

The Big Read

The price of peace in Asean

The regional group's unshowy deftness in keeping the peace in a diverse South-east Asia is celebrated in a compelling new book by old friends Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng

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THE ASEAN MIRACLE: A CATALYST FOR PEACE
By Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng
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Tomorrow, the Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asean) will hold its 30th summit in the same year that it turns 50.

It is, however, a safe bet that 99 per cent of South-east Asians, who number about 633.5 million today, will not know what the summit is for, who will attend it or even why there is an Asean at all.

As authors Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng cite in this book – as late as Jan 2 last year, *The Economist* saw the regional group in this way: “Grandiose statements from Asean are the region’s Christmas crackers: they appear at regular intervals, create a commotion but contain little of substance.”

Worse, the news magazine added that Asean has no mechanism to enforce its many agreements and treaties, each of its members still makes it hard for the others to fully enter its domestic market, and all of them continue to have differing standards for intellectual property, land use and immigration policies.

That is apparently so, even though the region covers an area equivalent to more than half of the continental United States. In geopolitical terms, it is an epicentre of diversity hiding in plain sight.

As it is, even among those in the know, such as Thai journalist and dedicated Asean watcher Kavi Chongkittavorn, whose work is cited in this book, the regional group is often seen as a talk shop and tool with which the world’s great powers wield and deal in their own interests.

But as Singaporean don and diplomat Mahbubani and Thailand-based philosopher-chronicler Sng, both 68, show in their book, the group’s strength lies in its perceived weakness, that is, being all things to everyone and so much less focused on its own interests unlike, say, the navel-gazing European Union.

Mahbubani and Sng, who have been friends for almost six decades, have fused their know-how in a book that is a surprisingly enjoyable read – surprising because its subject seems so tedious to begin with.

The niceties of statecraft do not pique the average reader’s curiosity, but in their sleek narrative, the writers have peeled back the platitudes of diplomacy to reveal just how hard-won peace has been in the region.

The absorbing insights include how Japan sends its most senior diplomats to negotiate with Europe, while Asean has to be content with the most junior Japanese en-



voys; how avidly Europe has long danced to the US’ diplomatic drumming; and how India continues to prefer dialogues with the US and Europe, even after Asean laboured to make it a full dialogue partner despite a lot of pushback from its other partners, such as Australia and New Zealand, which worried about India’s enmity with Pakistan being too disruptive to such dialogues.

Thus the reader gets an acute sense of the jostling, one-upmanship and uneasy dances among today’s great powers, such as the US, China, Russia and Japan and the rising influencers of South-east Asia.

Asean’s strongest suit, the authors argue convincingly, is its softly, softly belief in respecting differences and always finding ways to cooperate and collaborate with everyone. Those who favour such an approach would call it flexibility; those who do not will call it, at best, vacillation, and, at worst, hypocrisy.

On top of that, the authors stress, Asean’s rituals – such as their leaders’ many games of golf – matter a lot because they enable the leaders

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to relate to one another as human beings and not just as power players. As Plato once said, you can learn more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of chatting.

Asean, the authors note, could have gone the way of Europe’s blood-spattered Balkans – and it was, indeed, characterised by author Charles Fisher as the Balkans of Asia – simply because it is such a mother lode of diversity.

In fact, South-east Asia was such a cesspit of strife in the 1960s that when Asean was founded on Aug 8 1967 by Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, all of them were still in conflict with at least one among themselves. The region’s continued peacefulness since is its miracle, say the authors.

In particular, there is a sense of community among all its disparate countries, from all having been infused with incoming civilisations of India, China, Islam and the West, in that order.

But, contrary to what they contend, it might still be a bridge too far to suggest that by dint of that alone, Asean as an organisation has done enough to calm Asia’s troubled waters such that it deserves the Nobel Peace Prize.

For one thing, as even the authors point out, its identity as an organisation is still fuzzy at best. Nobody lauds anybody or anything it is not entirely sure about.

The book would also have benefited from a deeper discussion of the South China Sea tussles between China and Asean which, at the moment, show Asean’s non-confrontational approach to be rather impotent in solving long-seething claims over parts of the sea.

None of this, however, dims this beacon of a book.

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Don and diplomat Kishore Mahbubani and philosopher-chronicler Jeffery Sng at the launch of the book last month.

ST FILE PHOTO

In a nutshell

THE GOOD

Policy studies professor Kishore Mahbubani and philosopher-chronicler Jeffery Sng have written a vital and vivid primer on all things Asean. Better yet are Mahbubani’s first-hand insights into the shadow play of diplomacy in the region, including how and why Australia often thwarts Asean’s efforts to be more influential globally, and why the geopolitical ties between Japan and Asean are not as strong as they should be.

THE BAD

The voices of those who run the day-to-day affairs of Asean, or help support it as a regional group, are missing. As one of the authors’ goals in this book is to inspire, among South-east Asians, a greater sense of “ownership” of Asean, putting human faces to dry, if not dull, plans and policies for the region would do much to boost their pride in being from the region.

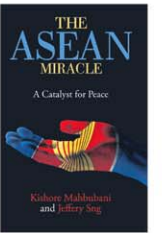
A fast and furious meet tomorrow

India-born author Pankaj Mishra’s new book, *Age of Anger*, has stoked the ire of a few Big Read Meet regulars, including German economist Hans Schniewind.

Join him and senior writer Cheong Suk-Wai as they take issue with Mishra’s contentious

views on capitalism at The Big Read Meet from 6.30pm tomorrow at the Multi-Purpose Room, Central Public Library, Basement 1 National Library Board (NLB) headquarters at 100 Victoria Street.

Sign up for it at an NLB e-Kiosk or try your luck at the door.



Five questions this book answers

1

What, and who, made South-east Asia the world’s biggest melting pot today?

2

To what extent can China influence Asean affairs today – and why?

3

What goes on behind the scenes between Asean and the great powers?

4

Why do South-east Asians not care more about their region?

5

Why does Asean deserve the Nobel Peace Prize?