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## <Book Review>

**Jim Placzek**

**Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng. *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace*. Singapore: Ridge Books, an imprint of NUS Press, 2017.**

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*The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace*

KISHORE MAHBUBANI and JEFFERY SNG

Singapore: Ridge Books, an imprint of NUS Press, 2017.

This book contains the best overall summary of ASEAN that this reviewer has seen in 40 years, and is great for related introductory or graduate courses. This reviewer has used it for the latter purpose and originally had reservations about the repeated claim that ASEAN deserves a Nobel Peace Prize. However, after reading the entire volume, he came to agree that the Association is as successful as Kishore Mahbubani claims it is.

*The ASEAN Miracle* argues convincingly that despite its many imperfections ASEAN is the world's second-most successful regional organization, after the European Union. Not only has it been able to preserve peace in Southeast Asia, it also provides an effective forum in East Asia for regional powers to meet and solve problems.

Four great cultural waves—from India, China, Islam, and the West—have had their historical impacts on Southeast Asia. However, the book's authors remind us that Southeast Asians were already engaged in international long-distance trade 500 years before these waves (p. 16), and attribute what they call the “softness” of Southeast Asian cultures to the original Indian wave. The major exception is Vietnam—under direct Chinese imperial control for over a thousand years, it is the only ASEAN member with an uncharacteristic “hard” culture.

Indian, Chinese and Islamic cultures became mixed in with Southeast Asian history, myth, and beliefs, of both the aristocracy and the peasantry. Although a “civilizing” influence is often associated with the Western wave, the Europeans were interested only in profit, and they routinely used violence to gain it. Therefore, for over 300 years, the Western influence on local culture was limited to the Christianized Philippines. Western colonial borders were surprisingly permanent, even preserving a few small nations, such as Cambodia.

From this early history, we understand why the authors consider the success of ASEAN a miracle—such extreme global diversity is an unlikely source for a successful regional association. “The reason ASEAN has emerged as the indispensable platform for great power engagement in the Asia-Pacific region is that it is too weak to be a threat to anyone. So all the great powers instinctively trust it” (p. 3).

Mahbubani and Sng rightfully emphasize the leading role of Indonesia in the formation of ASEAN in 1967, especially in the way that President Suharto did not try to dominate the Association although Indonesia accounts for almost half the population and territory. But it seems to this reviewer that there is a deeper debt owed to Indonesia by ASEAN. The original miracle was the unification of the fourth-largest nation in the world out of the Netherlands East Indies. Consultation and consensus, the identifying trademarks of both Indonesia and ASEAN, were present from the beginning under Indonesia's inspiring first president, Sukarno. Indonesians do not overtly

claim ASEAN is just a continuation of Indonesia, but the book's promotional blurb written by SB Yudhoyono, 6th Indonesian President, does imply it. This alternative perspective does not accord with the view of the authors.

The authors further point out that in the recent dealings between ASEAN and the great powers, both America and China have lacked wisdom. "China was . . . unnecessarily assertive in the South China Sea [and] blocking the annual ASEAN Joint Communique in Phnom Penh in 2012 represented one of the lowest points of Chinese diplomacy" (p. 77). Similarly, the US's recent efforts to enlist ASEAN nations against China have been unwise.

In both instances, the great powers need to consider if any of them would stand to benefit from the destruction of ASEAN. Many of them are in fact unaware that they would not, but their casual attitude about this question can lead to their disdain (and that of the Western media) toward ASEAN.

*The ASEAN Miracle* is, above all, a tale from a diplomatic perspective, filled with incidents and quotations illustrating various historic ASEAN events. There are occasional tinges of elitism in these revelations of the diplomatic insider's world, but it is all for the benefit of the reader.

Since the end of the Cold War, the US felt it no longer needed allies in Southeast Asia, and this was dramatically demonstrated in 1997's Asian Financial Crisis. Thailand only received limited American aid (p. 90), in contrast to how quickly the US bailed out American and South Korean financial institutions affected by the Crisis.

Then, with the major terrorist attacks of 2001, America turned back to Southeast Asia, recruiting the moderate Muslim nations as allies in its war on terrorism. ASEAN once again supported the US despite its previous diplomatic snubs.

The authors are correct to lament Obama's "failure to capitalize on his special relationship with Indonesia" (p. 94) since the then-President had spent his early years there. However, there are extremist American ultra-nationalists who believe Obama was not born in the US and is therefore not a US citizen, and they argued that this gave him no right to use these potential connections with Islam.

But notwithstanding America's sometimes negative attitude towards Southeast Asia, the US is still perceived positively in ASEAN. This can be seen in the numbers of young Southeast Asians enrolled at American universities, a 47% increase over 10 years (p. 96). Moreover, many Western universities have been "crucial drivers" (p. 97) in the replication of the entire ecosystem of modern research universities in Asia. On this point, America has yet to realize how such transformation supports its diplomatic goals.

The authors believe that America's inconsistencies toward ASEAN have caused the latter to accept China's generous offers to increase trade, and even becoming their dominant trading partner. With the South China Sea disputes damaging China's claim to have "peacefully risen" to its current global prominence, ASEAN's partnership is a "geopolitical gift to China" (p. 102).

Vietnam, however, is the ASEAN member most wary of China, and this has to do with its complex dealings with the latter: “Every Vietnamese leader . . . must be able to [both] stand up to China and get along with China and if anyone thinks this cannot be done at the same time, he does not deserve to be a leader” (p. 109).

As for the EU, even though it is the world’s most successful regional organization, the authors note the greater unity comes from its common base of Greco-Roman culture and Christianity. Additionally, the EU has no common language and depends upon an overly-rigid legalistic framework for membership. This internal focus leads to a neglect of external issues, even those which threaten it directly. Examples include its non-involvement in North Africa and the Near East, which has resulted in the current flood of refugees from these areas (p. 113).

However, Mahbubani and Sng believe ASEAN can make the following recommendations to the EU. First, the EU could establish a scholarship program for young African Muslims to study in universities in Malaysia and Indonesia—through this program, students may see that Islam is quite compatible with democracy and development. Second, Europe should embrace policies of engagement instead of isolation—compare how the EU treated world power Russia in the Ukraine (p. 117), against how China was the first to sign a free trade agreement with ASEAN. “This is why the EU should learn lessons from ASEAN on geopolitics” (p. 118).

Next, in terms of communication, the EU could follow ASEAN’s example and also learn from ASEAN by using English, which is not the native language of any member, but is the language of world business. Finally, the EU could learn some flexibility by looking at the “ASEAN minus X” principle. When ASEAN added new members with lower levels of economic development, its agreements applied to all members, but with later dates for newer members. Such an approach would reduce the EU’s rigidity which the authors see as its main flaw as a model for regional associations. The authors would seem to be obsessed with the prospect of an ASEAN Nobel Peace Prize because the EU was given one in 2012 (p. 209).

The book also touches on India and Japan in the context of ASEAN. India—despite its deep cultural roots in Southeast Asia—leans more toward the anti-capitalist view common in the UN, while ASEAN leans closer to the US. India ranked only seventh in total trade and Foreign Direct Investment in ASEAN in 2013 (pp. 122–123), though rising Sino–US conflicts in ASEAN will, in this reviewer’s opinion, create opportunities for India. Japan is another great power which has not lived up to its potential in ASEAN. As the first Asian nation to industrialize, it appears that Japan also adopted a Western attitude toward its Asian neighbors, and its failure to live up to its early promises also damaged its relations with ASEAN (p. 131). In 2005, when Japan made a bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, the only ASEAN nation to support Japan was Singapore. “Japan has never treated ASEAN with great respect” (p. 129).

Chapter Four features insightful and analytic “pen sketches” of the 10 ASEAN nations—this chapter alone makes the entire volume worth buying and can be assigned in any teaching course

on Southeast Asia. The authors' general advice is to leave ASEAN members alone to work out their own internal political problems, as interference is simply too un-ASEAN. One exception to this general rule is Cambodia, where the authors come close to suggesting the Association might expel Cambodia for its sacrifice of ASEAN unity to please China (p. 143), a surprisingly un-ASEAN threat.

In a book full of ironies, Mahbubani and Sng point to ASEAN's sense of community and identity as its first major strength. After all, this sense of community is limited to a lack of outright declarations of war between member nations, and the communal identity depends to a large extent on ASEAN leaders' shared enjoyment of golf. However, evidence shows that communal identity among its member populations is growing. With upgrades to educational curricula and popular youth-oriented media programs, most schoolchildren today can name the ASEAN member nations. Recent rapid increases in discount flights and visa-less travel within ASEAN have also increased interaction and familiarity.

The adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007 has strongly increased the power of ASEAN institutions, and seeing these institutions at work will help citizens develop a greater sense of ownership of ASEAN (p. 182). However, ASEAN has a notoriously weak and underfunded secretariat, and the authors make a call for change and improvements in this area.

Overall, this reviewer believes that education about ASEAN and the ASEAN identity are stronger than the evidence provided by the authors from 2007 and 2013. Though they are correct that these are still limited today, increasing knowledge among the ordinary citizens will ensure that ASEAN will most likely be around and stronger than ever by its centenary in 2067.

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### ***Seeing Beauty, Sensing Race in Transnational Indonesia***

L. AYU SARASWATI

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013.

In some Southeast Asian countries, there is a trend that promotes an aesthetic appreciation for lighter or whiter skin tones. This ideology of "colorism" is the theme of Saraswati's stimulating and sophisticated monograph, which explores how the white-skinned beauty ideal has been articulated and negotiated in Indonesia from pre-colonial times till present. The author frames her analysis within a historical transnational model of the Indonesian archipelago. She reveals how the