

# Indonesia's big-hearted spirit in Asean

Indonesia's generosity as a big country has shaped the region. A new book by former Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa maps out challenges the grouping faces in the future.

**Kishore Mahbubani**

For *The Straits Times*

Just as we, in Singapore, don't appreciate the clean air we breathe until the haze from Sumatra descends upon us, we also don't appreciate the geopolitical calm we enjoy in South-east Asia until the geopolitical haze comes.

This geopolitical haze is coming. Having devoted the first six months of my sabbatical this year to studying United States-China relations, I have no doubt that US-China rivalry will rise in the coming years. South-east Asia will be directly affected by this rivalry.

When this happens, and as we search for stabilisers in the storm, we will say: "Thank God, we have Asean."

However, we shouldn't just thank God. We should also thank Indonesia. Why? Just look around the world and ask yourselves why many regional organisations, including the Organisation of American States, Gulf Cooperation Council and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, are struggling.

One answer is that the largest member of these organisations exercises too much dominance. Indonesia is, by far, the largest member of Asean. Of the 650 million people in South-east Asia, 40 per cent, or 260 million, live in Indonesia. Why then has the country not tried to dominate Asean?

Quite honestly, this is a big mystery. This is abnormal behaviour. My co-author, Jeffery Sng, and I try to provide some answers in our book *The ASEAN Miracle*.

Fortunately, the former foreign minister of Indonesia, Dr Marty Natalegawa, has just come out with a book, *Does ASEAN Matter?*, which will be launched at

ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute tomorrow.

One of the blessings of my life has been that as a result of my 33-year diplomatic career, I got to know several Indonesian foreign ministers well, including the legendary earlier foreign ministers Mochtar Kusumaatmadja and Ali Alatas, as well as the more recent ones – Dr Hassan Wirajuda, Dr Marty and Ms Retno Marsudi. My direct experience with them enables me to say that Indonesia has shown a generosity of spirit to Asean that no other regional power has displayed towards its region.

I remember telling Mr Lee Kuan Yew a story that Mr Alatas told me that, judging from the expression in Mr Lee's eyes, likely impressed him. Mr Alatas told me that for several years, Indonesia used to send its urban planners to the best cities in Europe to study urban planning. Each year, these urban planners would return home impressed, but in the concluding paragraph, they would say that "but 'City X' is in Europe, Jakarta is in Asia. We in Asia cannot do what Europe can do".

One year, these urban planners came to Singapore. In the last paragraph, they began writing, as usual, "but Singapore is in Europe ...". Mr Alatas told me that when they began writing this usual last sentence, they said: "Oops, Singapore is not in Europe."

Hence, when these urban planners hoisted in the fact that Singapore was a fellow Asian city, their attitudes towards what Jakarta could do in urban planning also changed. In short, without intending to do so, Singapore had a positive catalytic effect on Indonesia. Mr Alatas was big-hearted enough to give Singapore, a small state, credit.

Similarly, Indonesian President Joko Widodo was equally big-hearted. Before he launched his presidential campaign, he took me on a car ride around Jakarta in December 2013. In this car ride, he referred several times to areas where Jakarta could learn from Singapore, including in public housing and public utilities.

Since Indonesian leaders are big-hearted enough to acknowledge Singapore's contributions to Indonesia, we should be equally big-hearted to acknowledge Indonesia's contributions to Singapore and South-east Asia. As Sng and I



document in our book, as the smallest state in South-east Asia, Singapore is the biggest single beneficiary of the ecosystem of peace and prosperity that Asean has delivered to our region. Without benign Indonesian leadership and guidance, Asean could not have delivered this ecosystem.

## 36 HOURS OF SHUTTLE DIPLOMACY

Few in Singapore are aware that Asean went through a very traumatic experience as recently as six years ago in July 2012. Each year, the Asean Foreign Ministers issue a long Joint Communique after their July meetings. In 2012, under Cambodia's chairmanship, Asean failed to do so. This open breakdown in unity could have been catastrophic for Asean. Fortunately, Dr Marty was the Indonesian foreign minister then. He immediately swung into action, undertook shuttle diplomacy to several Asean capitals and within 36 hours, rescued the situation by getting an agreed document on the South China Sea. For this one act alone, he should be declared a hero of Asean.

He succeeded because he understood well the craft of diplomacy. As he says in his book: "Some of my most difficult experiences in the practice of diplomacy have involved diplomats endlessly poring over written drafts and dissecting them to no end."

Hence, in his 36 hours of intense diplomacy, as he says, "no written

drafts were formally circulated". He added that it took an "almost infinite reservoir of patience" to listen to the strongly opposing views.

As a result of his masterful diplomacy, Asean's Six-Point Principles on the South China Sea were adopted within 36 hours. It is clearly in Singapore's national interest for Indonesia's foreign ministers to carry on with this activist policy of protecting Asean.

Another huge contribution Asean has made to South-east Asia has been to deliver zero wars.

Asean is still behind the European Union because it has not yet delivered zero prospect of war. Indeed, some Asean states have come close to war. This happened between Cambodia and Thailand over the Preah Vihear temple in early 2011. Fortunately, once again, Dr Marty was the foreign minister of Indonesia then. He undertook shuttle diplomacy to Phnom Penh and Bangkok on Feb 7 and 8, 2011.

As a result of this shuttle diplomacy, Indonesia was invited to participate in the UN Security Council discussion on this issue on Feb 14, 2011. As Dr Marty notes: "To my knowledge, it constituted the first occasion that an Asean member state had been asked to appear before the (UN) Security Council ... as chair of Asean."

As a result of his intense personal diplomacy, a Special Informal Asean Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Jakarta on Feb 22, 2011, managed

to defuse the situation. For the rest of that year, Dr Marty and Indonesia remained actively engaged. War was avoided.

As a result of his extensive direct experiences with Asean diplomacy, Dr Marty is able to dispense much-needed wisdom.

He emphasises that his book is focused not on the past 50 years of Asean's achievements, even though he describes well the factors that contributed to Asean's exceptional success. For example, he says: "President Soeharto of Indonesia and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore were instrumental in promoting a new type of dynamic in their countries' bilateral relations and thus, indirectly, the region."

His main goal with this book is to help Asean deal with the next 50 years of challenges. He stresses the imperative of developing "strategic trust" and advises that "the consolidation of strategic trust for the next fifty years, therefore, requires a judicious combination of a 'rules-based' Asean and one that continues to place stock on the importance of that often-cited 'Asean spirit'".

In his book, he also pays tribute to the two Singapore foreign ministers he worked with, Mr George Yeo and Mr K. Shanmugam. He praises Mr Shanmugam for delaying his departure from the Asean meeting in July 2012 to support a last-ditch effort to rescue the meeting. He also describes the trilateral meeting he had with Mr Shanmugam and Malaysia's Datuk Sri Anifah Aman to deal with the haze issue in June 2013.

On the haze issue, he adds, wisely: "I deemed it essential that Indonesia took leadership and ownership of the cooperative process – on its own initiative – as the issue of the haze was severely affecting its own national interests."

It is a real pity that Singaporeans don't read books on Asean. The book on Asean that I co-authored with Sng was my sixth book. I expected it to be my best-selling one in Singapore since Asean is so critical to Singapore. Instead, it has turned out to be the least-read book of mine in Singapore.

However, I sincerely hope that Singaporeans will not ignore this book by Dr Marty. It contains many gems of wisdom. Let me conclude with one last piece of wisdom from him: "In the world of the 21st century, the idea of a single country 'winning' through the singular and narrow pursuit of its interests – oblivious to the wider context – cannot possibly be sustained."

Wise advice.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Kishore Mahbubani, a former diplomat and a professor in the Practice of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, is the co-author of *The ASEAN Miracle* with Jeffery Sng.

• Dr Marty Natalegawa's new book, *Does ASEAN Matter? A View From Within*, will be launched tomorrow and is available at US\$29.90 (S\$41) from Iseas Publishing's online bookshop.

Dr Marty Natalegawa, former foreign minister of Indonesia, with his new book, *Does ASEAN Matter?*, which will be launched at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute tomorrow.  
ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI