, and the *Rising Asia Journal* and Foundation for inviting me to deliver this lecture. I miss having them in Singapore and I still regard Harish and Julie as two of my gurus on Cambodia. I will now say a few words about the topic that Harish assigned to me, which is, "Will ASEAN Survive the U.S.-China Confrontation?"

I will begin by saying a few words about the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. ASEAN is a regional organization of Southeast Asia, just as SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) is a regional organization of South Asia. Let me tell you this story, how it all began. On the 8th of August 1967, the Foreign Ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand met in Bangkok. They took a leap of faith and signed the Bangkok Agreement establishing ASEAN. Why do I say it was a leap of faith? I say it was a "leap of faith" because in 1967, although we were neighbors, we hardly knew each other. The Indonesians had been ruled by the Dutch, Malaysia and Singapore by the British, the Philippines by the Spanish and the Americans, and Thailand had remained independent. They did not speak the same language or worship the same God. In spite of these

differences, ASEAN has been a great success. It has grown from strength to strength.

Today, ASEAN includes all ten countries of Southeast Asia, and very soon we will welcome our eleventh member, Timor Leste. The ten economies of ASEAN have been integrated into a single economy, and the ten economies have been growing annually at around 4 percent to 5 percent. The experts predict that by 2030 the ASEAN economy could be the world's fourth largest economy. So economically, ASEAN has been very successful.

Politically, ASEAN has played a very important part in promoting peace in Southeast Asia. ASEAN has kept the peace in Southeast Asia for over fifty years. It has promoted amity and cooperation between, and among, the countries of the Asia-Pacific or the Indo-Pacific region. I don't know whether you know that the three countries of Northeast Asia, namely, China, Japan, and South Korea had never met among themselves until we at ASEAN invited them to attend an ASEAN+3 forum. In the beginning, the comfort level between the three of them was quite low, so they met at breakfast; and when the comfort level rose, they then met at lunch and finally at dinner. There is a trilateral Free Trade Agreement negotiated between China, Japan, and South Korea, but the agreement had never been signed and had not come into force because of political difficulty between them. So, the role that ASEAN has played is not just in Southeast Asia, but we are also trying to promote cooperation and peace in Northeast Asia.

ASEAN is the convener and neutral chairman of many regional forums. Apart from ASEAN+3, we are also the convener and chairman of the ASEAN Regional Forum and very significantly, the East Asia Summit. The East Asia Summit is very important because it is a forum that includes two passive adversaries, the United States and China. The

United States and Russia are members of the East Asia Summit. Each year, the leaders of the most important countries in the world come to Southeast Asia to attend the ASEAN summit. The convening power of ASEAN is probably unique. I can think of no other regional organization that has the same convening power.

In fact, Harish and Julie, you might consider asking someone to write a book comparing ASEAN and SAARC, you know, and see whether there are any lessons that SAARC can learn from ASEAN. As I said just now, ASEAN is the convener and neutral chairman of ASEAN+3, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the East Asia Summit. ASEAN is able to play this role because we are neutral and trusted by the superpowers and the major powers. The moment ASEAN becomes disunited or partisan, we will no longer be a credible convenor or chairman. So, the question really this morning is, will the confrontation between the U.S. and China pull ASEAN apart?

### **The Three Historical Phases of U.S. China Relations**

Let me now turn to the relations between the United States and China. I want to share with you the three historical periods or phases, in which I want to describe this relationship. The first historical period would be from the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 until 1972 when President Richard Nixon shocked the world by visiting China.

During the first period, 1949-1972, the United States and China were enemies. Their armed forces actually fought each other in the Korean War and they had no diplomatic relations between them. Nixon's visit changed everything and it started, what I call, the second historical period, from 1972 until the end of the Cold War.

During the Cold War, the United States and China were de facto allies. They were not de jure allies, as there was no treaty between them.



They were allies because they had a common enemy, the Soviet Union. But once the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union disappeared, this relationship was bound to change. During the second period, U.S. policy was to bring China out of isolation and introduce China into the mainstream of the world. The United States facilitated China's admission to the World Trade Organisation. The United States had expected that China would change when its economy took off. This, in my view, was a false expectation because the Chinese Communist Party had no intention to loosen its grip on power or to become more "democratic" in the western sense. During this period, U.S. policy towards China was based on competition and cooperation.

We are now in the third historical phase of U.S.-China relations. Unlike President Obama, who did not regard the rise of China as posing a threat to American global leadership, President Donald Trump did, and it was President Trump who started a trade war against China by imposing tariffs on Chinese exports. It was also President Trump who began the process of decoupling the economies and technology [of the United States and China]. The surprising thing is that although President Joe Biden had served for eight years as President Barack Obama's Vice-President, he did not follow Obama's China policy. Instead, President Biden has followed essentially President Trump's China policy. He did not remove the tariffs that President Trump imposed on China. He has, in fact, augmented decoupling more extensively than Trump did, decoupling trade, technology, investment, and so on. President Biden has also tried to mobilize the support of other democracies against China and other autocracies.

The fundamental reason for President Biden's China policy is that the Americans in general, and the U.S. government in particular, view a rising China as a peer competitor. I repeat that President Biden's China

policy is based upon the American perception of rising China as a peer competitor. I spent over twenty years of my life in America, I think I understand American character and values and vision. America is determined to remain number one and, if necessary, America will fight any country that challenges its global hegemony.

President Xi Jinping has described the China policy of the United States as consisting of three things, encirclement, containment, and suppression. In view of this, the Chinese are not very keen about American overtures to begin dialogue at all levels. They feel that the Americans are not sincere and the Chinese regard the new word “de-risking” as just a synonym of “de-coupling.”

A very good friend of mine in Washington, Professor David Shambaugh, an American expert on China, has recently written a book entitled, *Where Great Powers Meet: America and China in Southeast Asia*. He argues in the book that of all the regions of the world, the one region that will experience the most intense rivalry between the United States and China is Southeast Asia.

### **Cautious Optimism that ASEAN Will Survive U.S.-China Confrontation**

So, I come back to my question, will the confrontation between the U.S. and China pull ASEAN apart? There is certainly a danger that it will do so because some member countries of ASEAN have already chosen sides. I think that the Philippines is an American ally, and if I am not wrong, Cambodia can be considered a Chinese ally.

However, when the ten leaders of ASEAN meet by themselves, there is a consensus among them that ASEAN as an organization must remain united and neutral. At the recent ASEAN Summit in Jakarta, our Chairman, President Joko Widodo, said in the press conference that



ASEAN is nobody's ally, that ASEAN is not an ally of any great power. I am therefore cautiously optimistic that ASEAN will survive the U.S.-China confrontation. Whether I am right or wrong, only the future will tell.

Thank you. I am happy to respond to your questions.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** Thank you so much for your wide-ranging talk which took us back to the past when ASEAN was formed, the conditions it was formed under. You took us into the narrative that the United States does view China as its principal global competitor, but you are hopeful at the same time that the confrontation doesn't become too damaging. So, what I am reading from you is that you are hopeful that ASEAN is able to somehow balance the two powers. With those very brief words, I would welcome any questions from the audience.

**Professor Tommy Koh:** I think I see Ambassador Gurjit Singh's hand.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** Yes Gurjit, please go ahead.

### **The Question of ASEAN Unity**

**Ambassador Gurjit Singh:** Thank you, Professor Koh. What a delight to see and hear you again. As erudite and clear as ever. First, you asked whether there is any comparison between SAARC and ASEAN. ASEAN is a reasonably successful organization. SAARC is a dysfunctional organization, so anybody who writes a book on this will only end up in the trash bin. So, there is nothing to compare success with failure. The second part is you are very candid about the challenges to ASEAN emerging from the China-U.S. rivalry. You have even said some countries are siding this way and that way, but the dismay is in the lack of unity. Not only on this issue but on issues internal to ASEAN, which is making ASEAN's position as a neutral player more difficult. But my question to you is this: Many countries in the world are resorting to the reconvening of the Global

South as a reaction to the big power rivalry. You see India's Group of 20 position, you see the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) Summit, yet ASEAN is neutral even from the Global South. So, where does ASEAN really want to go, be neutral from everybody and not even identify with the Global South? Thank you.

**Professor Tommy Koh:** Thank you very much Ambassador Gurjit Singh. Very happy to see you online and I remember with great pleasure our meeting in Singapore recently. I would disagree with you that ASEAN is disunited. I think ASEAN is united. The ten of us agree that ASEAN as an organization will not take sides. Individual countries may take sides but ASEAN as an organization will remain neutral. We will not take sides and this was confirmed again at the recent summit at Jakarta.

So, I'm not sure why you say that ASEAN is not united. Compared to other regional organizations, not just south, but even compared to the European Union, I think we are more united than the European Union is. And I don't want to be boastful but I think that ASEAN is one of the most successful regional organizations in the world. To be sure, we have some disagreement, for example, on Myanmar. You didn't mention Myanmar, but Myanmar is a very difficult case and there is some disagreement among ourselves on Myanmar. We can talk about that if somebody is interested in Myanmar. I'll take another question.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** We have a question from Senior Minister Mouly Ieng of Cambodia, and then by Professor Ngyuet Nyugen from the University of Alaska. In that order please.

### **Is Cambodia a Chinese Ally, or is it Neutral?**

**Senior Minister Mouly Ieng:** Thank you, Ambassador Koh, for your brilliant lecture. I just want to respond that there are wrong perceptions about Cambodia. As you said some believe, especially Westerners, that

we are aligned with the China, but look at our vote in the United Nations regarding the Russian war against Ukraine. We support the majority of nations that condemn the invasion of Ukraine. Why do other countries like Vietnam, which is supposed to be a good friend of the United States, vote neutral. So, I come back to one simple notion in diplomacy. We believe, as General Charles de Gaulle said, “*Les hommes peuvent avoir des amis, les nations jamais,*” meaning that men can have friends, nations never. Nations can only have interests. Our interest is the respect of international law. We are a small country. We cannot ally with China against the United States, or ally with United States against China.

So, I agree with you that ASEAN is united, as you said. We cannot accept aligning with China or with the United States. We want to be friends with most of them because they are of interest to us. You know, we probably have a lot of trade with China or we receive a lot of economic support from China, but we are grateful to the United States and Europe that open their markets to our country’s products. So, this is a wrong perception about Cambodia. In our Constitution, it is clearly spelled out that we must be neutral. This is what I wanted to say. Thank you.

**Professor Tommy Koh:** Thank you for your response. I would say that your colleagues at ASEAN view you as a Chinese ally because you have a track-record of protecting Chinese interests even it is against other ASEAN countries. So, we all remember that in 2012 when Cambodia was chairman of ASEAN, for the first time in ASEAN history, Cambodia blocked the adoption of the joint communique of the foreign ministers just because it contained a paragraph on the South China Sea that China could not accept. The Chinese were stupid enough to actually boast that Cambodia was acting on their behest. I mean that’s part of historical records, but I am happy to hear from you about Cambodia’s policy to be

independent and not be an ally of any power. Thank you for your clarification.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** Professor Ngyuet Nyugen, please ask your question.

### **In the Absence of European-style Commonality, ASEAN has Forged a Community**

**Dr. Ngyuet Nyugen:** Could you explain to me when you said that ASEAN was the most unified, even more than the European Union; as well as when you said that it was a very successful organization. From the surface, what I could see is the European Union has a common currency, for example. So, could you please explain to me in what way is ASEAN a unified and successful organization, and to some extent even more than the European Union? I guess you implied that it was even more successful than other organizations that exist. Thank you.

**Professor Tommy Koh:** That's not a simple question. ASEAN is successful in the way that we have united all the countries of Southeast Asia which are very different from one another, into a family. We have developed a very strong culture of consulting, cooperating, and arriving at a consensus. So, in spite of great odds, unlike the European Union, where they have a common culture and common religion, in Southeast Asia there is no such commonality. In spite of the absence of such commonality, we have successfully forged a community, and the ten of us are very united in economics and also in politics.

We have managed to integrate all ten economies into a single economy, and I say the ASEAN economy is growing at around 4 percent to 5 percent per annum. According to the World Bank and other international organizations, if we continue to make progress at this pace, by 2030 we could be the fourth largest economy in the world. We have kept the peace in the region which is strategically important to

retain power. Much more than that, we try to promote amity and cooperation with the other countries in the region, such as we brought together China, Japan, and South Korea, who had never met before. We have a forum that includes countries who have very difficult relations with each other, like the United States and China, and the United States and Russia. We managed to link the ASEAN economy to all major economies of the world. Except the United States and the European Union, ASEAN has a free-trade agreement with China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand. So, the ASEAN economy is linked to the economies of all these other countries. It enlarges our economic sphere and our political space. I would say all in all we are a very successful organization. We are different from the Europeans. We will never have a common currency. Even in the case of the European Union, not all twenty-seven members are part of the Euro Zone, as some countries opted out of it. We don't have a court, we don't have a parliament, but these are steps into the future. We focus on what's practical and what can be done.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** Thank you for that. May I bring in Senator Yuen Pau Woo from British Columbia, Canada, for a comment or a question.

### **The Trust Deficit with China**

**Senator Yuen Pau Woo:** It is lovely to hear from you again, Professor Koh. I've put my question in the chat box, and it has to do with what I think is the litmus test for ASEAN to navigate U.S.-China rivalry—whether ASEAN can diffuse tension in the South China Sea without seeming to side with either the United States or China? Is that possible?

**Professor Tommy Koh:** I think the rivalry between the United States and China extends way beyond the South China Sea. The rivalry between them is partly ideological, partly economic, and partly technological.

Actually, we are in a very dangerous period in world history. The two superpowers, the United States and China are, in my view, on a collision course. They can collide over Taiwan, or on some other issues on which they have diametrically opposite interests. There is a total lack of strategic trust between Washington, DC and Beijing. So, this is really serious, you know. It's way beyond the South China Sea and way beyond the East China Sea.

As you know, four ASEAN countries have claims to the South China Sea. These are Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam. The remaining six of us are not claimant states, but we insist that the disputes in the South China Sea should be resolved peacefully and in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and International Law. That's our collective position.

ASEAN and China are currently engaged in negotiating a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. You know you can't negotiate such an important code if there is an absence of trust between the parties. I would say respectfully to my Chinese friends, if they are listening, that at the moment there is a deficit of trust between China and Vietnam, and China and the Philippines. In this atmosphere, countries don't trust China. It's very difficult for us to make progress in the negotiations on the Code of Conduct. So, if you ask what is Singapore's position, it is that we support the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. We tell all the claimant countries that their claim must be consistent with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and International Law, and they if dispute with each other, they should solve it peacefully in accordance with the mechanisms in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. That's our position.

**Senator Yuen Pau Woo:** Thank you. That's very helpful.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** Thank you for the question, Senator Yuen, and Professor Koh for your wonderful answer. May I request the author and novelist, Meira Chand, if she has a question or a comment to make.

**Dr. Meira Chand:** I don't have a question for Prof Koh but I do have a comment. I am a not political person so I'm very happy through this time with Prof Koh to be silent, and to listen, and to learn. Really, I am learning a lot, just listening to you now. I'm happy to hear other people's questions and learn. Thank you.

**Prof Tommy Koh:** Thank you.

**Dr Harish Mehta:** Thank you, Meira. I think Mr. Aniruddha Lahiri, President of Rising Asia Foundation, has a question. Go ahead Mr. Lahiri.

### **“ASEAN is Committed to its 5-Point Consensus on Myanmar”**

**Mr. Aniruddha Lahiri:** Thank you. Your presentation was delightful, Professor Koh. In your lecture, you alluded to Myanmar, but you didn't go into the details. I'm sure there was a reason for it, in terms of the constraint of time. I just wanted an answer to a very simple question, which is that Myanmar sticks out as a sore thumb, and people seem to be ignoring it and saying that it's a spoilt child, let it do whatever it wants to do on its own. There seems to be absolutely no intervention from anybody. This is not a very stable situation. It is not a situation which is in equilibrium. So, I wanted to know from you, Professor Koh, where does Myanmar feature into this whole ASEAN scene, in terms of its policies.

**Professor Tommy Koh:** Myanmar is a very important member of the ASEAN family by its strategic location, as it is a neighbor of both China and India. It's of great value to the region and to ASEAN. We want to keep Myanmar in the ASEAN family. You may not know that I was the

Chairman of the task force that drafted the ASEAN charter in 2007. During the drafting process, we asked our Foreign Ministers, should we include in the ASEAN Charter a provision to suspend or expel a member because we envisage a future, when you may have a member behave very badly and bring ill repute to the organization. So, we wanted to ask our ten foreign ministers. I remember we met in Siem Reap in Cambodia, where we asked the ministers, should we include in the charter a provision to suspend a country or to expel a country, and the ministers unanimously said no, they did not want to suspend or expel a country even if it behaved badly.

We want to keep it in the family so that it can hear what the remaining members of the family are saying. This is our philosophy, we keep Myanmar in the family though what the military regime has done is unacceptable, but we punish the military regime by not allowing the military rulers to attend the ASEAN meetings. Myanmar can be represented by civil servants, but not by the military rulers.

**Mr. Aniruddha Lahiri:** Thank you. That's an excellent answer.

**Professor Tommy Koh:** I will tell you more. Two years ago, you know the coup took place, on the 1st of February 2021. Two months later, in April, the ASEAN leaders had a special meeting in Jakarta where they invited the leader of the Military Junta, General Min Aung Hlaing to join them. At the end of the meeting, the ASEAN leaders, including General Min Aung Hlaing, adopted a 5-point consensus, which is the ASEAN Peace Plan. What are the most important elements of the 5-point consensus?

First, the violence must stop, and the military rulers have not stopped the violence. It is using against its opponents. In fact, just yesterday, they bombed a refugee camp in Kachin State. This is totally unacceptable, as the violence continues.



Second, ASEAN urges the military rulers, leaders and other political stakeholders to come back to the negotiating table, talk to one another and forge an agreement on how they would govern themselves. The military ruler rejected this, they continued to imprison the leaders of the LDP (League for Democracy and Peace). So, the second element of the 5-point consensus is also not acceptable. We have not given up, you know. There are some members of ASEAN who have grown impatient and want us to be realistic, as the military is in power and they are not going to give up power. Let's talk to them. Let's work with them.

So, I am sorry to say that internally we are somewhat divided because Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam have met by themselves, and they are more willing to talk to the Military Junta in Myanmar. The rest of us have said no. We have adopted by consensus the 5-point Consensus in April 2021 and we must stick to it. I am happy to tell you that at the last ASEAN meeting in Jakarta, the ten leaders confirmed their continued commitment to the 5-point consensus.

**Mr. Aniruddha Lahiri:** Thank you. It brings in a lot of clarity.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** Thank you, Mr. Lahiri for your question, and Professor Koh for that very candid response. May I request former Indian Ambassador, Mr. Amit Dasgupta, to ask a question or a make comment please.

### **“ASEAN Must be Cautious in Dealing with QUAD and AUKUS”**

**Mr. Amit Dasgupta:** I just wanted to say a big thank you to all the organizers of this event. It's always a pleasure to listen to Professor Koh. I know several Indian diplomats and I'm sure diplomats from across the globe hold him in very high regard and indeed admiration. Thank you very much Professor Koh. My question really is to ask about the complex situation in the Indo-Pacific and what you see as ASEAN's response to

the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the QUAD) and also to the Trilateral Security Partnership between Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS). Thanks.

**Professor Tommy Koh:** Thank you, Ambassador, for your very kind comments. When the Cold War ended many of us rejoiced and we were so happy that we were no longer living in a divided world, but I am sorry to say that the world has again become divided into two rival blocs. You have, on one hand, a bloc led by the United States which includes Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, the five eyes; [along with] the European Union, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, Japan, and South Korea; and then you have the other bloc led by China which includes Russia, North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, and so on. This is the unhappy situation we have in the world today.

Even in my region, which I continue to call the Asia-Pacific, there's a division. The Chinese bloc views the QUAD as a hostile organization. I think the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who is quite outspoken, once described the QUAD as the NATO of the Asia-Pacific. I don't know what other words to use against AUKUS, but clearly the Chinese see both QUAD and AUKUS as hostile to China. I pointed out to the Chinese that although India is a member of QUAD, India is not a member of the bloc led by the United States. India has an independent foreign policy. India is not hostile to Russia, India is not hostile to Iran, which are the two enemies of the United States. So, India cannot be put into the bloc led by the Americans.

But on China, the United States and India share the same view. They see China as a disruptive factor. We at ASEAN want to stay neutral. We don't want to be part of the QUAD, we are not hostile to the QUAD because the four member countries are all friends of ours. We are not hostile to AUKUS because the three countries of AUKUS are all friends of

ours. But we understand that in this divided world, one side—the Chinese side—views QUAD and AUKUS as hostile to their interests. Therefore, we have to be cautious in the way we deal with QUAD and with AUKUS, even though all of them are our friends.

**Dr Harish Mehta:** We have a couple more questions. May I invite Joanne Lin from the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, and request her for a question or a comment.

### **ASEAN Never Lost Relevance (and Why Biden Skipped the ASEAN Summit)**

**Ms. Joanne Lin:** Thank you, Prof Koh, for speaking earlier and, of course, to Harish for organizing this event. I actually do not have any questions but perhaps I could also give some comments. I thought that there was something that was rather interesting that Prof Koh mentioned earlier about ASEAN's unity, which is intact and doing way better than the EU. I had a whole paper to talk about ASEAN's unity currently being challenged because of various regional issues that ASEAN has to face. Of course, I agree with what Prof Koh said how successful ASEAN has been, and I think ASEAN unity in areas of cooperation within ASEAN has worked very well. This is where we consider it as ASEAN's community building and integration efforts. However, I think where regional issues are concerned, you can see a little bit of division, and course on the question of Myanmar. I think Prof Koh also mentioned about certain countries like Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, engaging with the State Administration Council (the SAC of Myanmar) and that was not really in line with what ASEAN planned to do.

Of course, with the South China Sea, we know that there are countries with no positions, whereas there are very strong views from the Philippines and Vietnam, for example, and China is having a real

challenge in the South China Sea right now. I think even in the last few days, we saw a little bit of a division arising from the Israel-Hamas war, and I came across a couple of comments that came out to see that ASEAN might be divided over the positions of who is supporting Israel and who is supporting the two-state solution, for example. These are the things that ASEAN has to work together on. It certainly has agency and ASEAN still matters.

We still need ASEAN, but I think ASEAN will definitely need to address two things—How to build greater coherence within the bloc, and how to retain its relevance in the regional architecture because we also see other power-led initiatives like the QUAD and AUKUS. These were questions that were asked earlier, and whether ASEAN can continue to maintain its centrality in the regional architecture, find some ways to work with QUAD for example. These are the kinds of questions that we need to think about moving forward. These are my comments. Thank you.

**Prof Tommy Koh:** Thank you. Maybe I could briefly respond and say that Joanne Lin is a Co-coordinator of ASEAN Studies at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. I read all her writing and I admire her very much. I think on ASEAN unity, you have to understand that, unlike the European Union, we don't have a common foreign and security policy. We're still ten sovereign states. From time to time, we are able to coordinate opposition and have a joint position but we are not at the point like the European Union, when we have a single position on foreign security policy. So, you have to understand that.

As for regaining relevance, I would say that we've never lost our relevance. You may ask me isn't ASEAN offended when President Biden recently decided to skip the ASEAN Summit, and instead he went to Vietnam. I want to try to explain why President Biden did that. He's a

friend of ASEAN, you know. He hosted a special summit in Washington with the ASEAN leaders, and I know him very well from his long years in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I know that he is at heart a friend of ASEAN.

We have to understand that currently the United States suffers from one obsession, and that is China. Whether you are relevant to me or not depends on whether you join me in opposing China or not. If you are neutral like ASEAN, you are not so valuable. But if you're Vietnam and you have problems with China, you are more valuable. So, if I were in President Biden's shoes, I can understand the calculation that went through my brain, and why I decided that I will send [Vice-President] Kamala Harris to Jakarta and I'll go to Hanoi, because in Hanoi, President Biden was able to persuade the Vietnamese to upgrade the bilateral relationship between the two countries to a comprehensive strategic position on par with China. From Washington's point of view, that was important.

It is a fact of life. Whether we are relevant or less relevant to Washington doesn't depend on us. It depends on Washington. You know, if whether I'm valuable to you or not depends on whether I will join you in opposing China, then the problem is in Washington and not in ASEAN. ASEAN will remain where we are. We will remain united, independent, and neutral. If the Americans don't like this and downgrade our importance to Washington, well too bad. But we will not change our policy just to please the Americans.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** Thank you, Joanne and Professor Koh for that wide-ranging explanation. Professor Koh, we have a couple more questions from Professor Salikyu Sangtam from Tetso College in Northeast India, and Dr. Toh Han Shih in Hong Kong.

## How Would the U.S. Respond if India, not China, was the Rising Hegemon?

**Professor Salikyu Sangtam:** Thank you once again for a wonderful annual lecture organized by Rising Asia. All thanks to Dr. Harish. As always, the lectures are very interesting and also, good to hear from Professor Koh. It was a very nice speech. I have so many questions and so many things I want to clarify, but then I'll just keep it short. Number one is just a hypothetical question and we know that we should not read too much into hypothetical situations, but if today India was in a similar position like China being the rising power in Asia, do you think that the United States would have a similar response against India, as it has against China?

The second question is on the different dynamics operating within ASEAN, which is full of tension, some members siding with the United States, others with China. Do you think in the long run is ASEAN viable? So, help me make sense of this panoramic situation in ASEAN today.

**Professor Tommy Koh:** Well, you have to understand that ASEAN is a big family. The analogy of ASEAN is a big family. In a big family, members have different interests, different inclinations, different levels of wealth. We may disagree on some issues but at the end of the day, we're still one family. I think that's true in ASEAN where you have countries at different levels of economic development, different trade scenarios, different aspirations, but we realize that we belong to one region and if we don't hang together, we will hang separately. So, it's better to hang together. The galvanizing motivation of the countries in ASEAN is a realization that by ourselves we are weak and can be exploited, but when we are united as ten, we gain strength from each other. When we speak as ten, our voice is amplified. When we are able as ten to invite the United States

and China and the Russians to sit together with us, we are performing a very valuable deed for the world, not just for ourselves, you know. So, don't be distracted by the differences among the family. Yes, we are different but we are united. The Indonesian national motto is very relevant here. It's called "Unity in Diversity." So, the beauty of ASEAN is that we're united even though we are different.

Your first question is very interesting—would the United States feel threatened if India was the rising power? Washington would be less alarmed because they see India as a democracy. But yes, if one day India rises to become a peer power of the United States and is willing to challenge the Americans for regional leadership and global leadership, the Americans will fight it. The Americans have been masters of the universe for so long that they are not about to give it up. I know the American character. Some of my friends in Singapore like [the diplomat] Kishore Mahbubani, keep saying, "Oh, the Chinese will surpass the Americans one day, so the Americans might get used to being number two." He's wrong. The Americans will never accept being number two, and if it means going to war to maintain the number one position, they will do so.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** That is a very interesting question, Professor Salikyu, and so is your illuminative reply, Professor Koh.

### **Will the U.S. Pressure Asian Countries to Support it Against China?**

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** I've asked Dr. Toh Han Shih to ask his question, but he says to you Professor Koh, on the chatbox, "Sorry, I cannot speak because I have no mic. My question for Professor Koh is this: Will America behave like U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in the

1950s, by pressuring Asian countries not to be neutral but to support America against China?”

**Professor Tommy Koh:** By the way, Toh Han Shih is a very famous journalist based in Hong Kong. He is a very good friend of mine, so I am very happy that he joined us in this dialogue. I would say to Han Shih that John Foster Dulles was not very successful. He only managed to persuade Thailand and the Philippines to join the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The rest of us refused to join them. The majority of the countries in the region wanted to be non-aligned. They didn't want to be aligned with the Americans against the Russians or against the Chinese.

I say this is true today, you know. If you ask most of the countries, do you want to be aligned or you want to be non-aligned? I think a majority in ASEAN will say that they want to be non-aligned. Some countries for historical reasons or geographical reasons, will say that, I have no choice but to be aligned in order to protect myself against a much bigger country. The Philippines may say this. We understand. In the ASEAN family we accept all views. We don't say, hey, you must be non-aligned, you cannot be an ally of the United States or an ally of China. We can't say that because every country in ASEAN is sovereign. As a sovereign country, you have every right to decide on your foreign policy. If you decide that your national interest is best served by aligning yourself with a superpower, you have every right to do that and we respect that.

But when you take part in a meeting of ten, we tell you to put aside your individual preference. You must now think not as an individual country but think as ASEAN. The majority in ASEAN say that ASEAN as an organization must remain neutral, and even the countries that are aligned say that they agree. This happened in Jakarta a few



months ago and President Jokowi was able to say that ASEAN is not an ally of great powers, and I agree with that.

So, I will say to Han Shih that you can't repeat the 1950s, you know. Even if the Americans are trying, and I don't think they're trying, they will not succeed. I think President Biden and [Secretary of State] Anthony Blinken are much more sophisticated. They know the world, they are friendly even to their adversaries. They are very friendly with the Chinese. The Americans keep sending very senior people to visit China, to try and restart dialogue with the Chinese. Let's hope that next month, in November, when the APEC [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum] meets in San Francisco, that there will be a side meeting between President Biden and President Xi. Even if such a meeting were to take place, it is not going to solve the fundamental contradiction between them; they will remain.<sup>1</sup> This struggle between the United States and China is structural and will go on for many, many years until one side capitulates, or they come to conclusion that it's a draw, and we must agree to co-exist with each another.

**Dr Harish Mehta:** Thank you, Professor Koh for that, and finally if Mr. Raj Sharma, who is on our Advisory board, has a question, he can go ahead now.

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<sup>1</sup> As expected, President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping met at the APEC Summit outside of San Francisco in November 2023 in their first face-to-face encounter in a year. Biden declared at the Summit, "We have to ensure that competition does not veer into conflict," and that "critical global challenges we face, from climate change to counternarcotics to artificial intelligence, demand our joint efforts." Xi stated, "For two large countries like China and the United States, turning their back on each other is not an option. Planet Earth is big enough for the two countries to succeed."

## **ASEAN Can Invite the U.S. and China to Talk, It Can't Solve Their Problems**

**Mr. Raj Sharma:** Well, thank you, Harish. Thank you, Professor Koh, for this wonderful lecture. It is interesting that ASEAN chooses, and plays, a neutral role, but I would think that because individual states have long-term interests that evolve over time, particularly in the struggle between the PRC and the United States vying for supremacy, in the long-run would that create fissures? And what does ASEAN try to do to prevent that from unravelling its core charter?

**Professor Tommy Koh:** We can't solve the problems of the two superpowers, but we can invite them to sit with us at the same table. We can repeatedly tell them to talk to each other and try to rebuild trust even though they have differences in some areas. But there are important issues in the world on which they should work together, like climate change, like the pandemic. There are many issues in the world where we need both China and the United States to be with us. So, we the ASEAN countries have been repeating to the Chinese and the Americans, that please try to talk to each other, rebuild trust, don't escalate differences, and don't get into an armed conflict over Taiwan or some other issue.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** We now move into our concluding moments. I now ask Dr. Julie Mehta to ask her question.

## **The Rohingyas: A Tragedy Without a Solution**

**Dr. Julie Mehta:** I have one niggling question. We've really been through the universal approaches to the key question today, and you've done, only as you can, an inimitable job. My question is, the Rohingyas seem to be the fracture currently. How do you think, or is there a way of solving this refugee issue, or the issue of human rights, or however you want to look at the Rohingya issue? What would you say?



**Professor Tommy Koh:** It's a tragedy with no solution. I feel for the Rohingyas, you know. They are a people unwanted by their own country, and it's shocking to me that my good friends in Myanmar, especially the Burmans of all political positions, including the great lady, Aung San Suu Kyi, refuse to recognize the Rohingya as a people that belong to Myanmar. She even refuses to call them Rohingya. She'll call them illegals or Bengali. You know, there's a blind spot among the Burmans about the Rohingya. We, the ASEAN countries recognize them as a people and we call them by their proper name, the Rohingya.

We think they belong to Myanmar. We think the military was wrong to expel them and to make it impossible to live in peace and security in their own country. But ASEAN is a prisoner of our own charter and of our own ethos, which is that we don't interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. So, we can't tell the Myanmar government that please recognize the Rohingya as a people and as a minority. We can't do that. All we can do is to help the Rohingya, which we do. We give them help in Cox Bazaar in Bangladesh. We try to bring help to the Rohingyas and other minorities in Myanmar, but there's a limit to what we can do. At the end of the day, there's no solution without the Burmans recognizing the Rohingya as a minority that belongs to the country. It's a tragedy.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** Thank you very much, Professor Koh, for giving so much time and effort, putting so much thought, and bringing all your wealth of experience, and sort of nut-shelling it for us today. You've clarified so many important issues that surround ASEAN and the world.

**Professor Tommy Koh:** Let me just conclude by saying that I'm an all-weather friend of India. I believe in India when my Indian friends don't believe in India. Some of you may know that I've edited two books on India. One book was called *India on Our Minds* with a foreword by [former

Singapore Prime Minister] Goh Chok Tong, the champion of India, and it was launched by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Last year, I produced another book and it's called *ASEAN and India: The Way Forward*. You see, when India decided not to sign the Regional Economic Partnership Agreement, this was a blow to ASEAN because ASEAN wanted so much for India to be in the RCEP so that RCEP would not be dominated by one country. We need India in RCEP, so it was very disappointing to the ASEAN countries that India decided to opt out. So, what I wanted to do is change this atmosphere and say, okay this has happened, accept it, and put it in the back. Let's look forward. We have a new agenda for cooperation between India and ASEAN. Look at my book and see what the agenda is.

So, I want to conclude by saying that I continue to believe in India. I hope India will solve its internal problems and achieve much greater economic progress than it has done in the past. There's no reason why the Indian economy cannot be as big as the Chinese economy. There's no reason why India-ASEAN trade cannot be as large as Chinese-ASEAN trade. There's no reason why India's investment in ASEAN can't be as great as Chinese investment. So, as a friend of India, I plead with you, please up your game in ASEAN. There's so much more we can do to upgrade the relationship between India and ASEAN, and you can count on me to work with you to achieve this goal.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** We thank you on behalf of Rising Asia Foundation, our trustees, our President, and our various boards, some of whom have attended today's Distinguished Annual Lecture by Professor Tommy Koh, all the way from the University of Alaska and Senator Yuen Pau Woo from Canada, and Senior Minister Mouly Ieng from Cambodia.

**Dr. Julie Mehta:** And Meira Chand, who is the Singapore Spirit for all of us all over the world, and such a good friend of Prof Koh's.



**Dr. Meira Chand:** Thank you, Prof Koh, and Julie and Harish. I've learned a lot today. It's been illuminating and informative. Thank you all.

**Prof Tommy Koh:** Thank you.

**Dr. Harish Mehta:** Yes, I think I can speak for all of us, to say that we have all learned a lot because to get the perspective from such a senior academic and statesman, and such a senior career diplomat, probably the senior-most in ASEAN, to get his views is a delight. It's a pleasure to have heard all this in the way that you've put across, with so much clarity, shorn of jargon or verbiage that often obfuscates issues, in way that you reached out to us and to our audiences, and you will reach out to more once this video goes viral, and your speech goes even more viral when published in our journal in the coming months. Thank you.

**Prof Tommy Koh:** Thank you.