

Question: Former secretary of state Madeleine Albright referred to the U.S. as the “indispensable country” for world order. Assess whether and how this might or might not be true for Asia. For what exactly is the U.S. indispensable? Can U.S. roles in Asia be replaced? Should they be? Justify your views.

Answer:

When Mme. Albright referred to the U.S. as the “indispensable country” for world order, she reflected a widely accepted belief among U.S. policymakers that the world is inherently anarchic. In order to nurture commerce, trade and global development---both economic and political, it is essential to maintain a stable, if not entirely peaceful, environment. Only the United States has the financial and military wherewithal to sustain such an environment. In this regard, she is correct to claim that the U.S. is indispensable. Viewed within the Asia-Pacific context, in the short term, it is hard to imagine the region entirely void of American presence.

The assumption that peace is the best environment for social development is beyond question. Although polemicists from some corners may argue war is a shortcut to power and dominance, most of the world has learned the value of peace from their own historical experiences. Admittedly, not all nations have experienced history the same, even those shared similar past may have come to different conclusions.

For example, the former colonial nations and those that were once their subjects certainly experienced history very differently. Even among the victims of colonialism, different nations obtain distinctive identities in part because of their own path to independence and modernization. In fact, although all of them embrace peace, each holds very different view of what a justified peace is or how to achieve it.

Largely as a result of this reality, the world today is still quite a volatile place. In Asia-Pacific, this is perhaps best illustrated in the dynamics among the ASEAN countries. Although they genuinely hope for peace and stability in the region, and have made considerable efforts to forge a community, inter-regional tensions exist, and conflicts

flare up occasionally---a point I will elaborate more in the answer to the second question. If the frictions among the ASEAN countries seem relatively low in intensity, the nuclear standoff in South Asia should convince people that not only war is still a very real danger today, but also it can bring about utmost destruction.

It is within this context, many acknowledge U.S. role as the purveyor of stability of the region. Personally, I believe a war between mainland China and Taiwan will be disastrous regardless of the outcome, and will be poisonous to civil societies on both sides of the Strait. In recent years, given the boisterous surge of nationalism on the Mainland and the agitations by conniving politicians in Taiwan, military conflicts are more likely to happen without the U.S. in the middle¹.

Besides security concerns, U.S. also plays important roles in other areas. Global financial system, for example, cannot function without a strong U.S. leadership. Further more, being one of the most productive economies and the largest market, the U.S. is the engine of the world's (Asia in particular) economic development, which in turn contributes healthily to peace and stability.

However, it would be naïve to assume U.S. foreign policies are driven by virtuous altruism. If it can be said that the U.S. has been playing a largely positive role in world affairs today, it is only because on many occasions, what's good for the U.S. happens to be good for the world. When what's good for the world does not meet American interests, U.S. policies are often self-serving at the expense of countries directly involved. This is probably best illustrated in the North Korean nuclear crisis. Although both South Korea and China strongly urged a more engaging, more flexible approach, the Bush administration's aggressive stance was reckless towards regional stability, and flippant towards local sensitivity.

¹ This may seem a very problematic argument given the fact that U.S. arms sale only heightens tensions across the Strait. But to counter this criticism will inevitably touch off a deeper, more philosophical debate of whether national unity under a repressive authoritarian regime is necessarily a better outcome for all than other alternatives.

In other words, one must appreciate U.S. leadership *critically*. Otherwise, it is easy fall into two equally dangerous traps. One is to elevate U.S. dominance to ideological level. The other is to assume an anachronistic “Hobbesian” worldview.

The first aspect is perhaps more clear and present, as have been amply demonstrated in “Confronting the Bush Doctrine”. The problem with Secretary Condoleezza Rice’s statement, “American values are universal ... the triumph of these values is most assuredly easier when the internal balance of power favors those who believe in them,”² is that she subconsciously indoctrinated liberal democracy, American style, as a set of immutable “values”, and without explicitly acknowledging it, equating pursuit of American interests with defense of such “universal” values. With a deeply religious President in power, along with a decidedly unilateralist policy entourage, the world has already seen the danger of misinterpreting American leadership.

The second aspect is probably less obvious but equally troublesome. So-called “Hobbesian” view refers to Thomas Hobbes and his theory of Laws of Nature³. He states men are in nature selfish, shortsighted and distrustful of, if not outright hostile to, others. Left alone, men would be constantly at war among themselves and self-destruct. Thus it is necessary, according to Hobbes, to accept absolute authority from the State. Although his primary concern was to justify state’s power, one may be tempted to apply the same reasoning to legitimize U.S. role as a watchful and punitive “policeman”.

This view is anachronistic because its proponents’ perception of the world is hopeless fixated at the Age of World Wars. Unquestionably, nations have since progressed beyond insulation and aggression, in their most primitive forms at least, and have genuinely embraced international cooperation as the desired form of co-existence. The evidences are abundant: from global institutions such as the United Nations, WTO, NPT, to regional organizations such as EU, ASEAN and others like them. It is obvious that nations have

² Rice, “Promoting the National Interest,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (January-February, 2000), p. 49

³ Admittedly, my understanding of Thomas Hobbes is not from direct reading of his original works. Instead, it is mostly resulted from summary reviews of them. The one I benefited most is compiled by “Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy” project. The project is public funded and can be found online at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/>

learned to synthesize their own interests with those of others. Just like in human society, in which absolute state sovereignty had its days in history, but has evolved into popular representative democracy under the rule of law---not the law of the authority, but of the community, a truly sustainable world order cannot depend on the superpower of one nation alone.

In this regard, it is a mistake to speculate whether or how history will replace American superpower with another one. What the U.S. should do is to leverage its unique position to foster greater liberalization, international cooperation and the rule of law. When viewed in this light, many U.S. policies, especially those from the current administration, are actually detrimental to the development of such a trend. For example, whatever justification there was for bilateral relations, U.S.'s sale of nuclear technology to India seriously undermined an already weakened international institution, the NPT. U.S.'s opposition to Japan's AMF initiative was equally indicative of U.S. suspicion towards regional self-development.

In short, although it is fair to say the U.S. is indispensable in today's world, it will be a grave mistake if U.S. policies are crafted to serve the "indispensability" as an end to itself.

Question: What roles has ASEAN played in the international relations of Asia? Has it been successful in those roles? Why or why not? Has ASEAN been an important and respected actor in Asian affairs? Again why or why not? Is it likely to become more or less important in the next 10 years? Explain your reasoning.

Answer:

ASEAN stands for Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Its stated objectives are: “(i) to accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region ... (ii) to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law ...”⁴

ASEAN’s role in the international affairs has evolved along with history. During the Cold War, ASEAN was decidedly security oriented, a bulwark in the region against superpowers’ (including China) encroachment and potential wars through proxies. Immediately after the Cold War, ASEAN played an active role in reconfiguring regional order by mediating in Indochina conflicts, and by absorbing formerly client states (Vietnam and Laos) into the organization. As the globalization process started in earnest, ASEAN also expanded regional cooperation in economic areas (through AEC), and other non-traditional issues, such as drug control, crime, human rights and the environment. Most recently, ASEAN also engaged in new efforts to cope with the rapid rise of China.

Amongst member states, ASEAN serves as an important platform to promote mutual understanding and cooperation. However, it could be argued that, as a regional collective, ASEAN has had more success dealing with outside powers, national (e.g. the U.S., Russia, and China) as well as communal (e.g. EU), than with internal members.

ASEAN’s outward prowess is perhaps best demonstrated during the Cold War era. At the time, many of the nations in the region were newly established independent states. They were geopolitically weak, domestically unstable. Together with fragile national economies, the situation was ripe for outside manipulation. Yet, through ASEAN,

⁴ ASEAN Secretariat official website. “About ASEAN”, online at: <http://www.aseansec.org/64.htm>.

Southeast Asian nations survived the Cold War unified. Similarly, it can be argued the ASEAN successfully represented member nations to hold back China's urge of using force to assert its claims in the South China Sea. All those achievements are likely to encourage further regional security cooperation and collective deterrence.

Internally, however, there is a lot to be desired for. After nearly forty years of existence, ASEAN remains an organization with little, if any, binding power over its member nations. It has been criticized as too quick to be satisfied with talks, and too timid to challenge for action. Indeed, a cursory look at its organizational chart finds ASEAN Summit and Ministerial Meetings at the top of the pyramid---instead of councils and committees⁵. As a result, ASEAN has been ineffective in resolving inter-regional conflicts⁶. In addition, scholars also criticized ASEAN for becoming the lowest common denominator on human rights in the name of unity.

To understand ASEAN's strength and weakness, one has to understand the idiosyncrasy of the region. According to Donald Weatherbee, compared to other geographical blocks, Southeast Asia is exceptionally diverse in history, culture, economy and politics⁷. In an organization where Singapore is juxtaposed with Laos and Myanmar, the diversity will lend common causes with an impression of universality. But at the same time, it brings with it thick barriers to mutual trust based on shared values. This duality is perhaps best illustrated during ASEAN's effort to end the 3rd Indochina War. In the immediate aftermath of Vietnam's invasion, a unified ASEAN response defined the conflict, and generated enormous pressure on Vietnam. However, as the resolution getting closer, there grew a "rift in ASEAN over approaches to a political solution"⁸. In the end, it took a concerted effort under the direction of the United Nations to finally resolve the issue.

⁵ ASEAN Secretariat official website. "Organizational Structure of ASEAN", online at: <http://www.aseansec.org/13103.htm>

⁶ Donald Weatherbee, "International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy", p121-133, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004

⁷ Ibid, p9-15. This is a rephrase of Weatherbee's categorization.

⁸ Ibid, p80

Still there should be no question that ASEAN is an important and well-respected actor in Asia-Pacific. Some observers, like Weatherbee, opined that ASEAN was no more than “an essentially declaratory regionalism that originates ... in the political will of Southeast Asian policy elites”⁹ I’d argue that Southeast regionalism is real and ASEAN its most representative actor. Since its inception, there have been many events and forces that could have easily split the alliance had there not been a strong regional bounding. In the end, the Cold War or the U.S. War on Terror did not split Thailand and Philippine from Indonesia and Malaysia. Globalization did not prompt Singapore to leave the organization just because it is at a different level in the food chain. Before ASEAN, there had been other regional institutions with different mandate and agenda, such as SEATO. But they have failed to gain traction in the region. Today, it does not look like cross-regional organizations such as APEC will supplant ASEAN either---despite, or maybe because of, their prominent extra-regional players.

It is tempting to measure ASEAN against the European Union, yet such efforts will prove to be fruitless and irrelevant. The truest regionalism, if there is such a thing, is the one that closely reflects the characteristic of the region. Founding members of the EU have experienced the purgatory of industrialization, imperialism and two World Wars together. The close integration among its members is the result of the region’s collective historical experiences. To expect ASEAN to rise beyond Southeast Asia’s own past, or otherwise dismiss it as regionalism in name only, is deeply troublesome.

Therefore, to accept Southeast Asia regionalism is to accept its diversity and its accompanying uncertainty. In this light, it is difficult to predict what ASEAN will become in 10 years. One of the challenges is to identify which will be a more active agent in ASEAN development: external stimuli or internal evolution?

There are many external factors to be considered. For example, how much is China’s rapid economic development a disruptive force in the region? In other words, with investment keep flowing to greater China region, will it cause higher unemployment or

⁹ Ibid, p15

widening the gap between the rich and the poor in Southeast Asia? If so, would ASEAN respond collectively by deepening regional economic integration? Another scenario is, if a steady rise of interest rate causes global economy to slow, which triggers a fall in material prices and capital values, what will it do to the already fragile economy in Indonesia---the largest member of ASEAN? Or, if Japan and China starts an arms race and both actively court endorsement from ASEAN, how will it respond? Will it be confident enough to play an honest mediator or will it turn into a military alliance?

Internally, besides economic development, many countries' experiment with democracy and institutional reforms may play a decisive role in ASEAN's future. A best-case scenario is Indonesia gradually coming out of recession with a healthy democracy installed. But what if Indonesia becomes another Philippine who has long been mired in internal division? Or if, after a long while, Malaysia and Singapore prove their benign authoritarian regimes are still the models to beat, would that trigger Vietnam and Laos to emulate them?

Arguably, the more ASEAN members converge, the more important it becomes. Although many factors inside and outside of the region can be viewed as positive to further regional integration, the great diversity among member nations calls for cautious predictions and realistic expectations.