

Unlocking Possibilities for ASEAN-China Relations

Wilfrido V. Villacorta, Ph.D.

**Professor Emeritus, De La Salle University;
Former Ambassador & Permanent Representative to ASEAN;
Former ASEAN Deputy Secretary-General**

**First International Seminar on ASEAN Development
Sponsored by the Asia-Pacific Headquarters of
Xinhua News Agency
Hong Kong, 13th December 2014**

I would like to thank the Asia-Pacific Headquarters of Xinhua News Agency for inviting me as speaker in its first international Seminar on ASEAN Development. I shall be expressing my views here as a Professor of International Relations. My statements do not necessarily reflect the position of my Government.

All of us are aware of the progress of ASEAN-China partnership since 1996. I am certain that you have read about the different challenges arising from conflicting claims of parties to the South China Sea. Time constraint prevents me from dwelling on the details. I would like instead to look to the future and the broader dimensions of our ties, focusing on our common dreams for our peoples.

The leaders and senior officials of our two countries have repeatedly stressed that our relationship should not be confined to the issue of the South China Sea. The recent APEC Summit provided President Benigno Aquino and President Xi Jinping with the first step towards the resumption of dialogue. Next year's APEC Summit to be hosted in Manila as well as the East Asia Summit in Kuala Lumpur and other international forums will afford additional opportunities for bilateral meetings.

In the 20th century, the study and practice of international relations have unfortunately been dominated by the Realist school of thought. National interests are supposed to be permanent, when in truth, they change depending on evolving circumstances. National security policies did not give enough importance to human security and concentrated on one-upmanship through the expansion of domestic and external power, resulting in intensified arms race, two world wars and four regional

wars in Asia (Korea, Afghanistan, Viet Nam and the Middle East).

The more complex economic, environmental and political problems now facing the world highlight the need for states to be more conscious of their interdependence and common stakes. The experiment of ASEAN offers an alternative to the Realist framework. The “ASEAN Way” subscribes not to zero-sum gamesmanship but to the ethos of “prosper thy neighbor.” We aspire to serve as each other’s catalyst in bringing about better quality of life for our peoples and in contributing to peace and prosperity in our whole region. This approach adopts the constructivist paradigm, which considers the role of socially constructed elements of history, culture, values, sentiments, institutions and ideas in forging foreign policy, as well as the liberalist framework, which recognizes the spill-over impact of market economies in fostering cooperation, prosperity and lasting peace among nations.

The formation of the ASEAN Community will complement the Chinese Dream enunciated by President Xi Jinping. Speaking before students and scholars studying abroad, he stressed that “China cannot develop without the rest of the world; nor can the world as a whole prosper without China. We must open still wider to the outside world, strengthening our connectivity and interaction with it, and enhancing our understanding and friendship with other peoples.”

In his speech to the study group of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, he exhorted the members “to sort out traditional cultural resources and bring back to life relics sleeping in closed palaces, legacies of the vast land of China and records in ancient books.” He must have referred to Confucianism and Taoism-- the great foundation of China’s ethical legacy-- and Mahayana Buddhism, which was developed from the philosophical tradition of India,

In another speech of President Xi, he shared his perspective on “Diplomacy with Neighboring Countries Characterized by Friendship, Sincerity, Reciprocity and Inclusiveness.” He exhorted his audience “to promote regional security cooperation, which is needed by both China and our neighboring countries. A new outlook on security is required that features mutual trust and reciprocity, based on equality and cooperation.”

If China, now the largest economy of the world, resolutely fulfills its dream, perhaps we can witness the growth of a humane world order.

But that is the distant future. In the short run, China’s ASEAN neighbors have high hopes.

The first expectation is that **China will support and even act as one of the catalysts to the integration of the ASEAN.** Of all the economies in the region, it is China that has the wherewithal to play this facilitative role.

The second expectation is that **China will be open to the adoption and ratification of a Code of Conduct**

for Parties to the South China Sea (COC). No one wants war to break out in the fastest growing economic region—neither China nor any of the big powers nor anyone of the ASEAN member-states. Armed conflict will disrupt the fruition of the envisaged ASEAN Economic Community.

The third expectation is that **China will be the exemplar of a new type of big power, which subscribes to the principle of *rén* (仁), the primary guiding principle of Confucianism.** It was Kongfuzi who first taught the Golden Rule: “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others (Analects, Book XV, Chapter 23).” Surely, China, which suffered a century of humiliation at the hands of colonizers, would not want to be the colonial ruler of the 21st century.

President Xi recognizes the diversity and uniqueness of the development approaches of its neighboring countries. It is interesting that Dr. Henry Kissinger in his latest book, *World Order*, believes that “to achieve a

genuine world order, its components, while maintaining their own values, need to acquire a second culture that is global, structural and juridical—a concept of order that transcends the perspective and ideals of any one region or nation. At this moment in history, this would be a modernization of the Westphalian system informed by contemporary realities.”

In order to develop and perpetuate the acceptance of the logic of One World, Singapore Ambassador Kishore Mahbubani prescribes that there needs to be a convergence of Eastern and Western ways of thinking. He observes that “paradoxically, the contemporary Western mind, which has until recently been more open than other minds, may have more difficulty grasping the complexity. Through a tangled combination of having to be always politically correct and never admitting to Machiavellian calculations, most Western commentators have fallen into a black-and-white mind-set. In their minds, there are right or wrong solutions. In the real world, most solutions are

right and wrong wrapped together.” Perhaps, these ideas will generate a lively discussion with other participants.

I thank you.

###

References

Das, Sanchita Basu, Jayant Menon, Rodolfo Severino, Omkar Lal Shrestha (eds.). 2013. *The ASEAN Economic Community: A Work in Progress*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Jacques, Martin. 2009. *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2009.

Kissinger, Henry. 2014. *World Order*. New York: Penguin Press.

Mahbubani, Kishore. 2013. *The Great Convergence: Asia, The West, and The Logic of One World*. New York: Public Affairs.

Xi Jinping. 2014. *The Governance of China*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014.