

By Invitation

The oxygen of Asean

In the conflict-ridden region, the grouping has developed an ecosystem of the 'oxygen' of peace and prosperity critical to Singapore's existence



Kishore Mahbubani

For *The Straits Times*

I am 72 years old. Like many people my age, I dreaded getting Covid-19. I could have died. As I investigated more, I discovered that even if I survived Covid-19, I could have still suffered if I had got it because I could have been put on a ventilator.

If insufficient oxygen had reached my lungs, they would have to put in a tube to inject oxygen directly to my lungs. Ugh!

All this made me aware of how much we take for granted the most essential commodity for human life: oxygen. It is even more vital than water. We can go without water for a few days. We cannot go without oxygen beyond a few minutes.

Just as we take for granted oxygen in our daily lives, Singaporeans also take for granted the daily oxygen provided by one of our primary geopolitical sources of oxygen, namely Asean.

Without Asean, Singapore could have been put in an equivalent of a geopolitical ventilator. Since it is so critical to our existence, every Singaporean should understand how much oxygen Asean provides to us. This oxygen comes in two forms.

OXYGEN OF PEACE

The first is the oxygen of peace. As a region, South-east Asia was never pre-ordained for peace. It is by far the most diverse region of planet earth, with over 250 million Muslims, 150 million Christians, 150 million Buddhists, and millions of Confucianists, Taoists, Hindus and even communists in the mix. British historians accurately describe our region as the Balkans of Asia. Yet, when the Balkans of Europe went to war, the Balkans of Asia remained peaceful.

Why? The simple answer is Asean. As my co-author Jeffery Sng and I argue in our book, *The Asean Miracle*, it is truly amazing that our traditionally conflict-ridden region has developed a remarkable ecosystem of peace and prosperity.

Indeed, more than any other region in the world, it deserves the Nobel Peace Prize. But it will not happen. The Western ignorance of what Asean has

achieved is stunning.

Exhibit A is a recent issue of *The Economist*. It has an alarming map of South-east Asia on its cover, with red brush strokes about to envelop all of the region. The article correctly states that in the rivalry between the United States and China, which has begun, the main bone of contention will be South-east Asia. Yet, the underlying assumption of this article is that South-east Asians can only be hapless victims. They have no power of agency to influence their own destiny.

It is true that Asean is a relatively weak organisation. It has none of the robust rules that tie together the European Union. Yet, paradoxically, as we have documented in *The Asean Miracle*, the strength of Asean comes from its weakness. Because Asean is weak, everyone trusts it. Hence, under the weak umbrella of Asean, miracles happen.

One recent concrete example will help clarify this point. The three largest and most significant economies in East Asia are those of China (US\$14 trillion, or about S\$18.8 trillion), Japan (US\$5 trillion) and South Korea (US\$1.7 trillion).

If these three economies had tried to have trilateral meetings to negotiate a free trade agreement (FTA) among themselves, they would have failed. The room would have been filled with distrust and suspicion among these three parties (Note: As an aside, let me mention that a similar culture of distrust and suspicion was present among the five founding members of Asean when I attended its meetings in the 1970s).

Fortunately for China, Japan and South Korea, Asean proposed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Since Asean proposed it, there was no distrust. After all, "weak" Asean is seen as benign and non-threatening. Consequently, RCEP was concluded in November last year.

What was the most significant result of RCEP? The answer is the effective creation of an FTA among China, Japan and South Korea. In short, Asean pulled off another miracle.

OXYGEN FOR PROSPERITY

The second oxygen Asean delivers to Singapore is prosperity. Most Singaporeans are unaware that Asean is one of the world's fast-growing economic regions. Indeed, apart from China (whose economy grew 12 times from 2000 to 2019) and India (six times), Asean grew at five times.

Here is one statistic that will probably surprise many Singaporeans. In 2000, Japan's economy was eight times the size of Asean. By 2019, it was only 1.6 times larger. By 2030, Asean's economy will become larger than Japan's.

Why is all this important to Singapore? No other country in the world has international trade that is 3.1 times the size of its gross national product. Our open economy needs to be surrounded by an ecosystem of peace and prosperity. Asean provides both.

Still, Asean is imperfect. It has setbacks from time to time. The recent coup in Myanmar was a huge setback. Clearly, it will be difficult for Asean to reverse the coup. Inevitably, we will see once again the resurfacing of the usual schadenfreude in the Western media about the weakness and ineffectiveness of Asean.

Asean will be condemned or criticised for not expelling Myanmar or imposing sanctions on it. Since many Singaporeans are prisoners of Western media perspectives, they too will inherit this Western disrespect for Asean. And it would be an absolute tragedy for Singaporeans to spurn the oxygen they need so badly.

This is where some historical perspective is needed. The issue is not black and white. Western governments condemn military coups when they happen far away, as in Myanmar. They accept military coups when they happen in their backyard. For example, the European Union quietly accepted the military coup in Algeria in 1992 because it was happy to see the prevention of the establishment of an Islamist government. It did the same with Egypt in 2013.

And when Western governments engaged in "humanitarian intervention" in Libya in 2011 under a Nato-led operation that helped to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi, they took no responsibility for the humanitarian disaster that followed there. Then United States President Barack Obama has admitted this. When asked in 2016 what he considered to be his worst mistake during his presidency, he responded: "Probably failing to plan for the day after, what I think was the right thing to do, in intervening in Libya."

He added subsequently that given the Europeans' proximity to Libya, he expected them to be more "invested in the follow-up". Instead, the Europeans abandoned Libya after creating a mess there.

Asean will never abandon Myanmar. Hence, Asean should not be troubled by Western public moralising on Myanmar. Indeed, it

may be helpful, if it is able to convince the Myanmar generals that the coup will not work.

However, Asean should stick to its own methods of avoiding public moralising about coups while delivering strong messages in private. This is what the Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi did when she met Mr Win Aung Myint, the designated representative of the Myanmar generals. And it was good that she also met representatives of detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Certainly, Asean should unreservedly condemn the use of live ammunition against peaceful protesters. Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan was right in saying in Parliament on Tuesday: "We strongly reiterate that the use of lethal weapons against unarmed civilians is inexcusable in all circumstances... We call on the Myanmar military authorities to exercise utmost restraint, to desist from the use of lethal force, and to take immediate steps to de-escalate the situation in order to prevent further bloodshed, violence and death."

On Tuesday, Asean foreign ministers in an online meeting urged the Myanmar military to desist from violence and respect the will of the people.

Asean should also use this opportunity to send a clear message to both Beijing and Washington that the grouping will be unhappy if either party uses the Myanmar coup to embarrass the other party.

Instead of scoring points on Myanmar, both countries should work quietly with Asean to slowly and steadily persuade the Myanmar generals to reverse course and go back to status quo ante.

Both sides will have to compromise. Ms Suu Kyi will have to give the army chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who led the coup, another five-year extension to his term which was granted in 2016. Gen Min will have to allow Ms Suu Kyi to go back to her post as state counsellor.

If Asean did not exist, such a turnaround may be almost impossible. With Asean, we have a hope that Myanmar will gradually return to status quo ante, even though it will take time.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

- Kishore Mahbubani is a distinguished fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, and the author of *Has The West Lost It?* and *Has China Won?*
- This article will also be published on the website of the Asian Peace Programme, an initiative to promote peace in Asia housed in the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.