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'Controlled US-China tension good for Asean'

By Roger Mitton, Straits Times

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WASHINGTON - IN A controversial address, Singapore's former ambassador to the United Nations, Mr Kishore Mahbubani, said South-east Asia will benefit if tension exists between the US and China.

Many experts have said that the more Washington and Beijing like each other, the better everyone will be.

But Mr Mahbubani disagreed. He told a high-powered audience of policymakers and Asian experts at the Brookings Institution in Washington on Tuesday that a state of 'controlled tension' is preferable.

When China and the US vie for influence in the region, Asean will benefit, he said.

'If you have a certain degree of tension between the United States and China, it creates opportunities for the countries of South-east Asia,' said Mr Mahbubani, who is now the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore.

He gave his surprised US audience an example of how this tense rivalry had been beneficial in the past.

He said that because of the tension and the possibility that the US might try to contain China, the government in Beijing had reached out to share its growing economic prosperity with the region.

One way was proposing a free trade agreement with Asean. When it did that, other nations like Japan and India quickly followed suit and offered similar preferential trading arrangements.

'So South-east Asia benefits a great deal from the controlled tension between the United States and China,' he said.

In his view, this beneficial situation had helped create the right moment for the East Asia Summit that will be held in Kuala Lumpur in December this year.

'This is where you will see an effort made to lay in place a broader Asian order that brings together all the major powers of Asia into a cooperative arrangement,' he said.

And he urged his US audience to take note of the fact that the summit is an Asean initiative.

He said he knew many Americans dismissed Asean as an inconsequential organisation, especially compared to the more deeply integrated European Union.

But Mr Mahbubani said: 'Asean has made a remarkable contribution to South-east Asia by ensuring that no two Asean nations have gone to war in a region which is known as the Balkans of Asia.'

The controlled tension between China and the US that he extolled, of course, requires both parties to be present and active in the region.

So Mr Mahbubani stressed that Asean wants the US to maintain a strong and sizeable presence in South-east Asia. But American rivalry with China in the region should not go too far, he said.

'It's very obvious that if the US and China fight each other, it's going to be bad for the world and bad for our region too.'

So he warned the US against trying to curb China's rise. 'For those Americans even thinking of a containment policy of China, think twice,' he said.

Such a policy could lead to ties between America and China becoming so antagonistic that Asean countries would be forced to choose between the two powers.

'You will put them in an invidious position because they know that America may leave the region, but China will stay,' he said.