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Comments on "Regional Order and Political Development"

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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, allow me to congratulate my good friend Pak Jusuf Wanandi, for his excellent presentation and discussion of the role of ASEAN in terms of regional order and political development in Southeast Asia and the larger Asia-Pacific region. I join him in reiterating the thesis that, in contrast to other 'developing' regions, ASEAN has been able to cope with the problems/challenges of socio-economic and political modernization in large part through the quality of political leadership and the support, generally, of the population in its various member-states. There is no doubt as well of a strong element of both national and regional resilience that explains the relative success of ASEAN even as it faces the difficult economic times of the 1980s and the concomitant problems of political participation now becoming more salient. It is indeed worthwhile to ponder that the thesis of national and regional resilience and that these buttress each other was actually enunciated in the 1970s by the Indonesians themselves, from the country that Pak Jusuf himself represents.

If I may be provocative, perhaps it is also worth pondering if ASEAN itself now has become too "small" for Indonesia as it seeks a more highlighted role beyond Southeast Asia to extend to the Western Pacific, befitting, as it were, the large nation that it is, was historically, and in some sense a "middle power" in the making. One sees, in effect, that ASEAN-Pacific

Cooperation (APC), first officially recognized in 1984, as but a manifestation of Indonesia's desires to play a leading role in the Asia-Pacific. In this context, too, I find it most poignant that Pak Jusuf has touched little on the challenge that Vietnam, or perhaps more correctly the IndoChinese Federation, poses for the region. Please do not misunderstand me. I am an optimist, albeit a cautious one. But I daresay we forsake Vietnam at our own peril when we neglect to factor in the Vietnamese when assessing Southeast Asia's regional order.

The challenge to regional order to Southeast Asia is the Kampuchean problem and Vietnam's role. Over time, I have become "hard line" vis-a-vis the Vietnamese. I do not discern any real desire on their part to allow for Kampuchean selfdetermination or that in effect they are really desirous of a genuine co-existence with ASEAN.

This raises a host of problems for the "Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality" concept, now acronymized by ASEAN-watchers as "ZOPFAN". Although there is a supposedly ASEAN agreement on ZOPFAN as a principle, I am afraid, however, that there exists ambiguities in the concept inside and outside of ASEAN. Given what I see as Vietnam's intransigence, ZOPFAN must be viewed in pragmatic terms. In principle, as a long-term objective, it is an ideal based on:-

(i) "co-existence" in Southeast Asia between noncommunist ASEAN, communist IndoChina and "neutral" Burma;

(ii) the external/major powers are not interventionist;

(iii) the non-existence of foreign military bases.

In practice, and for ZOPFAN to be workable, there has to be a regional balance of power along the following dimensions:

(a) between the indigenous powers; and

(b) between foreign military powers, but with the unstated ASEAN proviso that the balance of power is titled in favour of the US.

In the interim period between desire and reality, there is also tacit acceptance that foreign military bases/presence are allowable and that enough transition time is allowed for full military capability (self-reliance) to be built up in the ASEAN states. The bottom line about ZOPFAN revolves around two conundra, viz., whether Hanoi believes in ZOPFAN or is it willing to subjugate Southeast Asia militarily under its aegis or otherwise, and whether the USSR and the PRC will want to dominate the region, if and when the US "withdraws" from the region.

Pak Jusuf, I believe, is correct in touching on the issue of the roles of the major powers in Southeast Asia, but there is also a problem of a Vietnam supported by the Soviet Union. In a different vein, the role the United States is sometimes benign, but often it tends to dismiss Southeast Asia as but only a lesser factor in its global strategies. Indeed, at times the US is more damaging in its policies, especially in the economic dimension.

Let me turn now to Malaysian political developments. I find little to disagree in terms of Pak Jusuf's treatment of the subject. It is equally pertinent to observe that a strong factor in the political stability in ASEAN has been the high premium on "strong government" as a basis for national development. But, increasingly, this very notion is being questioned by a more politically-aware citizenry, benefitting--ironically, it would seem, from those who wield authority--from the onslaught of socio-economic progress. Pak Jusuf himself is consciously aware of this dilemma as his paper shows. But the process has also made more salient the deleterious effect of government and political party corruption--the whole question of "money politics" that has besieged UMNO of late. One is reminded as well of the BMF scandal that

surfaced in 1983 and is still being investigated. In that light too, the strength of UMNO has soared to new and dizzying heights, highlighting in effect Malay political hegemony in multi-racial Malaysia.

Might it not be possible that Malaysian politics has now become essentially a question of Malay politics, and that with the onset of a resurgence of Islamic consciousness the battle lines will be drawn between those who seek heaven on earth and those who seek paradise in the hereafter? Although one can be assured that religious exstremists will not be able to disrupt the political system, the quest for the absorption of Islamic values does present difficulties, indicated no less by official reference to deviationist interpretations and the dwelling on trivia against the positive effects of learning from secular experiences. But, can Islam play the role of promoting good work ethics a la Protestantism as the country pushes for socio-econoic advancement? In terms of racial politics, it is more likely that non-Malay political demands and aspirations have become submerged but yet retain the potential to explode if the assertion of Malay political power becomes intolerable. But, it is interesting to ponder if in some sense the MCA leadership crisis could have indicated the possibiltiy whereby Chinese interests could be represented, after all, by UMNO qua national movement.

Fortunately, the "need to harmonize racial and religious relations" (in Pak Jusuf's words) has also meant an understanding for moderation so that the assertion of Malay political power cannot be pushed too far nor that ethnic (both non-Malay and Malay) chauvinism be unbridled. Nonetheless, the coming to power of a state that is seeming non-Malay (and non-Moslem) earlier this year has caused some concern among those who hold power at the centre.

One can expect of course that further socio-economic progress will in its wake lead to increasing demands on the political system but it is more than

likely that the high degree of political institutionalization will ensure that the system will be able to accommodate such new pressures. That having said, however, Malaysia's major challenge will still be its efforts in nation-building.

Mr. Chairman,

Let me just conclude my brief remarks by alluding to the serious challenge that Malaysia and the rest of ASEAN faces as we head toward what many of us believe to be a "Pacific era". The quest in Malaysia's modernization is to achieve that place in the sun that equates as having arrived in terms of economic well-being on par with the developed world. In Malaysia, a strong and vigorous leadership is striving for this status by industrialization but also at the same time allowing for a fair modicum of political rights and liberties. A fair balance has to be struck between the ideals of liberal democracy (and avoiding as much as possible authoritarian tendencies) as the country pushes for discipline in attempting to become an NIC. In ASEAN, the resort to the Marxist model has far and long been pushed to the background, but often those very countries which should provide the very climate for noncommunist Southeast Asia's prosperity are committing acts contrary to such objectives. In that sense, Mr. Chairman, Malaysia's and ASEAN's performance in regional order and development are contingent as much on internal dynamism as in the context of developments and the actions of others in the Asia-Pacific.

Thank you.

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