SESSION B1

"The Uphill Struggle for ASEAN Centrality and Unity: Is ASEAN Punching Above or Below?"

ASEAN Room – Conference on Indonesian Foreign Policy 2024

Speakers:

1. **H.E. Delia Domingo Albert**, Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines (2003 - 2004)
2. **H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow**, Vice Minister and Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Thailand (2006-2007)
3. **Robert Matheus Michael Tene**, Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for ASEAN Political Security Community (2021-2024)
4. **Professor Amitav Acharya**, Distinguished Professor of International Relations at the School of International Service, American University

Moderator: **Dayu Nirma Amurwanti**, FPCI Senior Fellow; Lecturer at International Relations, BINUS University

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Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Good morning, everyone and welcome. Thank you everyone, thank you FPCI for organizing this event and also the sponsors, collaborators of this event. And for this session, let me mention and give a shout-out to our partner university, BINUS University. Where are you? BINUS students, faculties. Thank you. And, also let me greet ambassadors, your excellencies who are here today. Friends, I see a number of familiar faces. Thank you for attending this session.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
So this session is called Uphill Struggle of ASEAN Centrality and Unity: Is ASEAN punching above or below weight? So there's a lot of expectations over what can be discussed or raised in this topic. And it's very fitting that we have our distinguished panels for today. Let me have a seat. First of all, let us welcome Ambassador Her Excellency Delia Domingo Albert.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Ambassador, welcome. She is the first female and former Secretary of Foreign Affairs in the Philippines in Asia. Very inspiring. Not an easy feat, I believe. And next to her, we have Ambassador Sihasak, who is a former vice minister and Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand. Welcome, Ambassador. And next we have, Bapak Michael Tene, who is Deputy Secretary General of ASEAN for 2021-2024. Welcome, Pak Michael Tene. And last but not least, we have Professor Amitav Acharya, distinguished professor of International Relations of the School of International Services, American University. Welcome, professor. So I believe to set the scene, probably we need to invite Professor Amitav Acharya to explain and enlighten us what ASEAN centrality and unity means since it's quite a recent concept, I believe. Professor, over to you.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
Thank you. Thank you very much. It's just a tough call, but let me say a few words about where this term ASEAN Centrality came from and what it actually means. First of all, if you look at the Bangkok Declaration that founded ASEAN, there's no mention of centrality. ASEAN Centrality simply wasn't there.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
The Bangkok Declaration was about one and a half pages long, and it talked about what ASEAN could do in terms of socio-cultural cooperation, and a little bit of economic cooperation, but you know, ASEAN centrality. Why? Because the founding foreign ministers of ASEAN were very cautious people. They didn't want to create very strong, large expectations that ASEAN can do this, ASEAN can do that. They were very happy to look inwards and say, “we'll keep Southeast Asia stable and keep us away from great power intervention and rivalry.” This was during the Cold War, the height of the Cold War. And, they did not have this idea that ASEAN could build an architecture for Asia, or the term Asia Pacific didn't exist at that time, not to mention Indo Pacific. So they were pragmatic causes. These are relatively, what you can say, Indonesia is not a small state, but a smaller power compared to say India, China, but also the United States and the Soviet Union or even Japan. So with even the Bali Declaration, the first ASEAN Summit in Bali, also didn't mention ASEAN centrality.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
The declaration of the ASEAN Concord didn't mention ASEAN Centrality. So this is pretty much a very recent phenomenon. It came after the end of the Cold War, but not even immediately after the end of the Cold War. Just a decade after the end of the Cold War. Nobody knows. Actually, I'll be very interested. Even students, researchers, tell me what's the first mention of ASEAN centrality. I haven't been able to figure this out. So, the second point, a related point, is why we have a notion of ASEAN centrality and what it actually means. Meaning it's unclear, very ambiguous.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
But, there are two possible ways of looking at it. One is that ASEAN is the foundation, and is the point of reference for a larger Asia Pacific architecture. I'm still using Asia Pacific rather than Indo Pacific, but whatever you say– Asia Pacific, the regional architecture that evolved with the creation of APEC, ASEAN Regional Forum after the end of the Cold War, they must conform to ASEAN's foundational principles, like three areas and cooperation.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
So that's the kind of a situational foundational role for ASEAN. But the slightly more, maybe controversial but actually more expansive understanding of ASEAN centrality is that ASEAN are the driver and the leader. So it's one thing to be a foundation, another thing is to drive and lead. So ASEAN is the driver. We have the driver's seat metaphor. We have the leader metaphor, ASEAN leadership. And that became kind of, more and more used as the post cold war period unfolded. And that's the problem. So if we can talk about it later. I don't wanna take up your time. Well, let me end by saying where this term came from; There are two reasons why we have ASEAN centrality.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
One has to do with the fact that ASEAN was quite successful during the Cold War in managing relations within Southeast Asia. Right? I emphasized within Southeast Asia, and we talk– heard about ASEAN's role in the Cambodia conflict. That was really, the key basis for ASEAN's perception of ASEAN as successful, probably the most successful regional organization outside of the European Union. So that was ASEAN's own doing. ASEAN also managed conflicts peacefully.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
Since The Konfrontasi, in the 60s, there has never been an armed conflict between one ASEAN member against another ASEAN member. Now in Vietnam of course, Cambodia had fights, but they were not ASEAN members. And since there have been ASEAN members, they haven't actually fought. That relations are peaceful. There have been tensions between Thailand and Cambodia, about a temple, but these are very minor conflicts. Just compare that with India-Pakistan, North Korea-South Korea. It's nothing. So ASEAN has kept peace at home. That's success.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
So that's the first reason why ASEAN has the exact claim to it, centrality by providing peace at home. But the second thing, and this is also very important, is that the great powers accept it. Why? Not because they necessarily love ASEAN. And they will say that, oh, ASEAN is a center. But usually, the great powers want ASEAN, whether it's US, China, Japan, they want ASEAN to side with them. But none of the great powers can leave the region. The great powers sometimes cancel each other– not sometimes. Historically, there has been no single regional organization in Asia led by a great power. They all failed. The United States with the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, India with the Asian Relations Conference, the Japan-Korea Asia Pacific Council– China never even tried. So great powers, because they are suspicious of each other, they can if China created a regional organization, Americans will not join it or Japanese will not join it. If Japan created an organization on its own leadership, China would not. And the same goes for China, India.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
Maybe I'm exaggerating slightly, but the thing is the great powers mistrust – which is nothing new, by the way – Great power rivalry. We saw the return of great power rivalry. But it was always there. So because they cannot trust each other, they find ASEAN as a neutral broker, kind of a, you know, acceptable, convener of a regional architecture. ASEAN is the most acceptable, neutral, benign, sort of broker of regional peace and stability. And that's another reason why we have ASEAN centrality. Thank you.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Thank you, professor. Bapak Michael Tene, now that you have left your position, the ASEAN Secretariat, you promised to speak more freely now. Yes? So Professor Amitav Acharya says that centrality means that ASEAN can play a neutral broker and a benign one. Should ASEAN remain benign, especially when we talk about, South China Sea situation, the geopolitical rivalry? Now we have President Donald Trump, being re-elected. So should benign still be associated with ASEAN?

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
Well, thank you for that question. First of all, I'm still an active foreign service officer, so, because of that, I would like to make a disclaimer that whatever I'm saying is not representing the Indonesian foreign ministry.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Okay. Well noted.

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
Before I answer your question, I also want to complement what Professor Amitav mentioned. If you look at the period between the early 90s up to around twenty fifteen, this also coincides with the situation where the relationship between major powers are relatively benign. I mean, rivalry is always there, but they are relatively benign. And what has ASEAN achieved during this period? We contributed significantly to the Cambodia peace process. We established the ASEAN Free Trade Area, we established the ASEAN Regional Forum, we established the East Asia Summit, we established the ASEAN Community, the expansion of ASEAN dialogue partnerships and the launching of the RCEP, the biggest free trade arrangement in the world, these are all achieved during this period. And I think this also substantiates why the notion of ASEAN centrality came into force and is being used, because it is a significant achievement during this period of time. Another thing, for instance, the adoption of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone as well in Bangkok, 1995. That's the first time I attended the ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, 1995. So a lot of achievements, and these are all big achievements.

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
And, so if you talk about whether ASEAN is relevant, if you look at this period of time, we are very much relevant, and we lay down the foundation during this period of time as also implied by Professor Amitav, the foundation for regional cooperation in Southeast Asia and beyond in Asia Pacific and in Indo Pacific. But of course due to that success, the expectation about ASEAN also increased manifold, yeah? Perhaps beyond what we can do actually. But I think we have to always go back to the core objective of ASEAN which is to maintain peace and stability in Southeast Asia. The reason why we are active beyond Southeast Asia is to ensure that the surrounding region of Southeast Asia can also be peaceful so that it can contribute to the peace and stability prosperity of Southeast Asia. But the objective of ASEAN has always been and will always be focusing in Southeast Asia, yeah, to maintain peace and stability in Southeast Asia.

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
There are internal processes that affect that objective, which is the relationship between Southeast Asia countries, but also there are external effects that affect the situation in Southeast Asia. The latter part is one of the reasons why we expand and develop various regional mechanisms beyond countries in Southeast Asia. Now, the challenges are numerous. You are mentioning the South China Sea and whether we should remain benign or not. Well, of course, we are always benign.

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
I mean, the purpose of ASEAN is to establish peace and stability. And, the peace and stability in Southeast Asia depends not only on the peaceful relation between country in Southeast Asia but also depends on the peaceful relations between countries in Southeast Asia and its neighbor countries, as well as the peaceful relation between those countries neighboring Southeast Asia. But I mentioned 2015 as one of the benchmark, but if we see that period after 2015 or let's say from 2014 then since the, you know, the invasion of Russia in Crimea, and we see the relationship between the major power quickly, literally, not only in terms of security issues but also in terms of trade frictions. And the worsening of the relations between the major powers of course affects ASEAN directly and makes things more difficult for ASEAN to address many of the issues that they are facing compared to the previous environment that we experienced. I think South China is also within that context. When the relationship between the major powers were relatively benign, the issue of the South China Sea is always there, but the tension, conflict, incidents are relatively few.

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
And if there is a tension or incidence, it is more easy to address quickly. But the more the tension arises between the major powers, the South China Sea becomes one of the factors, one of the points of contention, not only among the countries that have direct interest in the issue of the South China Sea, I mean the claimant states. But the whole issue of the South China Sea went beyond the claimant states. It became one of the contentious factors among major powers, and that makes things become more complicated.

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
And that is why we are having difficulties in dealing with these issues at the moment. So my point here is that the global environment has changed from a benign environment into a more confrontative element and it directly affects how ASEAN works and how we deal with complex issues such as the South China Sea. But, that direct question to you, whether we should remain benign, I think of course the answer is yes.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Okay. Thank you, Bapak Michael Tene. Also, a round of applause for us. Let me go to Ambassador Albert, your excellency. Let me first share that some of my students here were born in 2006. So they may not be familiar with the history of ASEAN, the relations between leaders of ASEAN. So how do you see ASEAN now? Are there, like, more divergence, more, convergence between the leaders and the member states? And how do you see East Timor's or Timor Leste's accession into ASEAN?

H.E. Delia Domingo Albert
Thank you. Perhaps I can go as far back as 1967. I think everyone, the only one old enough to tell you the story of ASEAN. I was physically there, I was the Secretary of the Foreign Minister of the Philippines, and my job was to connect by telephone the five Foreign Ministers who decided to get together in Bangkok. Of course, you will be aware that there had been earlier efforts to get the countries in Southeast Asia together.

H.E. Delia Domingo Albert
There were new challenges, and if you recall historically, we tried to organize ASSA – Association of Southeast Asia – but there were only three countries, and Indonesia was not there. So the Philippines came in and said we can't talk about Southeast Asia without Indonesia, so we had Maphilindo. But there were some bilateral issues that were going on between and among the three. Luckily, there was a man called Thanat Khoman, And I was, very lucky, very fortunate, privileged to have connected the phone between Thanat Khoman and the Foreign Minister of the Philippines. And Thanat Khoman was, I think, one of the brightest early foreign ministers in the region, because he was very convinced that the five foreign ministers should get together.

H.E. Delia Domingo Albert
And at that point, I remember the relationship was wonderful. There was no computer, so they talked by phone. This makes a difference when you talk to each other by phone. And I remember Adam Malik calling my minister, hello, brother Narciso. And Narciso calls back, yes, my brother Adam. That doesn't happen anymore. I think the early days of ASEAN, I can say, were very familiar with each other, because they all played golf together.

H.E. Delia Domingo Albert
They said the glue that keeps ASEAN together in those days was, golf and durian. You have to convince everybody to eat durian because others did not. But if you were prepared to eat durian, you were alright. That was part of your initiation. I had the privilege to witness this situation when leaders would, perhaps in a retreat, there were no monitors in front of them. They talked very freely with each other. And I think it made a difference in the evolution of ASEAN from agreeing to a stage of cooperation. Then they went into integration in 1992, which was a very difficult situation to accept whether or not you will, include in your vocabulary the word, integration. Before 1992, we could not use the word integration because it meant giving up some of your political baggage that you would not want to give up. But 1992 to me was a crucial year when everybody agreed that this was the best way for ASEAN. Not just merely talking about cooperation, but integration into an economic body. And I remember of course, people look to leaders within leaders.

H.E. Delia Domingo Albert
And we looked at the Thai Prime Minister, Anand Panyarachun, to introduce that in Singapore. Of course, at that time, if Singapore would say it, somebody else may not like the idea, so we chose a very neutral leader who had a very good stature in the region, Anand Panyarachun. But, the story of ASEAN is really a story of leaders getting together, getting to know each other, and agreeing to work together. And when going back to 1967, I remember Thanat Khoman, urgently calling the meeting because Thailand at the time felt there was an immediate threat at the height of the Cold War. So there was one political issue, I think that had to be addressed.

H.E. Delia Domingo Albert
And, the diplomatic skill of Thanat Khoman, I admire. And I have to say, even if I come from another country, that I acknowledge Thanat Khoman as the father of ASEAN. You will appreciate him more if you read his speeches from the time that he was convening the other leaders of the region. So I was old enough to be there at the time. And from cooperation to integration, then went on to connectivity. People went beyond just political discussions. But to me, the strength of ASEAN today is how the economies are working together. And because of that situation where they were better connected, then we start talking about centrality.

H.E. Delia Domingo Albert
To me, centrality is twofold. One is internal, that we have developed institutions, which you have heard from Dr. Tene in terms of strengthening the arts and secretariat, etcetera. And the other part of the coin is our relationship with our external partners, bearing in mind that, before we do take up anything with what we call a third party, ASEAN will agree. ASEAN will find ways to have a common position vis a vis our external partners. This is why I think we have become the major player in the regional architecture, we've become a hub.

H.E. Delia Domingo Albert
I remember coordinating one of the two external partners, how we did our best to make sure that we may not have called it centrality, but we wanted ASEAN to come out vis a vis an external partner with a common concern, a common and shared concern. And if you see ASEAN representations all over the world, there's a magnet between and among our ASEAN ambassadors. And when I was ambassador to Australia, the first group I would contact before I would do anything vis a vis Australia was to get together with our ASEAN colleagues. The same way when I was ambassador to Germany, the first thing we would talk about. To me, these are the manifestations of what you would call today's centrality.

H.E. Delia Domingo Albert
You asked about East Timor. Of course, if you look at the ASEAN declaration, the leaders wanted everybody in the region. But certainly, there were moments when some were better prepared than the others. And after the five, you have had the three, CNLV. We do believe, as far as the Philippines is concerned, that we, that East Timor should be part of ASEAN, it's a matter of when. When they are better prepared, when they can be able to accept the responsibilities that are a must in ASEAN in terms of being an active and an effective member of the community. Of course, we had a long way to go to develop that small letter c in ASEAN Community to the big letter C. That also was a major step forward in terms of the evolution of ASEAN.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Thank you. A round of applause also for Ambassador Albert. So let me now go to Ambassador Sihasak, and let me build on Ambassador Albert's comment on ASEAN being a community. There's a very ambitious vision that we have and we have the Blueprint of 2025. How close or how far away do you think we are to achieve that vision?

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
Thank you very much. You know, I'm a little bit amazed that if I were to organize something like this in Thailand, I would not have so many young people. You know, and–

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Thank you. A round of applause for all of you. Thank you.

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
And, you know, it's an indication that, you know, your organization is doing something right. But I think for the young people, you know, sometimes you cannot look at the present. You must look at the past because everything has a history. And if you understand history, you understand the present and perhaps you will understand the future better. So for me, the concept of a community, when I asked my young colleagues at the ministry, you know, I'm alas of a dying breed of a true believer in ASEAN, you know, because nowadays we have many doubters, many skeptics.

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
But when you ask my colleagues, please explain to me what the ASEAN community is. They will say, oh, yes the ASEAN community, we agreed this year, it has three pillars. But I asked him, what is driving the ASEAN community? You know, I've spent forty years in the foreign service. Most of those years were dealing with ASEAN, Cambodia, the Cold War came, why did we survive? I think we survived because of what I call regionalism. This is what drives ASEAN. What is regionalism?

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
It's a sense of interdependence, a sense of common destiny, of a sense which my close friend, Bilahari Kausikan, has always said, if we don't hang together, we will be hung separately. And I think it's true that if we cooperate collectively, we can be larger than the sum of our parts. And in terms of integration, we can make the pie bigger for all. So I think you have to understand this concept of regionalism to understand the ASEAN community. Now the question here is, are we punching above or are we punching below? I have a concern whether we're punching or not.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
We don't have to punch.

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
Yeah we need to keep punching, you know. I think one of the problems, again, whether we are punching or not punching, is centered on the concept of this very nebulous concept of centrality. And when I was the leader of the Thai delegation to the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting, we had a retreat on this concept of centrality because we talked about it so much, it became a mantra among us. But none of us really were sure what it was all about, you know. And so Thailand was asked to do a paper on centrality. And I told my staff to make it as simple, simple as possible.

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
So to me, centrality has basically three dimensions. A very important dimension is centrality in managing the affairs of our region, which we have been successful, building up trust, keeping peace. But now we have a problem because of Myanmar. So our centrality is being challenged. The second very important dimension is trying to contribute to peace and stability beyond Southeast Asia. You know, and so we created all these, for us, these forums, you know, which constitute the ASEAN led architecture. At one time, when we had a very benign external environment, you know, everybody praised all these; the AIF, the ADMM defense ministers, the EAS. But once the external environment changed and it became so competitive, now, this ASEAN led architecture has become marginalized.

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
I wouldn't say irrelevant yet, but it has become marginalized. And you have the architecture that is being created by the United States and QUAD and AUKUS and IPEF and all that. But I think for me, the real problem when it comes to centrality is going back in history and centrality within each country. Because before ASEAN was central to the making of foreign policy of each country, we know that if we did not rally together, we would not survive the challenges that we faced– our security. But now because ASEAN is so diverse, we don't have an overarching threat like we had during the Cold War or during Cambodia when we were five, and because of geopolitical competition that's pulling us left and right, front and center.

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
This concept of the Indonesian concept, I think, and this when we signed the Bangkok Declaration, people spoke about this and we have to change our mindset. We have to think, [and this is for the young people], we have to think as a nation and as a region. And this is the Indonesian concept of national and regional resilience, which still apply to this day. But the problem now is because of the transformation of ASEAN, it's bigger geopolitics. Each nation is pursuing its natural interest and forgetting about the regional interest. So centrality, if we do not stick together, if we're not united, then we're not going to be able to demonstrate. And centrality begins at home. Thank you.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Thank you, Ambassador. Let me go back to Professor Amitav Acharya. We basically heard that there is a need for ASEAN to be responsive and to navigate the geopolitical situation. But at the same time, it also has its non interference policy that it has to maintain. So what is your impression of ASEAN's attempt to be responsive and yet maintain stability within the member states as well?

Prof. Amitav Acharya
Yeah, thank you. If I understand the question properly, you are saying how can ASEAN maintain its own stability and adapt to the changing, say, external environment. But I think it's a good way to actually look at what are the challenges to ASEAN centrality. So, as I said earlier, this concept was a very recent creation, and certainly there is no mention of ASEAN centrality as a concept, before the end of the Cold War. But that doesn't mean there wasn't an aspiration for playing a role in the region.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
But if you look at ASEAN's foundational document, a lot of this was, in fact, the freedom of peace, freedom, and neutrality, or in the Malaysian precursor to that was, neutralization of Southeast Asia. Stay out of great power rivalry. Don't invite them in. Military bases are not permanent. I mean, all kinds of compromises to insulate Southeast Asia from the great power rivalry. But that changed quite dramatically at the end of the Cold War when relations among the great powers became more friendly, but nothing like that now. I mean, the collapse of the Soviet Union, China-US relations are much better. China was actually trying to cultivate ASEAN. It was ASEAN that socialized China, not China that socialized ASEAN. ASEAN provided a pathway to both China and Vietnam to come into the regional community. The Chinese now forget about that, but the record is very clear. So this is why I said that the Chinese could not trust the Japanese but they would trust the ASEAN. And similarly, Americans, those days were not as tense as before, US-China relations are pretty good but they still trusted ASEAN more than they would trust China. So that is the key point.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
That's why the ASEAN centrality came about in practice. And again, please tell me where the term was first used. I think it's somewhere in the 2000s. But that's also one of the major challenges today because the great power relations are not what they used to be in the 1990s. So we have the return of geopolitics, so to speak, and US-China relations are a lot worse than they had been and also rivalry between India and China, China and Japan.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
So in that sense, one of the first challenges to ASEAN centrality is the great power rivalry– external. And how to navigate great power of every the best way to do that is not to take sides in the conflict. But, while all the great powers pay lip service to ASEAN centrality, they actually want them to be on their side. This is true of the United States as much as true of China and, of course, those are the two major players. So the ASEAN centrality requires ASEAN neutrality. Neutrality doesn't mean in a legal sense. It means not taking sides and engaging all sides rather than staying away. There's a term called hedging. I don't like that term because it's kind of negative. I like engagement, multi engagement.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
Engage all the powers, and don't favor one over the other. As long as ASEAN can maintain, ASEAN centrality requires ASEAN unity and ASEAN neutrality in the sense I described. But that's harder to maintain when you have, ASEAN started with five, then Brunei joined, then ASEAN became in 1997 nine, and then ten, now eleven. As you expand, the European Union has faced the same problem. It will become bigger.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
It's harder to maintain that kind of consensus. This is also, as Ambassador Delia said, very important. ASEAN actually, the Bangkok Declaration should be actually called Bang Saen Declaration because the day they signed the Bangkok Declaration– the day before they went to Bang Saen, which is about fifty miles south of Bangkok to play golf. And then they came and they signed it. But all the negotiations were actually done in many ways in Bang Saen.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
And then, Thanat Khoman, who is the secretary I had the privilege of interviewing for a long time. I have actually met Rajaratnam and, quite a few founders of, [INAUDIBLE] and others. They will emphasize that point, that informality led to consensus. So telephones are far better than emails. You're quite right, Delia. It's very, very important. We don't have that situation now. Unfortunately ASEAN is bigger.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
ASEAN takes on too many things, and, it's no longer you know – When ASEAN started the emphasis was in sociocultural cooperation, economic cooperation. No military cooperation, but understanding that reducing conflicts among ASEAN countries could lead to allowing countries to focus on development. But many of these things have changed now, and that's why it's difficult to maintain ASEAN centrality. Not impossible, it's a challenge. And one of the things that, we should, keep in mind is domestic politics.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
Domestic politics is the basis of foreign policy – you heard that, from, Pak Dino this morning. And when domestic politics changes, countries' attitude towards ASEAN can change. We had domestic politics change in the Philippines on the president on Thursday, and there was a, you know, he goes to Beijing, for a while at least. So in Cambodia, domestic quality changes. But Myanmar, domestic quality changes, the whole ASEAN consensus, becomes fragile because, as far as we know, Myanmar is still a member of ASEAN. It has not been expelled, but it has not been invited to any of these ASEAN meetings. And it can happen here also. You know, we are talking about *Bebas Aktif*. The foreign minister assured us that there'll be no continued change.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
Maybe not. But there could be every leader who brings new ideas. So I'm actually thinking. You can quote me, but, because it's an open forum. But *Bebas Aktif* can become *Bebas*-assertive. And Indonesia is not immune to assertive foreign policy under Soekarno. It was President Soeharto that really [INAUDIBLE] international foreign policy. So everything is possible because domestic politics changes. Nationalism is a product of domestic politics. Global ambitions are a product of domestic politics.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
So you have to bring in that also makes it difficult to maintain ASEAN unity. So all said and done, I think ASEAN centrality is a new concept, but it's a very important concept. But I do think that ASEAN should never forget what it was created for. It was created to maintain peace and stability. It was created to maintain peace and stability in Southeast Asia primarily. It was not created for the South Korean peninsula or China-Taiwan or India-Pakistan.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
So as long as ASEAN can keep its own region stable, it has made contributions to international peace and stability. Surin Pitsuwan, who was a very close mentor of mine, ASEAN Secretary General, Thai foreign minister, used to say, ASEAN centrality has to be earned. It's not a given. Secondly, to have ASEAN centrality, you have to maintain that kind of, you know, don't take sides, and those are becoming difficult. Don't take it for granted. And I also want to add one more thing. Maybe you should downsize. Don't take on everything.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
I mean, ASEAN cannot solve the problem of Indo Pacific, Asia Pacific, but it can do a lot of things in Southeast Asia. And so as Surin used to say, there's one less problem for the world to deal with. Southeast Asia is not part of the geopolitical rivalry in the world. And ASEAN can really do that. And it's a region of six hundred plus million people, over three trillion GDP, and if it can actually create, maintain stability at home in the region, that's a big contribution rather than trying to solve the Korean problem or a China-US rivalry. You can do that, but that's not your primary objective.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Thank you so much. Round of applause for the panels. I believe now it's time for us to go to Q&A. So I will open the floor. Please raise your hand. In order of fairness, oh no, it's difficult to choose. There's no female. Are there female, female I'll prioritize female, right, Ambassador Albert? Are there female participants asking questions? Oh, here we have one. Okay.. One from over here, I'll take three. One in the middle. Okay, Okay, I'll take one, right in front. So, committee, please help with the mic. Okay, please go ahead.

Audience 1
Is it working? Yes. First of all, I would like to congratulate the FPCI for organizing such a great conference, and a huge event on Indonesia's foreign policy. I'm Dr. Sarita. I'm a PhD from JNU. And, recently, I also joined Indonesian University as a Deputy Head of International Affairs, Nusa Putra in Sukabumi. And I'm recently, you know, I frequently visit Indonesia because this is my second best, you know, country to visit, in my life. My question directly, I mean, to all the panels because they all are experts on ASEAN centrality and, of course, on the ASEAN region. So I really would like to know about, like, how ASEAN is, you know, balancing the nexus between China, India, and the USA.

Audience 1
Because having the the concept of foreign policy, trade, diplomacy, and other conflicts, Indonesia also plays a very important role in that. So being, you know, a part of Indonesia as well, I mean, Indonesia keeping in the Southeast Asian countries. So how it is important even for Indonesia to be the most important part and playing as a pivotal role, to present as an important foreign policy aspect even into the ASEAN countries. So, anyone from the panel can give me an answer. Thank you.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Thank you. We have one here in the middle. Yes, please go ahead. Okay.

Audience 2
Okay. Thank you for the grand opportunity to ask questions before distinguished individuals. My name is Oktawidia Dana. I am currently in semester three, in the international relations department of BINUS University. And I have a question specifically for Professor Acharya. So just yesterday, I was studying about the concept of human security, and you are one of the scholars that contributed to this concept. And my question is, how do you see the significance of ASEAN centrality in facing the challenges of human security in the region, especially regarding the situation currently in Myanmar. Thank you.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Thank you. We have one in front. It doesn't work, you can take my mic.

Audience 3
Okay. Thank you for the opportunity for me to ask all these amazing fantastic people. I really appreciate you guys. And my question is pretty simple, straightforward. It's about, I assume that most of you say that the main purpose of the centrality of ASEAN is to establish the peace and stability of the world, correct? And then my question is pretty simple, is that what if, look, the world is not perfect, issues are going to come and conflict is constantly going to come to us. So as ASEAN people, how do you guys maintain the peace that you guys have guaranteed to the people of ASEAN? Or perhaps that yeah, like I said, the problem is going to come constantly and for the people who say that you guys are going to establish the peace and the stability of the world, how do you guys face these issues for the next couple years? Thank you.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Thank you. I believe that two corners don't have their chance yet. Okay. One over there. But this corner? Okay. One at the back. And then one more here. He's begging for the mic. Okay. Please, yeah. From that corner.

Audience 4
Okay, good afternoon to all, good afternoon. First of all, thank you for the opportunity to ask about, especially about ASEAN centrality and ASEAN unity. So, my name is Cristiano Disapradana and I'm currently in the fifth semester from International Relations from Universitas Jenderal Sudirman from Central Java. So my question is, as mentioned before by His Excellency, Sihasak Phuangketkeow, that to strengthen ASEAN centrality, one of it is about regional integrity.

Audience 4
So, my question is how do we as a society or even a government strengthen that integrity so that it does not become a new challenge to strengthen the regional integrity as a society, whether from the society or from the government perspective. So, to increase the ASEAN centrality by regional integrity. Thank you.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Thank you. And then that corner, I believe oh, you haven't had the mic yet? You have. Okay.

Audience 5
Yeah, I would like to ask, my name is Juwi. I am currently a student at BINUS University. Since you said that integration would be a big part of ASEAN. Right? Do you guys think that the best path for ASEAN is for us to become something like the European Union? Or do we remain, like, as is but, like, with increased effectiveness and more cooperation than currently?

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Okay. Thank you. And one last question from the front. You can take my mic if the mic has enough.

Audience 6
Okay. First of all, I want to introduce myself. My name is Rifky. I'm a master's student of Padjadjaran University. And my question is, yet in this forum there are policy makers and an academician. How it's supposed to be, how the ASEAN approach is supposed to be towards Myanmar from your perspective as a policymaker and from Professor Acharya as an academia. Yeah. I think that that was important because you guys are saying that Myanmar political development or political crisis is challenging ASEAN centrality. Thank you very much

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Yeah, I would like to invite Ambassador Sihasak.

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
Since Thailand is the next door main neighbor of Myanmar. Perhaps I'd like to address this question. And it was a question I had to grapple with when I was vice minister. I think the situation in Myanmar poses a challenge to ASEAN — the ASEAN way. Because, you know, sometimes when we have a situation like that, we say, no, no, we shouldn't interfere it's domestic affairs. But the fact is that this principle of non indifference was the cardinal principle when we founded ASEAN because we did not know each other, and we were sensitive about intervention. But ASEAN is over fifty years old now. We're so independent. You cannot draw a line between what is internal, what is external.

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
And so when we talk about non interference, we have to recognize that things have changed. And ASEAN is intervening not to undermine a member country, but our intervention is to help a member country out of a desperate situation. So I think that is the thinking behind our approach to Myanmar. But I hope that the Myanmar regime sees it that way, you know. That's very important because they have to engage constructively with ASEAN.

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
And so far, they have not engaged constructively with ASEAN under the five point consensus. You know, they hardly talk about the five point consensus. They talk about their five point roadmap. And the broader challenge is that [video was cut off] work on consensus because we are an organization of sovereign states. Right?

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
If we don't have consensus, then maybe Indonesia will be the one deciding everything, or the smaller countries will get together to hang up on Indonesia, you know. So we operate on the principle consensus, but how do we arrive at consensus more quickly? And again, it relates to this question of do we see the national interest and the regional interest going together. And so it may be a little bit abstract, but I think that's a challenge. But the real challenge is this principle of non interference being applied in the real world, being applied to the reality of the present day.

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
We have the Charter, the ASEAN Charter. All of you young people, you know the ASEAN Charter right? Go and read the ASEAN Charter. Yes, we have no interference, but we also have the principle of democracy, good governance, rule of law, and human rights. So that means that non interference must be applied against these principles in the ASEAN Charter. We've committed ourselves to this. Are they going to be meaningless? And then my feeling – and this applies to the situation in Myanmar – is that non interference does not give any government of a member country an excuse to do whatever it wants to its people. So we really have to re-look at the ASEAN Way if we're going to resolve the crisis in Myanmar.

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
And my real concern is that if this crisis is going to be resolved, all of us within ASEAN must feel that it is a regional problem. It is not a problem– it may not eventually, yes, that Myanmar will have to solve the problem themselves, but we can help. But my concern is that every time we meet, we say two things. First, we reaffirm the five point consensus. Second, we support the ASEAN special envoy. So he or she goes do whatever, you know, he or she likes. And then there is no real collective effort on the part of us.

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
Each one of us can contribute. Thailand can contribute to our humanitarian assistance program. Indonesia can contribute by engaging the stakeholders. So all of us must do our part, and we must work with China because China is really the big elephant in the room, you know. So that's my reply on Myanmar. Thank you.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Thank you. I think a very good takeaway is that the non interference policy must also be applied against principles of human rights, democracy, rule of law, and that also applies in the case of ASEAN. So let me go to Ambassador Albert. Do you think that we should also integrate the way, EU does?

H.E. Delia Domingo Albert
First of all, I think we should remember that the way the EU and ASEAN evolved were two different ways. You know that the EU came out of the coal and steel community, etcetera. Now I think what's important to remember is that ASEAN is an intergovernmental body. We don't have a super body like the EU in Brussels. The EU in Brussels sort of takes on a lot of responsibilities for the member countries of the EU.

H.E. Delia Domingo Albert
In ASEAN, we don't have a super body like the EU in Brussels, we have the ASEAN Secretariat. I remember participating in the discussion. The ASEAN Secretary General used to be called the ASEAN Secretary General of the Secretariat. In the 90s, we decided to give more personality, a stronger hand, and we, if you will accept the word promoted, the ASEAN Secretary General to become Secretary General of ASEAN, which puts him at a ministerial level. But there's a very big difference in the way the EU operates. The EU has the Brussels office that has all the responsibilities that addresses many of the issues in all the member countries. They are well represented within the EU. They take official functions within the EU. Whereas in the ASEAN Secretariat, they will maintain the intergovernmental nature.

H.E. Delia Domingo Albert
We are there as governments. We are represented by our representatives based here in Jakarta. This is a major difference. People usually complain, how come we cannot decide very quickly? Then you come back to consensus, and *Musyawarah and Mufakat*, you know, that was a very Indonesian discussion and consensus. But that is a very big difference, so it is not quite right to make a comparison. When we discuss, I used to be coordinator of ASEAN-EU relations for four years and I always said, they say, why can't you be like us? I said, sorry, we want to learn from your mistakes.

H.E. Delia Domingo Albert
And I think we have learned a lot, from the mistake of having one body organization that would decide for us. There is no other grouping as varied as ASEAN. And if you look at it, this is why I think we have remained consistently an intergovernmental body, and it serves us well. It serves our needs from each independent country that is a member of the organization or association, is able to voice whatever their national policies are in the discussions in ASEAN until we come to a consensus again, and this is true in terms of addressing the Myanmar issue. I hope in terms of addressing say, the South China Sea issue. But there is such a difference, and I think the way we are moving, we will remain an intergovernmental body. We have worked well so far, and I think we will continue to do so.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Thank you. Now let me go to Dr. Michael Tene. There is also a question on how should ASEAN balance itself against the megapowers, not only in the region but also globally?

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
Well, first of all, I think when we talk about the external powers, vis a vis ASEAN, like I said earlier, we engage partners, major powers including, not to try to resolve their issues. We engage them because they have influence towards the situation in Southeast Asia. We discussed the rivalries, confrontation between major powers because the nature of relationship has implications to Southeast Asia. So that is the context why ASEAN, for instance, in the forum like East Asia Summit, we discuss global issues. Not because we want to solve the core issues but how do we deal with the implication of those global issues arising from the competition, rivalries between major powers in Southeast Asia. So that is something that we have to keep in mind when ASEAN discuss global issues: how it impacts ASEAN and the second is whether we can contribute to, to address those issues.

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
But mostly it's the first one. Our priority is how we deal with the implication of global issues to our region. So, with regard to the relationship between major powers, frankly ASEAN has very limited things that ASEAN can do. But we can do a lot when we talk about how they behave in our region, and that is the main concern for ASEAN.

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
You can have a confrontation between themselves and other parts of the world or directly between them, but when they come to Southeast Asia, they have to behave according to the norm and principles that they have agreed upon. For instance, under the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which everyone has, you know, acceded to. So, I think this is the core issue when we talk about how ASEAN deals with the major powers. Of course, we have the ASEAN Outlook in the Indo Pacific. Which has outlined ASEAN's strategy on how we defuse and how we look at how we can engage major powers. Basically, the outlook on Indo Pacific consists of two parts.

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
One is about the principle and norms that all the partners of ASEAN have agreed also, and then the second part is containing activities, but the cooperation activities under the four priority areas is meant to highlight cooperation. What we want here is that, we want to have cooperation, we want to provide space for cooperation rather than amplifying the confrontation among the major powers when they come to Southeast Asia. But, one complication– but there are many complications, of course, because when we talk about major powers vis a vis ASEAN, we have also to take into account the impact of the relationship between major powers, to the bilateral relation between each of ASEAN countries. And that makes things a bit complicated because ASEAN has no common foreign policy. We have different foreign policy outlook, we have different security outlook and that influences how each individual ASEAN countries see their relationship with the major powers and their individual policy in this regard of course influence how they come to a consensus when they are in ASEAN. That means the ASEAN consensus has to take into account all these variables, the different security outlook, and the difference of foreign policy outlook between each member state. And that brings me also to the challenge of integration.

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
When we talk about ASEAN integration, to be frank I think mainly we are talking about economic integration as a driver. Why? Because it's much easier to achieve. When we talk, we never talk about political integration in ASEAN. We remain a sovereign state, and you know, that is the main difference between the EU. For instance, they have not only economic integration but political, security integration as well. And, although ASEAN has agreed to a certain set of norms and values as contained in various treaties including in ASEAN Charter, but we have different interpretations. What do we mean by democracy, the principle of democracy? What do we mean by adherence to the principle of human rights?

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
There are differences and these differences in values affect how, especially in terms of political integration, is concerned and how we look at political cooperation and also why the Myanmar issue is very difficult for ASEAN. I think in terms of non interference, I just want to highlight that it is a very important principle because why? Because it is the basis for trust and confidence among ASEAN countries. So when we talk about how to balance the principle of non interference with other principles in the charter, vis a vis, for instance, in the case of Myanmar, we cannot use a white brush. It's a matter of what kind of intervention we are talking about.

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
Because interventions can go from a very minimum to a very maximum, and we cannot just equate them. What we are doing now is providing advice, providing perhaps some strong message to the Myanmar government, perhaps some diplomatic pressure, but we are not going towards a much more, stronger intervention like, for instance, applying embargo or, some other forms of much more stronger intervention.

Robert Matheus Michael Tene
So it's a matter of degree. The balance between non intervention and the other principles should be considered in a case by case basis and a matter of degree. It's not an easy black and white issue. Thank you.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Thank you. Ambassador Sihasak, yes, please, one minute.

H.E. Sihasak Phuangketkeow
I just want to go to the question on the nexus between India, China and the US. It's a question of what kind of regional order we seek. You know, what we seek most importantly is inclusivity. And we had this vision of Indo Pacific that was inclusive before the term Indo Pacific became popular. The East Asia Summit, if you look at it, comprises the whole of this Indo Pacific and includes everyone. So the challenge for ASEAN right now is that the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific should be more than an outlook. It should be an ASEAN strategy on the Indo Pacific. And our strategy should be to bridge the differences among the various versions of Indo Pacific, which seems to be not inclusive. And then try to address the concern of that particular major power who is not being included or is opposed to the Indo Pacific. So I see inclusivity as the name of the game when we talk about balancing the relations between the major powers India, China, and the United States. And I see the ASEAN Outlook as one of the pathways to do that. Thank you.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti
Thank you very much. Professor Amitav Acharya.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
The question about regional integrity and how to maintain regional integrity and also the peace in the world, there are two questions on this. And I repeat one point I made. To maintain peace in the world, you maintain peace in the region first. The region comes before the world.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
It sounds selfish, but they are not either, so you can contribute to world peace by maintaining peace in the region and that's the regional integrity. If you mean by regional integrity, maintaining unity, coherence of Southeast Asia as a distinctive region, Southeast Asia is not Indo Pacific, Northeast Asia or South Asia. So for that, you need to do, I have four ideas, that very quickly I can mention that you need to pay attention to ASEAN issues. First, the absolute most important thing is to maintain what you call the no war situation within ASEAN. So ASEAN's singular achievement, which nobody can deny, is that no war has broken out among two ASEAN countries when they're ASEAN members.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
So as I said, Thailand-Cambodia, maybe in 2011, Preah Vihear, but it's not really a war, minus skirmish. So that has to be maintained and ASEAN has done that through diplomacy, during 2011, Marty Natalegawa actually did this, shuttle diplomacy, but also through arbitration. Don't forget, ASEAN has solved a lot of bilateral disputes through arbitration, including Preah Vihear. Malaysia, Indonesia, and the [INAUDIBLE]. So keep doing that. ASEAN is a believer in international law, much more so than what the Chinese basically rejected the arbitration but ASEAN countries never have rejected an arbitration. So either through diplomacy or through arbitration, maintain intra ASEAN peace, meaning no major war.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
You can always have disputes and conflicts and tensions, but don't let it become war. Number one. Number two, promoting economic cooperation. ASEAN is doing pretty well, through the ASEAN Economic Community, but there's always more you can do to relate to the Indo Pacific Economic Framework, the transpacific, okay. The various of the plurilateral mechanisms that are coming up. How to take some sort of a common position, but also economic integration within ASEAN is vital because it attracts foreign investment.

Prof. Amitav Acharya
ASEAN, as a single window for investment, is actually very attractive to foreign investors. The third thing is to develop our people's cooperation, and that's what this meeting is about. People to people cooperation. People have become actors as Dino pointed out. But ASEAN has not done a great job of becoming a people's association. It's still seen as a club of officials and elites. Now the Sociocultural Community to me is one of the least developed of the three communities, but that doesn't have to be like that. With the younger generation, with education exchange, cultural exchange, and meetings like this. Maybe FPCI, I'm sure it's open to young people, from all over ASEAN.

Prof. Amitav Acharya

There is ASEAN week at Sri Lanka University. I go every year. It invites students from all over ASEAN. So that's also very important. Make it a people's ASEAN, not just a government officials ASEAN with due respect to government officials here. And finally, don't take sides in the geopolitical rivalry. I mean, you know, just stay out because we're not pro China, not pro US, not pro Japan. We engage everybody. So if you can do those four things, ASEAN can do those four things, it will maintain its integrity, unity, and also contribute to the stability of not only Southeast Asia, but also the world as a whole.

Dayu Nirma Amurwanti

Thank you very much. And that concludes our session. Please join me in thanking all of our distinguished panel today. Thank you, Ambassador Albert, Ambassador Sihasak, Dr. Michael Tene, and Professor Amitav Acharya. And with that, let me return the floor to the MC. Please stay on stage.