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Southeast Asia, Once Described As Asia's Balkan, Is Today A Peaceful Community

By Manik Mehta

NEW YORK, Feb 7 (Bernama) -- Southeast Asia, once described as Asia's "Balkan States", is today a thriving and peaceful community bonded together in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

This view was presented by Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore's diplomat for 33 years and currently Dean and Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at Singapore's National University, while introducing his new book 'The Great Convergence - Asia, the West and the Logic of One World (Public Affairs 2013)', at the Asia Society in New York Wednesday evening.

Mahbubani, who had served in Kuala Lumpur and a two-time Singapore permanent representative to the United Nations in New York between 2001 and 2002, used the Asean example to support his contention that former enemies are working together today to achieve success, prosperity and improvement in their living conditions.

He said that the rise of a new Asian, and indeed worldwide middle class, takes an optimistic world view in his book, playing down the conflicts that have emerged in several corners of the world.

He further said: "The world has changed profoundly ♦ I believe that the change is best captured by this great convergence."

He saw a direct co-relation between the decline in the number of wars and the rise in the number of free trade agreements (FTAs) between states.

"This can be explained with the phenomenal rise in the level of interdependence. Some 100 years ago, it was convention not to shy away from wars for the love of country. That's not happening any longer now. Asian leaders and the people know that going to war is the stupidest thing to do," Mahbubani claimed.

"But the world is not a perfect place and I have illustrated in my book through examples seven contradictions to the overall desire for peaceful coexistence," he said.

"The world's seven billion people live in 193 countries, which were once analogous to boats. Today, interdependence has increased to such an extent that these 193 boats have become cabins on a single ship," he said.

The common interest and responsibility of each state towards humanity had also increased. The changing attitude towards global warming revealed this.

President Barack Obama had referred to global warming as one of humanity's challenges in his inaugural speech.

Even India and China, once emphatically blaming the developed world for causing global warming, are now taking a conciliatory stand and realise the significance of working together.

Mahbubani, who was selected in 2010 and 2011 as one of top global thinkers by Foreign Policy, envisaged America's economic power receding to the second position while China's will climb to the number one slot in as early as 2017.

According to Mahbubani, the "big test for Asia is whether China's neighbours can learn to accommodate China's rise and whether China itself can learn to address its neighbours' concerns better".

Similarly, by submitting the "nine dash" South China Sea map as a document at the United Nations, China may have created a problem for itself.

"As I document in The Great Convergence, China will have to work hard to regain its deft diplomatic touch to reduce its problems with Japan and Asean," he explained.

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"The good news for the new Asean Secretary-General Le Luong Minh is that the South China Sea is not a problem between China and Asean. It is a problem between China and a few of its neighbouring Asean states. It is also not in the mandate of the Asean Secretary-General to deal with these geopolitical challenges," Mahubani contended.

Le can make a big contribution towards improving Asean-China relations by focusing on enhanced economic cooperation.

Asean trade with China has grown exponentially from US\$7.42 billion in 1990 to US\$292.78 billion in 2011. It grew even faster after the Asean-China FTA was signed in 2004 with China providing the Asean countries an "early harvest" of unilateral trade concessions.

By helping to create a larger cooperative framework between Asean and China, Le will also be helping to provide a buffer from any tensions reverberating from the South China Sea issue.

Mahubani called on Le to also lead the effort to ensure that the other FTAs signed by Asean are implemented as quickly and as effectively as the Asean-China FTA.

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