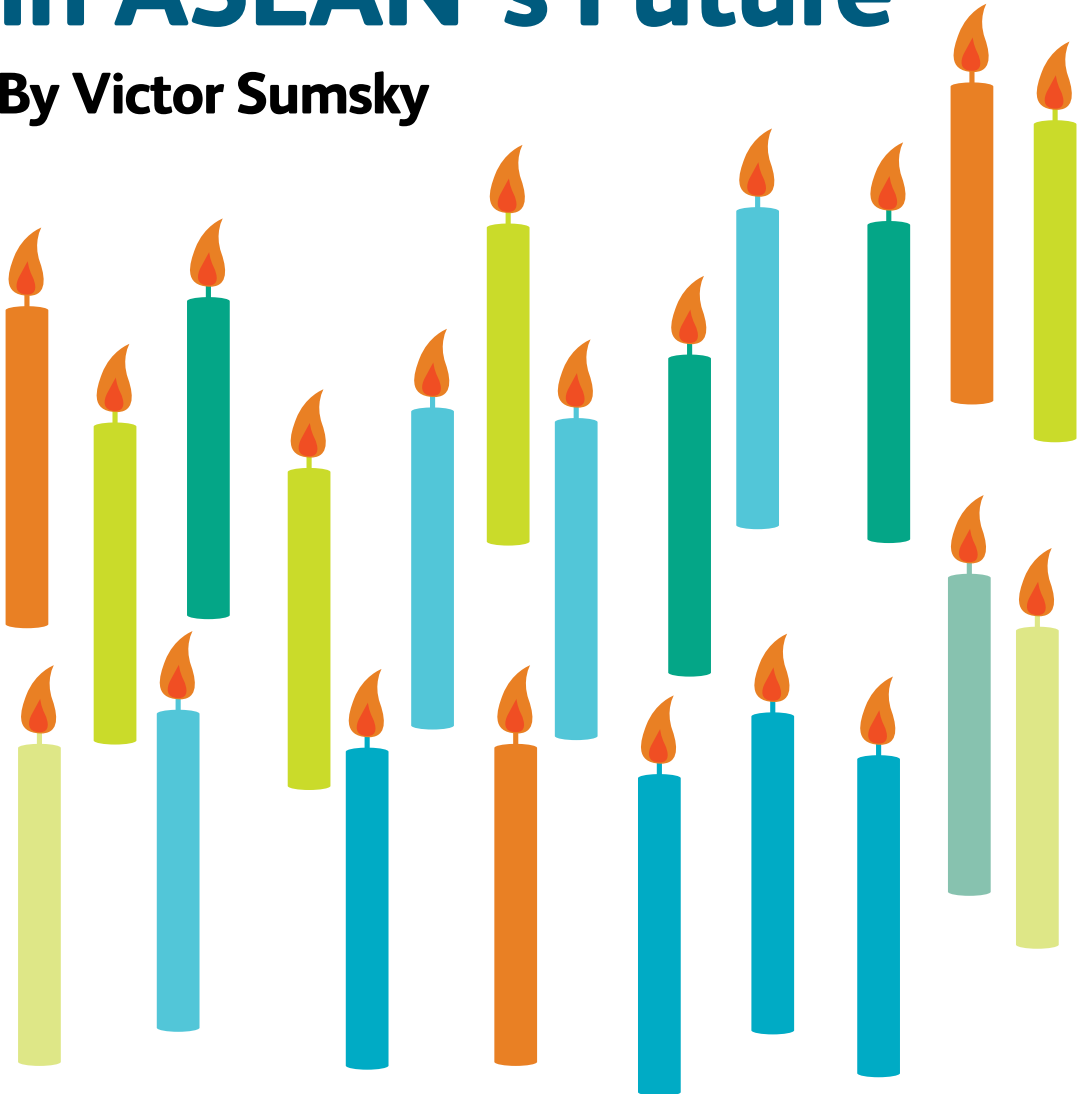




The Art of the Possible in ASEAN's Future

By Victor Sumsky





Often dismissed as an irrelevant “talking shop,” the Association of Southeast Nations greeted its 40th anniversary with questions still in the air about its future importance. Russian academic Victor Sumsky reviews the history of ASEAN and argues that the organization still has a future, if it continues to pursue the art of the possible.

LIKE SO MANY OTHER BIRTHDAYS, ASEAN’s 40th anniversary gave the friends of the family a chance to praise the hero of the day, and much of the praise was not undeserved.

Born in August 1967 in the midst of Cold War rivalries then tearing the region apart, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations was conceived by its founders — Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines — as a platform for minimizing disagreements, coordinating security agendas and promoting economic development and cooperation. Since their ultimate objective was to make themselves immune to communism, their joint venture was also something of a pro-American counter-insurgency campaign. But, unlike some other operations of this kind, it proved better suited to the real needs of the participants and, consequently, worked much better. By the time the US-Soviet confrontation ended, most ASEAN members, joined in 1984 by Brunei Darussalam, were classified by economists as newly industrializing states. The half-century-long conflict in Indochina was almost over, with only Cambodia still plagued by the dying remnants of the Khmer Rouge. Actively working for a peaceful solution to that conflict, ASEAN was consolidating its reputation as the most successful regional alliance in the non-Western world.

The measure of its self-respect in the early post-Cold War years was reflected in its claims to

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“centrality”—or, as it was often put, taking the “driver’s seat”—in such newly-created vehicles as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Asia-Europe Meeting. The ever-growing list of ASEAN’s official dialogue partners left few doubts that the association was getting to be a global player. Characteristically, its extra-regional interlocutors were also eager to get closer to it. Another proof of ASEAN’s prestige was its own enlargement by way of co-opting its former adversaries in Indochina. The process, initiated in 1995 with the admission of Vietnam, was sustained by the admission of Laos and Burma two years later. It was completed in 1999 when membership was granted to Cambodia.

Before that, however, came the Asian financial crisis. The combination of political stability and dynamic markets so typical of the key ASEAN members was suddenly gone. At the peak of the storm neither the association as a whole, nor the individual countries, seemed to know exactly what to do about it. When they finally started to compare notes, the division between those who, like Thailand and Indonesia, were thinking along the neo-liberal/IMF lines and those who, like Malaysia and Vietnam, did not, pointed to the absence of a common response to the challenge.

To its credit, ASEAN was among the first to be embarrassed by its own lack of readiness for this

trial. It has been trying hard to confirm its relevance ever since. The number of action plans, joint programs and blueprints for the future designed under its aegis in the last decade cannot help but impress. At present its cherished objectives include a regional free-trade area (initially planned for 2020, but recently rescheduled for 2015); a narrowed development gap between the group’s old-timers and newcomers; a stronger organizational structure and more efficient decision-making; creation of a comprehensive, rules-based entity called the ASEAN Community (again, by 2015, with specialized communities centered on security, economic and socio-cultural issues as the pillars of the whole).

On top of that, ASEAN is striving to promote a bigger East Asian regional architecture. At the heart of this effort is the decade-old 10+3 framework (in which ASEAN interacts with China, Japan and South Korea, building free-trade relations with each of the three and strong diplomatic ties). Since 2005, the leaders of these 13 countries have met once a year with counterparts from India, Australia and New Zealand to discuss current problems and a possible common future. The forum, known as the East Asian Summit, is sometimes viewed as a precursor to an East Asian Community. The composition and the aims of the latter are yet to be clearly defined.

As they try to reinvent ASEAN, its functionaries do not conceal that apart from the lessons of

the 1997 crisis they need to react to the rapid rise of China and India as global powers. The magnitude of this phenomenon, they say, is such that only by truly integrating can the ASEAN members cooperate — and compete — with these giants. The fact that East Asia, in the words of Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, "has become a new focus for the great game of international relations" and some of its protagonists "are wary of one another," is prompting ASEAN's greater consolidation too.

Beyond that, there is the European Union's integration experience and a sense that by adopting some of it ASEAN can improve its collective economic performance, strategic position and global image. This kind of thinking is traceable not just in the ASEAN Community concept, but also in the ASEAN Charter approved in November 2007, after two years of deliberations, at the Association's 13th and latest summit in Singapore. Along with ASEAN's commitment to enhanced cooperation in the region, it expresses an adherence to "democracy, the rule of law and good governance." Emphasizing ASEAN's traditional principles of non-interference in internal affairs of the members and of taking decisions by consensus, the Charter speaks about "the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms" as a new priority of the Association. In order to live up to it, a pledge is given to set up "an ASEAN human rights body."

IS ASEAN IN MID-LIFE CRISIS?

All of the above helps to understand the mood of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. A while ago, lecturing on ASEAN's current initiatives, he said, "ASEAN has shown not only maturity, but also, perhaps, wisdom beyond its years."

What to make, then, out of the fact that to scores of observers ASEAN at 40 is seized by a mid-life crisis with little hope of getting over it anytime soon? According to some, ASEAN is practically immobilized by the enormous differences in its member's levels of development, as well their different political regimes; it is merely a "talking shop" where high-minded phrases are

rarely matched by deeds. On the eve of the 13th ASEAN Summit last year one outspoken critic published an essay built around the theme of "sifting schizoid ASEAN's reality from rhetoric."

It is not easy to dismiss these views out of hand. After all, for years some inside ASEAN have been talking about the urgency of getting over the principles of non-interference and consensus when a member's dismal human rights record is spoiling the image of the whole organization. The major case in point, of course, is Burma. While the so-called Eminent Persons Group was helping to draft the ASEAN Charter, its participants promised to make the document legally binding, allow the imposition of sanctions on "misbehaving" member states, reject "unconstitutional and undemocratic changes in the government" and introduce decision-making by majority. None of this is found in the Charter.

Worse still, prior to the November 2007 ASEAN Summit, Burma was rocked by protests against military rule that were quelled with gunfire. When the hosts of the meeting proposed inviting Ibrahim Gambari, the UN special envoy on Burma, for a briefing on the situation, Burma blocked the move. What followed was a string of media comments on ASEAN caving in to the junta and becoming a shameful farce and an example of doublethink.

Doublethink is not a pleasant word. But what can be done if it reasonably comes to mind in the process of scrutinizing the attitudes of ASEAN's statesmen and experts towards the EU? Repeating one after another that Southeast Asia's conditions are too different from those of Western Europe to permit a replication of EU practices, they continue to call the EU an inspiring model. "Some might say that an intellectually infectious disease has been spreading among ASEAN thinkers: EU envy," writes Donald Emmerson, director of the Southeast Asia Forum at Stanford. Whatever it is, it impedes a realistic evaluation of both ASEAN and the EU, and borders on wishful thinking.

This raises some obvious questions. Why is it so difficult for ASEAN to transform itself into an entity based on rules and obligations? What

prevents it from pressing Burma toward real democratization? Can ASEAN, as we know it today, retain a leading position in building the new architecture of East Asian cooperation? Before addressing these questions directly and for the sake of providing better answers, let's raise one more question.

WAS ENLARGEMENT A MISTAKE?

Today's habitual complaints about ASEAN's unhealthy heterogeneity may give some people an idea that the association was wrong to open its gates to the newcomers of the 1990s. At any rate, the ease with which ASEAN added new members at the time suggests the presence of many overlapping interests and attractions.

First, what made the traditional anti-communist old-timers of ASEAN attractive to their Indochinese neighbors (minus Burma, which we will discuss later)? Most probably, it was a combination of their booming economies, successful nation building and ability to direct the process of modernization. By the standards of the Third World, this was no mean achievement. The Asian Communists with their state-centered worldview could truly appreciate it.

On the other hand, the attempts of Indochinese leaders to emancipate their markets in the manner of Deng Xiaoping were great news for ASEAN elites. The striking results of the Chinese reforms must have convinced the original ASEAN members that a productive way out of the communist system was possible. If so, then switching to the ASEAN model of modernization as it evolved in the Cold War era might only be a matter of time for Vietnam et al.

From the old-timers perspective, enlargement could also help it to uphold the claim to centrality in big international forums, and Vietnam, never burdened by a China-related inferiority complex, could be a special asset in dealing with Beijing. Meanwhile, the newcomers, no longer enjoying the Soviet Union's manifold support, saw ASEAN as a shelter from potential new threats, a place to acquire new partners and lure investors. Businessmen from countries like Thailand and Singapore started to operate in Indochina

well before the enlargement and were eager to continue their expansion.

Mutual gravitation between the ASEAN six and the newcomers was strong enough to allow the acceptance of the latter by the former without ideological preconditions. Besides, the six apparently believed that in the post-Cold War environment the Indochinese would have to abandon their socialist habits sooner rather than later. At the same time, democracy and human rights were not yet a part of the association's vocabulary. On the contrary, such senior statesmen as Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad propagated the concept of Asian Values, putting a premium on common prosperity rather than individual freedom and making it easier for the newcomers to identify with ASEAN.

The style of enlargement was quintessentially an expression of the ASEAN Way — that is, it relied on patient, informal bargaining rather than formal talks and potential partners were treated in a non-confrontational and pragmatic fashion. It would be wrong to say that the enlargement was an accident of history, but further developments have shown that the task of integrating ASEAN may be much more challenging and time-consuming than anticipated earlier.

Of the original ASEAN members, only Singapore, the well-controlled city-state, has gone through the years after the Asian Crisis without significant political instability. Although Malaysia has avoided a major upheaval, intra-elite clashes came into the open during the crisis, leaving a bitter memory. Lately, against the background of debates about the future of affirmative action favoring ethnic Malays, the symptoms of communal tensions have been more pronounced. As for Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, the list of trials experienced by each country in the last decade includes changes of government by extra-constitutional means, secessionist rebellions, terrorist activities, frequent parliamentary stalemates, demands for resignations of top officials and massive street protests — all in the context of trying to be democratic in societies with a recent authoritarian past.



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Years ago, exploring the nature of the transition from the stability of a traditional social order to modernity, Samuel Huntington described modernization as a bumpy ride from point A to point B, especially destabilizing in its accelerated forms. What is happening today to the original ASEAN states reminds one of the validity of the thesis.

How the ASEAN newcomers perceive these problems and what conclusions they draw is anybody's guess. But judging by their behavior, they are in no hurry to democratize. Exploratory, piecemeal and cautious steps in that direction are the maximum they seem to want — and what, in fact, the classic ASEAN Way would prescribe. For Hanoi, as for Beijing, a Leninist political structure remains a useful safeguard against internal tensions and outside pressures. Only time will tell if this is right or wrong. It may be noted, too, that the Asian Values concept, no longer touted among the ASEAN old-timers, has not been abandoned in Indochina.

In a very general sense, these developments signal that national integration is still unfinished in practically every ASEAN country. ASEAN's mixed composition is often illus-

Who's Who: A snapshot of ASEAN and the EU

Sources www.en.wikipedia.org, www.trade.ec.europa.eu,
www.epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu, www.cia.gov,
www.guardian.co.uk, www.asean.org, www.unpan1.un.org

ASEAN

Association of South East
Asian Nations **Established in 1967**

General information	Objective	To accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region.
	Current leader	Secretary General — Surin Pitsuwan (Thailand)
	Founding members	Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand
	Joining members	Brunei Darussalam (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Burma (1997), Cambodia (1999)
	Observers and partners	Papua New Guinea, China, Japan, South Korea (ASEAN Plus 3), United Nations, Australia, Canada, EU, India, New Zealand, Russia, United States of America, Pakistan
	Candidate members	East Timor
People	Total population (2006)	564,986,000
	Population density	127 persons per km ² (2006)
	Annual population growth	1.6 % (2006)
Trade	GDP total (2007)	US\$ 1173 billion
	GDP per capita (2007)	US\$ 2,041
	Top five trade partners (\$USbn)	Japan (161.78), USA (161.20), EU (160.59), China (139.96), Republic of Korea (52.52) excluding intra ASEAN trade
	Economic growth (2007)	6.0 %
	Top five sources of visitors (excluding member countries)	EU, China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Australia

EU

European Union

Established in 1951

Creating peace, prosperity and freedom for its 495 million citizens in a fairer, safer world.

EU Council Presidency — Slovenia

France, Germany (then West Germany), Italy, Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg

Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom (1973), Greece (1981), Spain, Portugal (1986), Austria, Finland, Sweden (1995), Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia (2004), Bulgaria, Romania (2007)

Iceland, Lichenstein, Norway, Switerland, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, members in the Mercosur, SICA and Andean Community, Mexico, Chile, Japan, Republic of Korea, Australia, New Zealand, ASEAN members and China

Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey

492,975,207

114 persons per km² (2008)

0.16 % (2006)

US\$ 16,370 billion

US\$ 33,482

USA (3,522.98), China (2,013.13), Japan (1,413.82), Canada (935.28), South Korea (761.14)

2.7 %

Switzerland, USA, Norway, Japan, Russia

trated by references to per capita GDP figures — \$29,500 in Singapore, \$1,600 in Indonesia, \$200 in Burma in 2006 — plus a strange mosaic of political regimes that range from the absolute monarchy of Brunei, to freewheeling democracy in the Philippines to Communist Party rule in Vietnam. It may be worthwhile to proceed by emphasizing differences in models and degrees of national integration.

If we consider ASEAN’s problems defining its membership obligations and try to draw comparisons with Europe, what will we see? In contrast to Southeast Asia, European integration was the project of mature, modern nations from the very start. Surely, their resolve to pass some elements of sovereignty to supra-national institutions was hardened by Cold War era motivations, but had it not been rooted in their potential as integrated nations, the project would have never worked. Lacking the quality of governance and political life that is typical of integrated nations, ASEAN members are uncomfortable ceding any nation-state prerogatives to their regional organization.

But progress in integration at both the national and regional level, does not depend on Southeast Asians alone, and there is a vivid example of this.

BURMA AND ASEAN-BASHING

Ever since Burma joined ASEAN, its presence has provoked endless rebukes addressed to the association, visibly tarnishing its image. US officials, EU legislators, human rights activists and scores of others are ceaselessly harsh on the subject, viewing it as a mortal sin. One prominent campaigner is George Soros, the billionaire idealist and currency killer. According to one unfriendly school of thought, he was so upset by ASEAN’s intention to bring Burma on board that he decided to punish the enemies of open society by triggering the Asian Crisis.

How could ASEAN’s leaders dare do it? One may only guess that a stable democratic government did not look like a realistic option in impoverished, self-isolated Burma. Had they been inclined to push the military rulers towards liber-

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alization, what kind of leverage could they apply in the absence of solid ties with that country? Eventually, they decided to try “constructive engagement”— the policy of involving Burma in ASEAN in order to invigorate the national economy, give the generals a better feeling of the region and encourage the regime to soften. Burma reciprocated by choosing to emulate Suharto’s New Order, with its legalized political role for the military, as a source of inspiration.

But almost soon as that happened, the 32-year old Indonesian dictatorship collapsed. In the aftermath of the Asian Crisis, ASEAN elites were understandably concerned with their countries’ abilities to attract foreign capital. Since adherence to democracy was now a part of globalization’s business ethics (assuming there is such a thing), sitting at one table with unreformed Burma was becoming less comfortable for the democrats in

ASEAN — and less justified from a pragmatic point of view. At that moment some ASEAN pundits began to complain that the non-interference principle was impeding further regional integration and protecting human rights violators.

Burma-bashing was propelled to new levels of intensity by the Bush administration. In 2005, it ranked Burma, together with Byelorussia, Cuba, Iran, North Korea and Zimbabwe, as an “outpost of tyranny” and a threat to America. The absurdity of these claims is obvious to anyone vaguely familiar with the capabilities of Burma (and by the way, with the scope of inner repression there compared to some other Third World countries toward which Washington demonstrated remarkable tolerance). Apart from the unbearable pain of sharing one planet with this regime, there have to be more reasons for the anti-Burma campaign.

The key to this riddle is in the word “outpost” — a small fortification protecting the passage to a major one. Behind each “outpost of tyranny” there must be a corresponding “stronghold.” In this instance it is undoubtedly China, America’s emerging global rival No. 1.

Throughout the period of Burma-bashing, the generals have been trying to hide from their enemies in the economic and strategic embrace of Beijing. The latter has been happy to offer its weaponry and aid for infrastructure development in return for important concessions. First, Burma has given it access to a set of military bases including ports, airfields and an upgraded surveillance facility on the Coco Islands; this allows the Chinese to monitor the northern approaches to the Straits of Malacca through which pass the greater portion of China’s Middle Eastern oil imports. Second, being rich in energy Burma is willing to supply large amounts to its high-consuming neighbor. Third, China and Burma plan to construct oil and gas pipelines stretching from the Bay of Bengal into Yunnan province. What the Burma-China pipelines will allow is “routing of oil and gas from Africa (Sudan among other sources) and the Middle East (Iran, Saudi Arabia) without depending on the vulnerable checkpoint of the Malacca Strait,” believes F.

William Engdahl, who writes frequently on the global politics of energy.

Alarmed by these developments, Washington is eager to nullify Beijing's progress in the energy security area by substituting Burma's present regime for a friendlier one. If successful, the US may gain a base for projecting power not just in the direction of China, but, when needed, to India and Southeast Asia too. Like in Iraq, human rights concerns are a cover for geopolitical games. But, due to the China-Burma military partnership, employment of Iraqi-type methods is a little problematic. A less risky option is a "people power" revolution of the kind that has been staged so often in the last decade or two to install pro-US governments in places of strategic value. In the second half of 2007 this was tried in Burma — as usual, with the full CNN coverage and the systematic backing of the National Endowment for Democracy, the Albert Einstein Institution and their likes. It failed.

A notable feature of this policy is its counter-productivity: after all that has been done to subvert it, the military regime is still deeply entrenched. Its capital has now moved to the town of Pinyinana, deep in the interior and not as easy to reach as coastal Rangoon in the event of a "humanitarian intervention." Staying close to China, Burma is also reaching out to such partners as India and Russia. Substantial investments are coming into its energy sector from Malaysia, Thailand and South Korea. A meaningful signal to both friends and foes is the launch of the national nuclear program.

If one is to believe US policymakers, "constructive engagement" was doomed before it started — whereas actually this course is persistently undermined by US-coordinated attempts to corner Burma.

Given its internal differences, ASEAN cannot avoid debates on the wisdom of its Burma policy, and disagreements periodically come to the surface. But even so, despite their sensitivity to Washington's strategic needs, the ASEAN states have not joined the anti-Burma crusade. The explanations are many, but not a single member of the association needs a second Iraq at its door-

step. If basic government structures become defunct in the midst of landslide democratization, what will stand in the way of chaos in ethnically fractious Burma? Where will ASEAN be if such a crisis erupts and spills over the borders?

No doubt, the US is able to foresee that Burma-bashing may end in this way. ASEAN, forced to pay so much attention to Burma, may be distracted from addressing other matters, and its internal divisions could become aggravated. If Washington is aware of this but continues to pursue its policy in Burma, is it fair to conclude that it no longer needs ASEAN? How to explain this change of heart?

VIVERE PERICOLOSO: MEMORIES AND OMENS

Of all the 21st century trends in East and Southeast Asia, none carries more serious implications than the rise of China. A major dimension of this rise is the breakthrough in Beijing's relations with ASEAN, be it in trade or security cooperation or construction of new multilateral dialogue platforms. At least one aspect of the relationship calls for special attention: what is known as China's peace offensive in Southeast Asia has an inherently global dimension. In the region, Beijing is quickly becoming the equal of the US and Japan. Therefore, it is undertaking a shortcut to global status.

As we know from Bush administration documents and rhetoric, a fully independent global role is the sole privilege of the United States. From that perspective, China is guilty of seeking the same kind of role and ASEAN is assisting it through a multidimensional partnership. This cannot go unpunished, and on the Burma front the US is actually trying to hit three targets at once - Burma itself, ASEAN and China.

In classic carrot-and-stick fashion (and in order to split the association), the US is also trying to woo some ASEAN members separately. "Special relations" are offered to Vietnam with the implicit idea of cultivating it as a regional counterweight to China. Other maneuvers are aimed at drawing Jakarta closer to Washington so as to disrupt its declared strategic partnership with Beijing. Interactions in the military sphere

with such traditional allies as Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore, are getting livelier.

While these countries are receptive to America's courtship, they are, nonetheless, determined to maintain their separate identity and relationships. In fact, they never miss a chance to show how interested they are in working with the Chinese.

Seeing this, the US implements a new security (or, rather, insecurity) initiative, officially labeled "quadrilateral cooperation" and, unofficially an "Asian NATO." The idea is to build an alliance around the core group of America's old friends Japan and Australia (the two signed a defense pact last year) and new friend India. The purpose of containing China — and marginalizing those who lean towards Beijing — is written in the very composition of the group. So far the foursome has focused on naval cooperation, ostensibly to assist victims of natural disasters and ensure the safety of the sea-lanes of communication. Their 7th joint exercise was held in the Bay of Bengal in September 2007, not far from the shores of Burma during a time when "people power" in Rangoon was close to its pinnacle. Experts assume that eventually more countries may be brought into the "quadrilateral" scheme, while the anti-China (as well as anti-Russia) Asian missile defense system being built by the US and Japan may also be part of this.

How should ASEAN read all this? Isn't it offered a rigid choice between the US and China? The question is rhetorical, of course, and for the questioner, the answer is obvious. The worst thing is that confronting ASEAN with this kind of dilemma is tantamount to depriving it of a decent future. In the unlikely case of a definite preference for one or the other party, ASEAN would stop controlling the regional balance of forces to the extent that it does today and lose its hope of keeping the precious driver's seat. If it refrains from taking sides, the most likely path, it may quietly fade away in the shadow of a new US-centered military bloc. As in the previous scenario, the driver's seat will be gone with the car.

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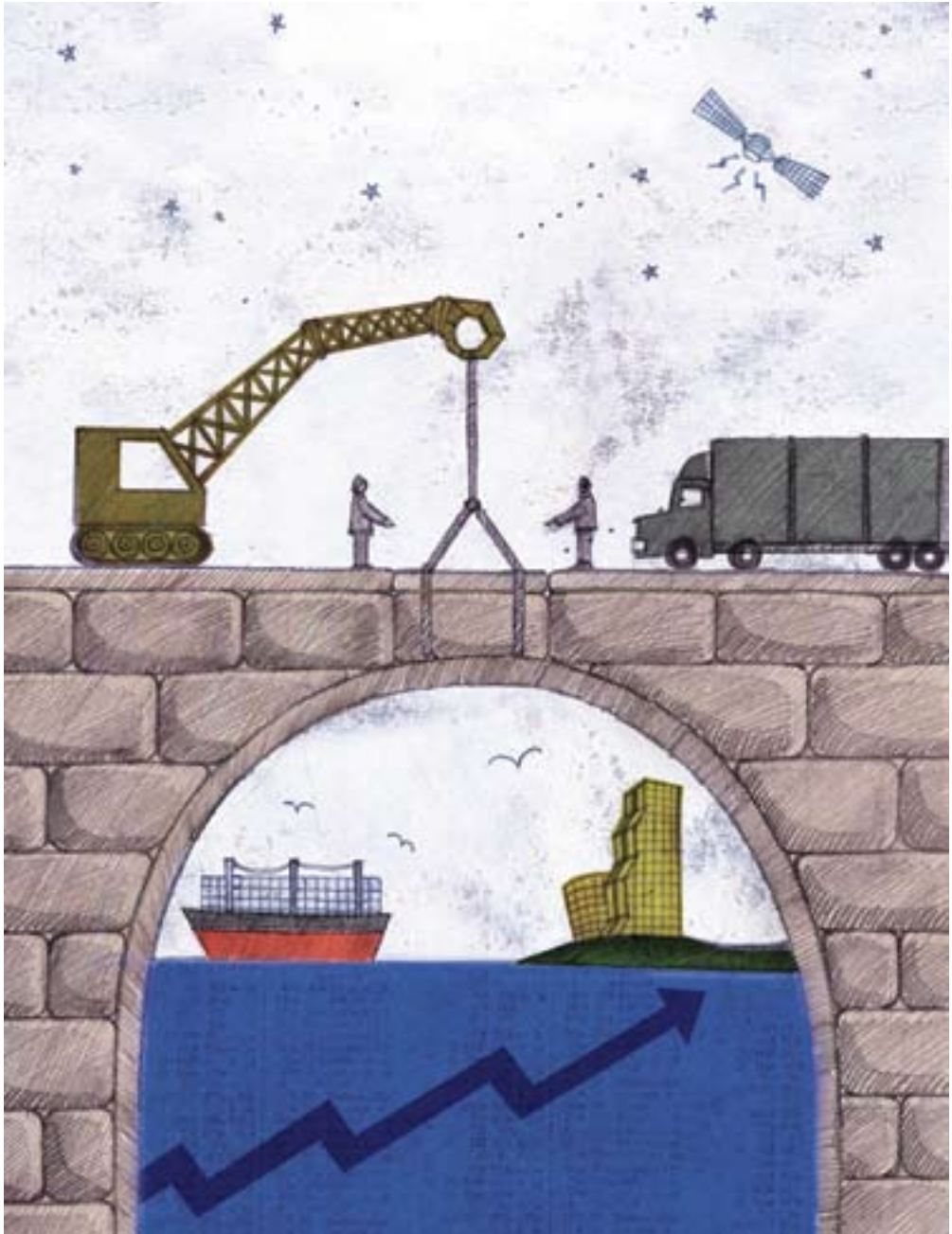
gionalism. The reason is the growing determination of ASEAN members to serve their own national and regional interests rather than simply helping the US to contain whomever it wants to contain.

Old Southeast Asian hands may still recall how back in the 1960s Indonesia's eloquent founding father Sukarno spoke of *Vivere Pericoloso* (or *Living Dangerously*) to denote what could lie ahead for the country and, in a bigger sense, the region. Who could imagine just a few years ago that this ancient expression might be recycled to describe the changing fortunes of ASEAN? But as we look at the geopolitical environment and measure its progress against the realities ASEAN must live with (rather than against the EU norms), we may feel that, in spite of the odds, it still manages to practice the art of the possible. And as long as it does, it has a future.

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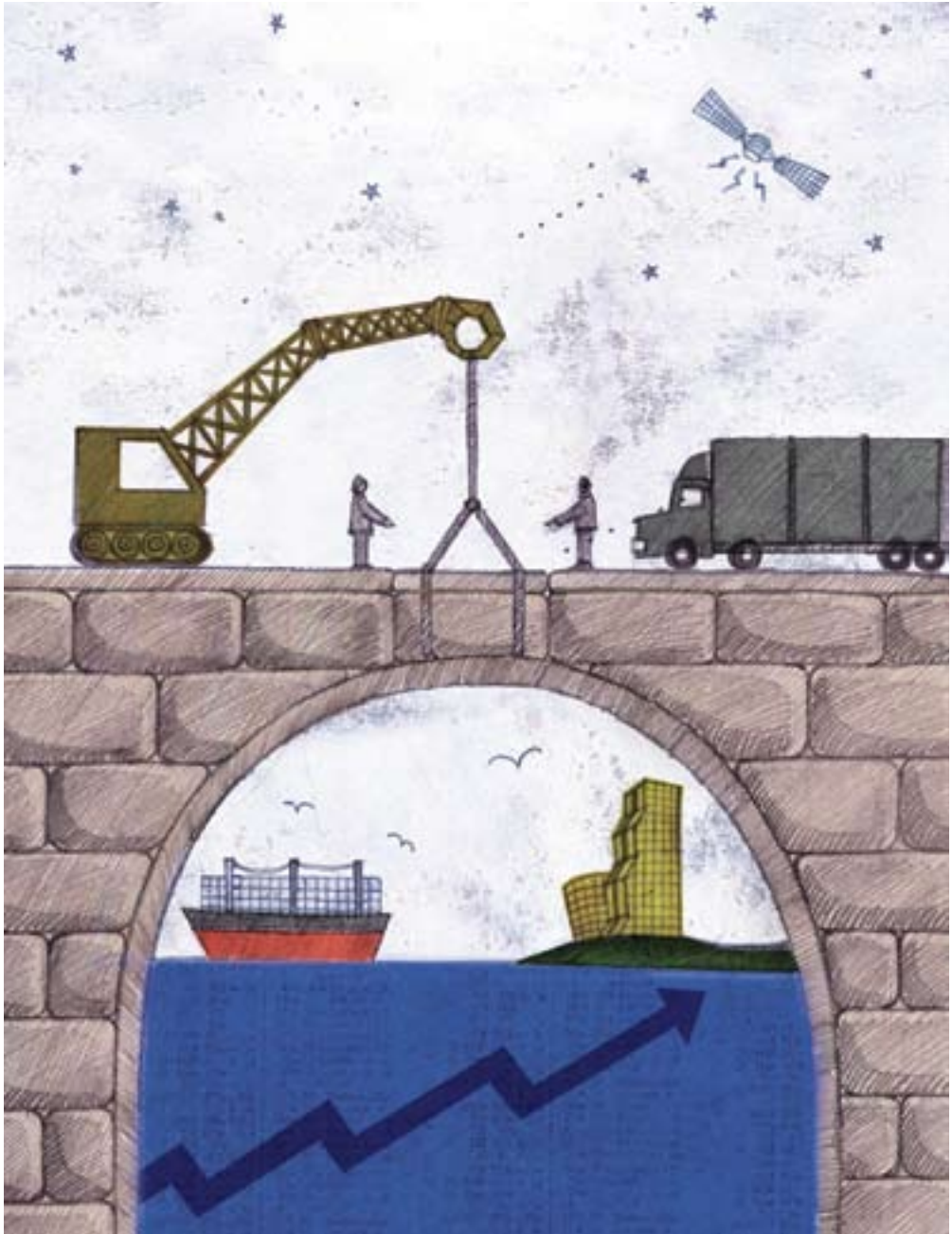


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