

“ASEAN Centrality in Today’s Geopolitical Context”



Interview with H.E. Jose Tavaréz

H.E. Jose Tavaréz is currently the Director General of ASEAN Cooperation in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. Previously, he was the Head of the Political Affairs Section at the International Organizations Directorate (1997 – 1999), Director for Dialogue Partners and Inter-Regional Affairs of ASEAN (2010-2012), Director for ASEAN Political and Security Cooperation (2012-2013). He is also former Ambassador to New Zealand, the Independent State of Samoa and the Kingdom of Tonga (2013-2016).



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Background

The world is being overwhelmed by the coronavirus pandemic along with its adverse impacts. Yet, the pandemic also not halted any geopolitical tension and rather to heat the situation. Now, countries around the globe are coping with economic and health crisis simultaneously. In this time of hardships, ASEAN as a regional bloc has to cooperate and address the crisis together.

The evolving geopolitical dynamic and unprecedented crisis test the notion of ASEAN centrality, where for ASEAN countries its centrality is an integral part of ASEAN like stated in Article 1.15 of the ASEAN charter “To maintain the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent, and inclusive.”

FPCI Research and Analysis (FPCI R&A) sees that in the present situation of rising geopolitical tension amid the pandemic, ASEAN centrality plays an even more critical role. FPCI researcher Steffani Alivia interviewed H.E. Jose Tavaréz, Director General of ASEAN Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs on July 30th, 2020. The issues discussed in this interview are: ASEAN’s regional efforts in handling the pandemic along with its impacts, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific, and geopolitics.

1. ASEAN had just concluded the 36th ASEAN Summit on June 26, 2020. What are your key takeaways from the summit?

First of all, thank you for this opportunity. In the summit, the leaders were primarily focused on the pandemic situation, the COVID-19 social-economic impacts, and the current geopolitical situation.

The leaders also reiterated their commitment to closely address the pandemic and to assist one another in various ways. For example, assisting one another by providing essential medical supplies.

Indonesia has the advantage of benefitting from this cooperation between the ASEAN member states as well as our dialogue partners.

Besides cooperation in dealing with the COVID-19, the leaders also discussed the impacts of the pandemic namely the economic impacts, which are huge in terms of rising unemployment and rising poverty. The socio-economic impact is no less severe than the pandemic itself. Due to the imposed lockdowns or social restriction policies to curb the spread of infection, we are experiencing the economic consequences of it.

The leaders are addressing it and they are providing the direction as well for the ASEAN Economic Ministers to construct an ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework. Currently, it is still under progress and

The leaders also said that they will dedicate the utmost effort to conclude the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership to be signed by this year in November. Hopefully, everything goes well so that it can be signed even though India is not going to be joining. We respect that and there is an open door for India to join in anytime. We see the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership as one of the important moves that ASEAN and the region can have in this situation where there is an economic downturn globally.

The leaders also touched the necessity to increase ASEAN inter-trade by keeping markets open without unnecessary trade restrictions. This has been the focus of our experts saying that the inter-trade of ASEAN is there between 24 to 25 percent. This is a great potential with 650 million people of ASEAN, great potential with a GDP of 3 trillion in 2018. ASEAN is the sixth-largest economy in the world, the potential is there and our relevant ministries have to look at the possibilities to increase inter-trade.

The leaders also discuss the geopolitical situation where there is increasing tension in the region, particularly in the issue of the South China Sea. They again reiterated the importance of moving towards attaining a substantive and effective Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

Some people criticized the delayed negotiation of the COC, but having a virtual meeting to discuss the COC negotiation paragraph by paragraph, sentences by sentences will be extremely difficult to discuss through virtual meetings. There are limitations of what you can do virtually, face to face interaction is much better since you have to go and lobby people.

2.Regarding the issues that were discussed in the ASEAN Summit, how was it different from the Special ASEAN Summit in April?

Some of the issues discussed during the Summit are a reiteration of the issues discussed in the Special ASEAN Summit in April. However, there are also some new points. For example, the previous Special Summit in April, we were discussing the initiative to establish an ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund. This summit was actually the launching of it. Therefore, it is already in place with some countries already provided a significant amount of money.

The ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund was proposed in the previous Special Summit and the ASEAN Plus Three Special Summit because the money is not taking from the ASEAN budget but also from our partner's budget, namely the ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation Fund. There is quite a significant budget provided by China, Japan, and South Korea. The ASEAN leaders suggested to them and in

principle, they agreed.

I think the initiative was launched relatively fast, it only took a few months considering that it has to go through the relevant ministries namely the Finance Ministry for the approval to switch some certain amount of the budget of the ASEAN Plus Three to the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund.

There was also the initiative of establishing an ASEAN Center for Infectious Communicable Diseases Prevention and it is significantly supported by the ASEAN Plus Three particularly Japan. It is still in the process and will be established. Once finalized, it will be like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the US.

There is also the initiative to establish ASEAN regional reserves of medical supplies for public health emergencies. It will be established and it was agreed by the ASEAN leaders.

The leaders also reiterated mutual assistance to each ASEAN member countries nationals. There are migrant workers, both documented and undocumented. Those who are undocumented are more subjective to law enforcement thus during this time of crisis, we ask everybody to please we treat everybody with a touch of humanity. We (Indonesia) know for sure that our ASEAN colleagues are helping our citizens everywhere with Malaysia for example.

Furthermore, ASEAN previously already came out with consideration to formulate ASEAN standard operating procedure (SOP) for public health emergencies and it is still under process.

3.ASEAN has come up with the Outlook on Indo-Pacific, what is the next move for ASEAN on Indo-Pacific and would that be a strong push? How will ASEAN engage China on Indo-Pacific given China seemingly 'cool' response to it?

I still remember when President Joko Widodo proposed the Outlook last year in the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok. Most of the countries supported it, some did not say much but there was no rejection. We are very much aware of the fact that the title of the Outlook is somewhat quite sensitive to some countries, they are not comfortable with the title Indo Pacific.

Regarding this sensitivity, we are explaining to China and other countries as well Russia for example, saying that the term Indo Pacific has been used by Indonesia and ASEAN countries before. I remember when Marty

Natalegawa came up with the idea of the ASEAN Indo Pacific Strategy in 2013 and it was in the document of ASEAN. It was in the Chairman Statement. We told our Chinese and Russian colleagues to not worry about the title but look at the content. The content is nice and they do not have problems with that.

This year actually there should be a big event following up. Retno Marsudi, our Minister of Foreign Affairs has already proposed to ASEAN member states that this year we should follow up on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific. There are 4 areas of cooperation in the Outlook; maritime cooperation, connectivity, UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030, economic and other possible areas of cooperation. We intend to follow up on the connectivity area this year, working together with the World Economic Forum. However, the terms of reference have to be readjusted because of the situation.

Today, ASEAN has the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, China has the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Japan also has quality infrastructure, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue countries where they are talking about connectivity as well. Therefore, there are some commonalities there that we can come together and discuss. We tell our friends that 'talking about connectivity, it is really connecting if it is connected to one another'. The Chinese BRI have their own connectivity, why could not we just connect it to one another, to make it more effective? So we have the commonality there and it is good for business and for the economy. We intend to come up with this kind of vision and put it to concrete results in the form of projects. It comes up with a big idea and then it goes to specific projects in order to benefit the region. The World Economic Forum officials came here several times but suddenly this pandemic occurred. Therefore, it will be postponed until next year.

Other than connectivity, there is also poverty, the first goal of the UN SDGs. Can anybody against the idea where we try to eradicate poverty in the Indo Pacific region? Everybody wants to eradicate poverty. This is the commonalities that we have where we can come up together, not to mention other various aspects that have not been mentioned.

How about maritime cooperation? We are aware there is some sensitivity there. But we can cooperate together on other aspects of maritime cooperation, for example, reducing plastic debris in the ocean. Will any country against it?

So the key issue is that the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific can identify commonalities and synergize the efforts to not only be among ASEAN countries or East

Asia Summit (EAS) participating countries but even globally.

Talking about the economy for another area of cooperation in the Outlook, we have millions of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Southeast Asia. This is the area where we can work together but it will require a longer period of time. Just like in any regional organization, we have so many sectoral bodies, agencies, ministries to deal with. It could not be fast but the aim is there.

Those are what we intend to do regarding the Outlook. We are now continuing to keep in touch between officials here, and Mahendra Siregar, our Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs is taking the lead on this. We are in close contact through virtual meetings.

4. This is a follow-up question regarding what you said earlier about the sensitivity and finding some commonalities that all parties can agree on. But in dealing with major powers, sometimes there are different grounds with each different perspective and interests. Therefore, how will ASEAN balance specifically between the US and China within the Indo Pacific concept, how will ASEAN balance between strategic alignment and economic interests?

We often find differences. What we do with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific is that we present to them our narratives saying that we are aware of the strategic competition between the major powers, namely between the US and China. We are presenting a narrative that is for mutual benefits, win-win situation rather than contestation. For sure, we could not really force them to adhere to ASEAN thinking, views, and narratives. But this is the perspective of ASEAN. We know that in this kind of competition, there might be a tendency to gain a sphere of influence over ASEAN. ASEAN might be pushing here and there, to go to one side and to the other. But we are telling them that we are not going to take sides and we have our own Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

Some countries in ASEAN might lean closer to certain powers and it is based on the reality of interests; economic and/or political interests. Indonesia has our own 'free and active' foreign policy principles and Indonesia can keep all the countries together in ASEAN. We are aware there are differences but we have common interests too for ASEAN which is preserving our region for peace, security, and stability that provides us a conducive environment for development and prosperity. As a result of our region's peace and stability for more than 50 years, you see the level of development that we have achieved.

We are moving from a culture of conflict to a culture of peace and cooperation.

It is not to say that we do not have any problems with one another in ASEAN. We still have border issues for example Indonesia with Malaysia; Malaysia with the Philippines shown in the recent social media post from Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. claiming that the Borneo state of Sabah is not a part of Malaysia; Cambodia and Thai border dispute, and many more.

This is why ASEAN is needed. But ASEAN is not a supranational organization, it is just an inter-governmental organization. We are unlike the European Union (EU) where their member states have rendered certain levels of sovereignty to the European Commission. Every ASEAN member states just keep their own sovereignty, they do not give it to ASEAN. The ASEAN Secretariat is mainly an administrative body rather than behaving like a supranational body like the European Commission.

5. How do you think ASEAN is collectively dealing with the pandemic so far? What do you say to those who said that the ASEAN response to COVID-19 is inadequate?

I think ASEAN responded quite early regarding the pandemic. On February 20th, 2020 we had the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Minister Meeting with on COVID-19 in Vientiane.

ASEAN has concluded nearly 40 meetings taken from the working group experts, health experts, research institutions in East Asia up to senior officials, foreign ministers, health ministers, economic ministers, then the Summit. From the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 to the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on COVID-19.

ASEAN has to cooperate together, they have to share their knowledge, their expertise, they have to mobilize the resources among themselves, help our nationals, because no country is prepared for this. This COVID-19 is not only for poor countries, small countries but also impacting hard on the big countries. They are also struggling to flatten the curve and to minimize the socio-economic impact.

I will share to you what ASEAN has already done in response to the pandemic, such as formulating the ASEAN standard operating procedure for public health emergencies, coordinating cross border public health responses such as contact tracing and outbreak investigation, sharing on best practices to assist one

another with medical supplies, establish the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund, ASEAN regional medical reserve for medical supplies, and ASEAN Center for Communicable Diseases Prevention. We also have instructed the ASEAN economic ministers to come up with a comprehensive plan for recovery. These are more or less what ASEAN has been doing.

In terms of ASEAN Plus Three, we thought that there is also a potential impact on poverty where we might have an emergency crisis in food. Thus, we established the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve. The leaders reiterated their commitment and their readiness to utilize the stock of the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice reserve in order to assist one another in case somebody needs it. But right now nobody is starving so the reserve is still there.

Due to COVID-19, there is also a potential that it will affect the financial stability of the region as we had experienced before in 1997. As a result of the past crisis, we had the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (CMIM) and right now there are 240 billion USD on that cooperation. Furthermore, we have the ASEAN Macro Economic Surveillance (AMRO) to secure macroeconomic and financial stability in the region.

All of these are the mechanisms that ASEAN prepared to address any further challenges or worsening of the situation due to COVID-19.

6. Are you saying that you are satisfied with what ASEAN has been doing so far in handling the pandemic collectively?

I am not saying that I am satisfied, we still need to improve and that is why there are new initiatives there. The room for improvement is there. We had already encountered SARS, the Asian flu, but this time with COVID-19, it is completely unprecedented and different from what we had before. There must be some improvement in our mechanism of cooperation.

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The Chinese BRI have their own connectivity, why could not we just connect it to one another, to make it more effective? ”**

7.COVID-19 has become the number 1 regional and global issue. Do you think it has impacted geopolitical relationships in our region? And if so how?

Yes, there is no doubt. It has somehow impacted geopolitical relationships in our region. Whether it is directly or indirectly affected by the situation, it is happening during this time of crisis.

For the situation in the South China Sea, we see incidents are happening amid the pandemic. For example, the sinking of Vietnamese fishing vessels by the Chinese Coast Guard on the 2nd of April. We expressed our concerns to our Chinese colleagues. In this time of the pandemic, our collective efforts should be directed to addressing the pandemic rather than having another conflict in the South China Sea.

I am not sure whether it is directly or indirectly impacted by COVID-19 but there is the fact that there are increasing tensions recently. At least three aircraft carriers are in the South China Sea. We urged all parties to observe self-restraint and behave accordingly to international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). We have reminded our partners as the high contracting parties to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation that they should contribute to the peace and stability in our region. We hope that increasing mobilization of forces and navies in the region will not create any miscalculation by either side. That is our concern. That is why we urged all parties to have self-restraint and resolve all differences and disputes by peaceful means.

8.Do you think it has led to more cooperation or more disputes? More trust or distrust in this current situation?

As for cooperation, in ASEAN we are seeing more cooperation with our partners as well. But in general, with the closing of countries borders, travel restrictions, surveillance of contact tracing program, also limiting exports of medical supplies, stigmatization that certain country is the source of the virus, xenophobia for Asian people. There is distrust there and it is understandable because it was an effort to contain the spread of the disease.

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9.Has the case for ASEAN centrality become more obvious in this COVID-19 crisis? Are we wrong to assert that the case of ASEAN centrality has not been strongly demonstrated in the present COVID-19 crisis?

I think ASEAN centrality is working and I think it is quite strongly demonstrated.

When talking about ASEAN centrality it is more about our partners. What does it signify? It means that we are setting so many agendas for COVID-19. Even sometimes we are wondering what else do we need to explore because some of the mechanisms are already in place. So ASEAN centrality is working in this aspect.

Another aspect of ASEAN centrality is that we are providing platforms for engagement. ASEAN Plus One (ASEAN-US, ASEAN-China, ASEAN-South Korea, etc) are working as well. We have nearly 40 of this kind of engagement with our partners to discuss COVID-19.

ASEAN centrality also signifies that we are setting the future direction. I think now is the time for ASEAN to do it. Setting the future direction means that we are asking the question, whether this pandemic will change our total relationship among ASEAN and with the rest of the world namely with our partners.

10. There are a lot of voices now that are calling for the reform of the East Asia Summit (EAS), these voices also echo those who criticized the EAS for not being robust enough as a regional forum. What is your response to this and what are the next steps to improve the work of EAS?

The EAS is a forum for dialogue and cooperation on broad strategic, political, and economic issues of common interests and concerns to promote peace stability, and economic prosperity. It is precisely it is. It is a forum for dialogue. This is a forum where you can have all of the leaders of 18 countries. All the big powers are sitting there, the US, India, Japan, Russia, China, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. EAS is an ASEAN leaders-led forum and they are discussing the strategic issues; economic issues, the South China Sea issues, the pandemic. This is a forum where you will have nowhere else. The EU and the UN do not have this kind of forum.

As a result of this kind of discussion, you see the COC (Code of Conduct) is moving. The Chinese finally after so many years agreed in 2018 to have a COC. Last year we have already finalized the first reading. This year is to actually finalize the second reading. We have planned to have meetings scheduled in Brunei on February, in the Philippines on May, in Indonesia on August, in China on

October. All of these meetings are to finalize the second reading and by next year it is supposed to be done.

The strategic aspect of this forum is very valuable. In ASEAN the leaders have to sit there and discuss certain issues with other leaders. Does that mean that this is invaluable? And then there is the functional cooperation, which means that you can translate ideas into specific projects.

What they want EAS to be? Is there any idea that EAS should be moving to somewhere else? Before, someone proposed that it should be like the ASEAN Security Council. It is very nice on the title but how could we do that? If we reach a consensus of a decision, how should we react if a country does not follow? We are not able to force them to adhere because we do not have any enforcement mechanism. ASEAN is very limited in its authority. Its members think that this is the best level that ASEAN could have. There is a limitation with what we can work with the existing mechanism. We are open to any good ideas on how to improve the work of EAS. But right now I think this is the work of EAS that we have.

“ The EAS is precisely it is, a forum for dialogue. This is a forum where you will have nowhere else. The EU and the UN do not have this kind of forum. ”