

The logo features a blue geometric shape resembling a stylized map of the Bay of Bengal or a network of nodes connected by lines.

# Bay of Bengal Conversation 2023

## *Rising Tides*

### **Plenary Session: "ASEAN Centrality: Caught in the Tug-Of-War Between the West and the East"**

Setting the Agenda:

**Haji Haris bin Othman**, Brunei High Commissioner in Bangladesh

Speakers:

**Ario Bimo Utomo**, Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur, Indonesia

**Bec Strating**, Associate Professor, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Australia

**Satoru Nagao**, Fellow (Non-Resident), Hudson Institute, Japan

**Suthikorn Kingkaew**, Advisor, KBU Research Institute, Thailand

**Bec Strating**, Associate Professor, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Australia

**Munshi Faiz Ahmed**, Former Bangladesh Ambassador to China (Moderator)

**About:** ASEAN centrality—the idea that the institution of ASEAN should be the primary force behind any region-wide architecture built in the Asia-Pacific. Though each ASEAN member interprets the principle of ASEAN centrality differently, some view the rapid militarization by China in the South China Sea and the formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) as destabilizing factors to the grouping in the region. So far, ASEAN has a strict principle of non-intervention in its member states' affairs and consequently has played an important role in economically integrating the region. However, the grouping has been constrained with regard to two factors—balancing relations with China and the delivery of global public goods. As tensions between the East and West grow, how should ASEAN nations act in order to acquire a mutually beneficial status quo in the Indo-Pacific?

**Munshi Faiz Ahmed**, “Good afternoon, everybody. As you can see, I'm **Munshi Faiz Ahmed** supposed to be the moderator today. And after such exciting speech from the planning minister and just previous to that president Mr. **Tadic**. We might be a little monotonous in this discussion I hope not but could be so you have to make special efforts to stay awake. You have seen that we are starting at 15:26 that's 3:26 and I understand that we'll have at least an hour and 20 minutes for us. Of that time, I'll try to give the presenters the speakers 10 minutes each which is about 50 minutes and my interjections might take another 10 minutes from time to time and then we'll have 10 minutes for question and answer that's how we plan to have this session. And as you have all seen the present session is “ASEAN centrality and the tag of war between the west and the East”. It's a very exciting Topic in many ways and it can create all kinds of you know tension, because it talks about the tension between the east and west. But this conference I understand is about promoting peace and Bangladesh is about promoting peace, Bangladesh talks about the minister mentioned friendship with all and malice to none. And Bangladesh has been for two decades now been pursuing resolution at the UN on a culture of peace and many countries have been co-sponsors

and it is adopted every year unanimously. But I think a conference like this provides us an opportunity to take it out to everybody and see if we can really move this program of culture of Peace forward so that everybody all countries start pursuing a culture of Peace within their countries and domestically as well as internationally in the international Arena. As in our relationship with our friends and since we say friendship with all and Malice to none so we do not want to see anybody as an enemy. Of course, there are people who are not very friendly at a particular given time our efforts will be to make them friends as well. So, with those words I'd like to pose a few questions for our speakers so that we can try to elicit a few answers on from them on those issues and then leave it to them. One is of course this question of centrality of ASEAN that is the main theme of this thing. And ASEAN there are so 10 countries and each country has its strength and weaknesses but when they come together and they agree on certain things it has an added Force. So, we all look up to ASEAN because they have been able to integrate in an exemplary fashion and in Bangladesh in South Asia, we have not been able to do something of that kind regionally. And so, we look up to them so we want to learn from ASEAN and of course we also want to see ASEAN with its strength do more for promoting peace and cooperation. Then this thing about the confrontation between the west and the East this is all the speakers earlier have talked about this being the most important challenge for us all and how do we navigate in this situation and is there anything that we can do to reduce this tension, can the conflicting parties come together and work together and cooperate so that we can benefit from both sides. That is the next thing that we would like to hear from our friends. Then when we talk about the East and West, we've been hearing about the South China Sea and all that. So the South China Sea dispute is going to come out to some extent in these discussions and my question here is- do we hear the right words all the time you? see if we go back a few years just before up to 2010 the American position

was a little different they were neutral on this issue. They officially particularly Miss Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State officially suggested that America was neutral and wanted the parties to resolve this issue through Mutual discussion. And then there was an effort there is still an effort at ASEAN to create a code of conduct there is a temporary or you know interim code of conduct in place right now. And they are planning to find out a permanent or more detailed code of conduct. So we be hoping to hear from our friends and about that code of conduct and how this is coming off and whether there is anything that ASEAN can do to help bring the various parties together and resolve this issue. And when we talk about the South China Sea disputes, there are territorial disputes between the parties. But nowadays we see a lot of tension created by presence of foreign ships and aircrafts in the areas claimed by certain countries and that creates difficulties. Is it some is it not something that we should be able to try and avoid? then the other thing that we are all talking about these days is when we have this war in Ukraine between Russia and Ukraine some people are talking about the next war that this war is going to end sometimes where does the um military industrial complex find its next for to sell their weapons, make new opens and all that. And some people are suggesting that it's Taiwan that there's going to be a it is the ground is being prepared to go to war over Taiwan if that is so how do we prevent that that is something we need to talk about. Here I think one thing that comes to mind is that it was also mentioned by President Tadic a little earlier that countries everybody who has diplomatic relations with China officially agree and commit to One China policy or that Taiwan and Tibbets are integral parts of China and America has USA has signed three agreements with China on this. But then at the same time America has enacted the Taiwan act and then they're trying to regularly strengthen Taiwan militarily and all and provoking confrontation on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. This is a kind of hypocrisy and how do we get out of this situation? that is something maybe some of our speakers

might address. So with those words may I now invite our first speaker in this session amb High Commissioner Haji Haris bin Othman High Commissioner of Brunei to Bangladesh.”

**Haji Haris bin Othman**, “Honorable **M A Manan MP** minister of planning distinguished guests distinguished moderator esteem speakers participants ladies and gentlemen assalam alaykum peace be upon you all. First and foremost, I'm grateful to be here today to deliver the opening remarks for this significant Bay of Bengal conversation hosted by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) Bangladesh. It is an honor to be part of this esteem Gathering where experts Scholars and leaders converge to discuss the pressing issues facing our region. The theme of this plenary session ASEAN centrality caught in the Tug of war between the west and the East. East is Paramount importance in the current geopolitical landscape ASEAN centrality is fundamental principle of ASEAN foreign policy and has been instrumental in promoting the Region's peace stability. And as we explore how Asian Nations can act to acquire a mutual beneficial status quo in the indo Pacific it is essential to appreciate the historical journey of ASEAN itself. Born during a time of regional instability in 1967 marked by the by uncertainty cold war tensions and intense trust deficit among nations .ASEAN initially faced skepticism regarding its ability to Foster cooperation and unity among diverse countries. However the seeds of trust planted by ASEAN founding fathers in 1967 gradually blossomed ASEAN members states have steadily cultivated trust through dialogue diplomacy and the pursuit of shared goals. The ASEAN journey from a region once marked by a trust deficit has transformed into one grounded in strategic trust. ASEAN centrality characterized by principles enshrine in the ASEAN Declaration Bangkok declaration 1967 is immersed within the organization. ASEAN centrality embodies mutual respect for the independence and sovereignty of member states, non-interference in Internal Affairs, peaceful settlement of disputes the denunciation of the use of force cooperation and cooperation

collaboration, adherence to international law and norms and economic integration. These principles collectively promote peaceful coexistence diplomatic conflict resolution and economic cooperation among member states contributing to Regional peace and stability in Southeast Asia. Over the years ASEAN centrality and ASEAN incremental achievements have been nothing short of remarkable as ASEAN gradually Grew From 5 to 10 member states. We witnessed among others the Treaty of Amity and cooperation Tech in 1976 establish the establishment of the ASEAN free trade area after in 1992. The signing of the ASEAN Charter in 2008 and the crafting of the ASEAN economic Community AEC blueprint in 2015 the ASEAN strategic plan 2016-2025 and the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. And there are many others and over the past 56 years ASEAN has grown from a small Regional organization to a central player in the Indo Pacific region if not a significant Global player. Today ASEAN has a combined population of over 680 million people and a combined GDP of over three trillion US dollars. ASEAN is also the world's sixth largest economy and is expected to become the fourth largest economy by 2050. Ladies and gentlemen ASEAN centrality the notion that ASEAN should be the basis of any Regional architecture in the Asia Pacific. As we understand it now emerge as a natural progression of its Journey while interpretations may vary among member states the core principles endures. These principles however are now encountering formidable challenges the rise of China in the south China sea and the emergence of the collateral security dialogue often referred to as the QUAD, have also introduced new dynamics that have put Asian centrality to the test. Amidst these formidable challenges ASEAN Nations find themselves at a cross roads presented with a spectrum of options. In this regard I believe all the Learned speakers here today and at this juncture will unleash the answers and could build upon ASEAN storic history of trust building cooperation and strategic trust. The ASEAN centrality and all the of Asian milestones and achievements demonstrates the

magnetic appeal of ASEAN and the Region's shed commitment to fostering cooperation and dialogue and are tangible evidence of the dedication of ASEAN Nations to Regional peace and prosperity. Objectively Asian could continue championing inclusivity and dialogue as they engage with significant players in the Indo Pacific by maintaining its commitment to open dialogue economic integration and the pursuit of shared interests, ASEAN could shape a mutual beneficial status quire in the Indo Pacific. In conclusion the concept of Asian centrality present represents more than a mere principle, it is a call to action as ASEAN navigate the intricate tapestry of the Indo Pacific. ASEAN would be capable of doing so with wisdom and adaptability. ASEAN region holds the potential to become a model of cooperation and prosperity exemplifying the principles of dialogue diplomacy and mutual respect. Last but not least I extend my profound gratitude to the Center for governance studies (CGS) for orchestrating this crucial event and allowing me to deliver opening remarks to this significant dialogue. I eagerly anticipate the wisdom and insights from the Learned speakers. I hope they will share collectively to shape the future of ASEAN centrality in the Indo Pacific. Thank you.”

**Munshi Faiz Ahmed**, “thank you Ambassador Harris. I think you have explained to us quite well about Asian centrality and its purpose of promoting peace and cooperation. Now next speaker on our list is Assistant Professor **Ario Bimo Utomo** from the Department of international relations University pangan pangan Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa. So Professor please by the way you can actually speak from where you are or if you like you can speak from the Pod.”

**Ario Bimo Utomo**, “first of all thank you. Distinguished guests and ladies and gentlemen first of all when talking about the ASEAN centrality we know that centrality itself is a highly contested issue in ASEAN. Given that we in ASEAN have the sort of principle called non-interference we

have consensus but yeah this sort of principle has provided us with some ASEAN way of preventing conflicts and how to manage the diversity of our region. But at the same time it also provides some difficulties because the so-called Tug over between the grid powers are occurring within the region. And also we have to pinpoint that ASEAN is naturally positioned as Cornerstone because we have this big economic potential and we have large population. First of all disclaimer yeah I'm not an expert in security studies but rather I would like to pinpoint another pathway another point of view which we can approach the issue of ASEAN centrality which we can focus on that is from the lens of City diplomacy how cities can be an actor how can be they can be actors to facilitate the centrality of ASEAN. And let's return to about the centrality of ASEAN. To me centrality outlines a more important point that is connectivity and resilience. Because at the fair core when we talk about centrality it means it means that we have to prepare our region to be able to stay resilient whatever the challenge is. It's still feels like yesterday two years ago we we were still struggling with the covid-19 and ASEAN was one of the most heartless truck region in the world. In Indonesia myself I'm from Indonesia we have millions of people died as the result of the covid 19. And this is where we took a we where we should took take a lesson that ASEAN should provide some sort of centrality in order to tackle this kind of problem. And moreover why City diplomacy because I regard that international relations particularly is now arriving into a new trend that is we have to divert our attention from state to state Affairs to cities. Why it is? because you know when we talk about international relations we usually have this sort of Mind map mental map that the world is divided into approximately 200 or 193 according to the UN countries. But if we look beneath those puzzles we if we look beneath those hundreds of countries we will find approximately 10 thousands of cities connecting which with each other pursuing their own interest and trying to tackle the problem occurring within their borders. So I think in order to address the



issue of centrality in ASEAN we also need to consider how to approach the centrality the connectivity through the urban approach ladies and gentlemen south east Asia is steadily urbanizing by 2025 the most population will be Urban. Now we are reaching approximately 47%. So 47% of the ASEAN population now live in urban city we have five brand cities. I'm from surabaya the second largest city in Indonesia it's like Chittagong for Bangladesh. And we also have cities like Jakarta we have Bandung and not to mention we also have Singapore one of the largest Hub international Hub in the world we have also Hanoi and Bangkok and so on. And so forth and I also believe that South Asia is no stranger to the concept of City connectivity many big cities are situated there and when centrality can be translated into resilience. Then ASEAN can help its cities and local governments to cope with Pro with modern challenges. I would like to quote the former mayor of New York Michael Bloomberg in his 2013 speech he said that 'when countries talk cities act'. Well we can take lesson here that when local government every day they're being faced with everyday problems. Like, technological advancement, environmental issues, Health resilience and urban planning they face this sort of problem every day. And I think this is where ASEAN can work on because ASEAN itself is not stranger to the concept of city diplomacy. Formerly we already have ASEAN smart cities Network stimulated in 2018 where approximately if I'm not mistaken 26 pilot cities engage in a group to share best practices and to focus on inclusive approach to address issues at the urban level, like sanitation Health Care, climate change and also urban planning. And I think ASEAN in this case can also provide a platform to encourage the cities to cooperate within the framework. Because when we talk about the international relations studies we now tend to see States as too big for small problems. But at the same time it is too small for big problems that's why globalization has provide has bring us to the concept of State transformation where now states are now be transformed from two from three ways. First of all

the states are now being fragmented meaning that the state is not as centralized as used to be because they realize they cannot tackle every problem at once. At the same time it provides as to the concept of decentralization. Meaning that now local governments also need to you know be given more power in order to address what actually they need in order to address the demands of globalization. But at the same time, I also believe that globalization not only pulls upwards but also downwards, meaning that those local governments also is now being pushed to internationalize meaning that they need to connect with other cities not only within the region but also outside the region. And maybe some of you may have asked why City connectivity why City diplomacy when we have this sort of traditional inter international relations space on state diplomacy? well let's go back to the concept of ASEAN centrality we have this principle of non-interference and while it is a problem it offers a fertile ground for us to discuss about City connectivity. First of all because cities benefit from The Gray Zone meaning that they are not necessarily they're not states in the sense of they're not the central government that provide that sorry that has this National interest. But at the same time, they also have the power to execute what they really need. And resilience can also mean that demands more people-to-people engagement. You know cities consist of civil society which are vibrant and actively engaging in deliberation of policymaking. So I think the resilience can also be pushed by providing more platform for more people to people engagement and also I believe that cities for the future international relations will involve more cities to globalize issue. Meaning that what is domestic is now International and now vis-e-vis we cannot separate simply what is domestic and what is international because those two are so interconnected. And I think what cities should prepare that is that first of all cities should be aware of their own brand. I mean they need to be aware of what are their main strengths and and what kind of Partners they are going to seek from the international cooperation for instance. I come

from surabaya and now my city is now focusing on tourism and also focusing as the center of mice in the in the Southeast Asian region. So that's why we are now pushing more cooperation on that sort of themes. And also cities can also provide capacity buildings personnel need to belong as a one Community. Because we already have the concept of ASEAN community and I think ASEAN should leverage on this As Cities now. So I believe that ASEAN centrality ASEAN centrality can be served by the involvement of more cities and ASEAN can encourage more cities to be involved in more networking. Because I believe that in the future cities can serve as the connecting hubs for international networks. Okay I think that's all for me thank you sir.”

**Munshi Faiz Ahmed**, “thank you professor and may I now call upon Dr Bec Strating, Associate Professor, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Australia.”

**Bec Strating**, “thank you so much and thank you to the Center for governance studies, again for inviting me to this excellent dialogue. So I guess I would like to start my comments with a bit of an outside observation. Because I am not from an ASEAN country you might tell from my accent I'm from Australia. And so when I think about ASEAN centrality I come from it I come to it from a slightly different view. So I'd like to separate sort of two interrelated but what I think of as being quite separate Concepts. ASEAN consensus on the one hand so ASEAN working together the ASEAN way principles that have already been mentioned such as non interference. ASEAN consensus over here but ASEAN centrality as a slightly different concept which really talks about ASEAN as an institution and the 10 Southeast Asian countries being able to lead Regional institution building. So when I think about ASEAN centrality the first thing that comes to my head is this idea of ASEAN being at the heart of the regional architecture. So one of the sort of core questions that I think about in terms of ASEAN centrality is really the extent to which that is true and the extent to which ASEAN remains the kind of central fulcrum or the central part of

particularly East Asian Regional architecture but increasingly as we move to this new Regional nomenclature about the indopacific to what extent does ASEAN and the bits and pieces of the institutions and organizations around. ASEAN really remain at the heart of that institutional architecture as our concept of region really expands across these two vast oceans. So in some sense we can say that ASEAN centrality is as much about external Powers as it is about the Southeast Asian Powers. Because this is and it's a remarkable story really about how other countries in the region and Beyond the region have how they use the term ASEAN centrality how when we read documents that are produced by the quad countries. For example Japan, United States, Australia and India, how those documents often talk about ASEAN centrality. It's become a commonplace term over the last 20 years when ASEAN began to really emphasize this concept of ASEAN centrality. So there's a certain Norm diffusion that has gone on here where other countries have adopted this Norm this idea of ASEAN being Central to the regional architecture. But there's a crucial question here about how much these other countries have actually internalized that Norm? how much they have absorbed that Norm of ASEAN centrality or how much they use this term in order to Plate Asian States in order to try to um ways of signaling to Southeast Asian countries that they still matter while they go about building new and different forms of security architecture. So I am as I said before from Australia and Australia is interesting I think in this in the context of this discussion because it is aside from the United States, the only country that is involved in both the quad and in orca. And what these Arrangements really represent are new forms of minilateralism strategic minilateralism. And there is a concern I think within Southeast some quarters of Southeast Asia and um and other parts of the indopacific about whether or not this strategic minilateralism is a threat to ASEAN centrality. Now personally I think that these forms of arrangements can exist side by side but that's only if the countries in the quad and in orca make

very real and substantive measures to ensure that ASEAN centrality is not just lip service but that it is something that it is embedded within this new strategic minilateralism. For the quad for example that really means about making good on the Promises around delivering public goods in and Beyond southeast Asia., my concerns around the lip service I'll give you one example Australia is a country that is seeking to deepen ties with southeast Asia across a range of different areas there are policy initiatives in areas like climate change, Maritime security, trade and investment to try to deepen the relationship with ASEAN as an institution as well as bilaterally within those countries the 10 countries. But where does it invest out of the top 20 countries for Australian foreign direct investment there's only one Southeast Asian country and it's Singapore and it's number nine. Australians are much more likely to invest with the United States and the United Kingdom with New Zealand and with Canada what we might group together as the anglosphere countries. So my view when I think about ASEAN centrality I'm as much concerned about what goes on within as an institution as what I am is what goes on with other countries by buying into the idea that it is Central continues to be a central part of the regional security architecture. And in one area in particular our moderator mentioned it at the start the introduction I mean really these are Big questions of what type of regional order is emerging and what type of great power is China seeking to be and the United States seeking to be. There was a mention around us provoking conference ation in the South China Sea, but we can also see that China has been assertive in the South China Sea as well. If we want to talk about hypocrisy and double standards which you know certainly I'm on board with that but we need to be taking a close look at what both great powers are doing in that sort of contestation. And that makes it very difficult I think for ASEAN where you have Maritime States and Continental States with very different interests trying to come together to solve some of these great dilemmas the great powers are not making that easy with

their own sort of interference. And the code of conduct was also mentioned we know that that is still being drafted and negotiated even that is not designed to resolve conflicts it is designed to manage conflicts. So I'm going to end my comments by saying that um I am optimistic about ASEAN, I see that there is still um a lot of worth in the institution in terms of navigating not just these big sort of grand strategy issues but also the lower hanging fruit in my area of Maritime security. This is about dealing with things like pollution, it's about dealing with things like plastic, it's about dealing with the quotidian, the day-to-day issues of dealing with Maritime crime iuu fishing, issues of blue economy these are the areas I think where ASEAN can and does and still can continue to play a really important role.”

**Munshi Faiz Ahmed**, “thank you Dr **Bec Strating**. I think you made some very Discerning comments about the issue and certain things that we have not been discussing so far about the intentions the motives behind using this term ASEAN centrality, very interesting. So let's get to the next speaker Mr **Satoru Nagao**, Fellow (Non-Resident), Hudson Institute, Japan.”

**Satoru Nagao**, “thank you very much. I'm not the government official so my analysis is personal. So ASEAN centrality has positive and negative aspect. So for Japan Asian centrality has three aspect I think based on our strategy which is indopacific and QUAD. Indopacific and QUAD this concept are introduced when prime minister Shinzo Abe address in the Indian Parliament. So Indian Ocean region is the place to publish this idea. But this idea has three aspect, first one is the both the Pacific side and Indian Ocean Side develop very fast Base that's why this region is developing this region has the influential region has been the influential region so that's why we need a new concept. But second feature is this region is under threat of China because around Japan we can say 1970 suddenly China start to claim spratly Islands as their territory. And now the more than 1,000 times the China's neval ships try to show the activity around it.. So 1,000

times an new this means that 365 days means that every day average is more than three times. So we need the strategy to deal with threat of China. And thirdly Indian Ocean region is very important that's why Japan want to corporate that's why Indo Pacific and QUAD. But view from this strategy what is ASEAN centrality. View from this firstly yes ASEAN is center of the Indo Pacific because of this center of the development in this region. That's the first one positive one but negative one is yes this region could be the arena of the power game, because we can remember what happened in the US Soviet competition during the Cold War. That times Central Europe consisted by the Poland, Czech Slovakia, Hungary this was Arena of the competition. And this region is surrounded by great powers like US and Soviet and British the France. So this ASEAN could be could be because ASEAN has the same feature between the US and China surrounded by Japan, Australia and India that's true. And at the same time to cooperate with India and Australia ASEAN is the joint Point Center of IND the Pacific that's why view from three we can say ASEAN centrality has both positive and negative aspect. So what will happen in this region it depend on the future of the US China competition. When we check the history of the United States which they claimed about 250 years, yes 250 years ago United States is just colony of the British Empire but now only super power in the world. But during this process they compete with many rivals and all of the rival hasn't survived. Including Japan Empire, Germany and Soviet Union. So that's why when we see the current US policy and when we see the difference between Republican and Democrat yeah about the China policy end of the Obama Administration was through the Trump Administration now the Biden Administration there is a consistency. So counter China strategy is there is no difference between the Republican and Democrat. So under current under such kind of situation we can expect that the it will escalate. So currently no country including United States did not does not demand the ASEAN country to choose the side but time will come to choose the side in the

future. And in this case of course that kind of situation could be the chance to relocate Factory in China to the ASEAN country or the other chances we can find but at the same time we should not forget one thing we will get all of the benefit in the competition. So that's why join us thank you.”

**Munshi Faiz Ahmed**, “thank you Mr **Satoru Nagao**. The lighting is rather difficult for me to see things here but anyways. So thank you very much for your very useful comments. Now we have the next speaker Mr **Suthikorn Kingkaew**, Advisor, KBU Research Institute, Thailand. Since you are from the ASEAN countries, so I try to request you to see if you can also add something here about- can ASEAN as a group make greater contribution to promoting peace and cooperation as against confrontation and conflict particularly in respect of the two countries that we've been mentioning the two great countries China and USA? thank you.”

**Suthikorn Kingkaew**, “thank you. Actually I have a slide sorry I have to stand here because I have slide so I can see my slide clearly. But anyway before we start I think I'm quite honored to be invited as speaker on this topic. Last time this is a zedo. I'm not sure not many of you have been through time of zedo, it was times ago like 50 years ago I born six year after it dissolve. So many of you may born after it dissolve. So last time I took sight it was during the Cold War and it failed miserably after US withdrawal from Vietnam and I think the region learn from this lesson and create Asians Association of Southeast Asian nations with focus more on social economic cooperation's instead of Securities. ASEAN was formed to focus largely on social economic cooperation and leaving all political conflict behind, this is the key for the success of ASEAN the conflict the back Gage leaving it to the past. So, we have progress well reaching different socio economic cooperation we create free trade area in 1992 that already mentions by honorable ambassador from Brunei. We became ASEAN communities, we are Becoming ASEAN Community, we create Asian economic community in 2015 we have common market and we are



moving toward free movement of goods and service free movement of labors and as well as investment. So if we consider ASEAN as a country we are fifth largest in the world by GDP by the economic size the third largest in Asia. There are three pillars of ASEAN community that are being formed ASC, AEC and AASCC. ASC is ASEAN political security Community. AEC is ASEAN economic community and AASCC is ASEAN social cultural communities. This is when we are forming ASEAN Community we are start to openly for and formally talking about politics and security as one of the three pillars of ASEAN Community. We did not start from political security issues. But we start from cooperation on economic and social issues this is the right time for ASEANS as is rising tensions between us and China in the regions. So the new challenge for ASEAN is the conflict between US and China. Before I outline about what ASEAN should do in this ongoing tensions I would like to give you overview of how important both US and China to ASEAN. In 2022 China is the largest export Market with 16.4% of ASEAN export going to China followed closely by the US with 14.9% of ASEAN export volume. These two countries together account for one third of ASEAN export they are very important to us. In term of FDI US contribution build 22.5% of invert FDI into ASEAN while China account for 7.7% of FDI into ASEAN. So they are important to us as well. What about what does ASEAN thinks about US and China conflict with those two point in mind we can see how US and China are important to us and we cannot easily choose one or another. What about people in ASEAN what are they thinking about in term of us and China? I borrow some data from ASEAN wide survey conduct by ASEAN study center in Singapore. For most influential political and strategic power in Southeast Asia ASEAN thinks that China is the most influential followed by followed closely by the US. I think this is may be because of the close proximity to ASEAN and it's Status as the largest trading partner of ASEAN. China is the largest trading partner of ASEAN you can see here China 41.5 in 2023

and us is 31.9%. Contradictory to that fact when we asked about the leadership in maintaining rule-based order and upholding international law China is losing to the US. And even in 2022-23 China even lose its leadership in this aspect to Japan and UK. This may be because the rising tension in South China seas and the way Chinese is exerting and projecting their power toward their ASEAN neighbors such as Vietnam and Philippines. So what choice we have ASEAN choices, what choice ASEAN has from this way? luckily only 6% of ASEAN would prefer us to choose between us and China so it's only 6% 18.1% want ASEAN to partner with third party to counter the coming US- China conflict and this is very soothing to know that 30.5% of Asian want to maintain is neutrality and 45.5% want ASEAN to become more resilience and unity to fend off pressure from us and China. Interestingly these two option the last two options which emphasize Asian centrality and neutrality together at for 76%. So we are better be neutral. But if you have to choose actually US won over China but actually it's a small margins this is quite indecisive actually. But when we look deeper into each country voting when we look into each ASEAN member we can see here that four out of 10 members are voting in favor of siding with China while the rest vote for US. This differ will no Unity approach I would like to ask the audience whether it is good or bad for ASEAN. Maybe you can raise your hand if you think it's bad for us this different view if you think it's bad for ASEA raise your hand. Actually I would like to argue that the difference among ASEAN member we observe here is good for ASEAN why did it why it good? is it's good in the sense that nonuniform it create stabilizing equilibrium that preventing ASEAN to move against one major one major power in favor of another major power. Embracing differing view is a backbone for ASEAN centrality and neutrality. So we don't have uniformity but different view no uniformity is good as there are no decisions to make between siding to one another major Powers. The last slide here I would argue that Asian centrality and neutrality is not

only good for ASEAN. You can see here we are in the middle it's not only good for ASEAN but also the US and China as ASEAN is acting as buffer between two major powers. In my concluding remarks I would say both major power benefits from existence of buffer mechanism of ASEAN that can provide foundation for exchange of information and pathway for collaborations in the regions despite the ongoing tension between two major Powers. ASEAN is important in offering a trust platform for Indo Pacific regions to diffuse direct confrontation from the rising tension between us and China. Thank you.”

**Munshi Faiz Ahmed**, “thank you very interesting analysis and as we all know people know better than the governments. So you said if I'm not wrong if I saw it right that the people said that you should stay not away from both side but stay as you are not siding with any side and that is the very big majority over 80% of the people think that's how it should be. So I think the people have spoken and they have spoken the truth it is important for all of us to find ways trying ASEAN is a strong force and the Chinese and the Americans both need ASEAN for whatever interest they have in this region. Therefore ASEAN definitely has a lot of how what is the word I forget but you have a lot of purchase on them. And then ASEAN can at least I feel that ASEAN can exert enough pressure on both sides to encourage them to abandon the path of conflict and confrontation and try to come together more in cooperation and come closer you know in cooperation and solidarity working together. So that they can bring great good to the world and in the process all of us who are not as powerful we can also benefit from their cooperation. If we remember a little bit if we go back a little bit say the 20 years from 1990 to 2010 we saw a period of great cooperation among all countries and almost all country not almost all countries benefited from that cooperation. Some countries benefited a little more or took advantage of it more than the others but that always happens. But we should not stop that cooperation we should continue that cooperation and try to

make the best of it for all of us. That is how we all make progress, but if we are trying to contain somebody to stop somebody we create situations where we go to war or conflicts and then we actually make the world poorer. That's what we are doing right now so I think we should take our lessons and try to encourage cooperation and friendship among countries big and small. So now let's take a few questions we'll have three questions and yes please come to the mic and speak yes.”

**Question 1,** “I have two questions different question. One- how does the panel look at a comparative view of ASEAN having progressed so much and Regional organization called SAARC of which Bangladesh is a member or almost the core thinker and in which capital of Bangladesh we are sitting and discussing the subject today? how come SAARC is in a very poor state of progress and ASEAN is in a very good state of progress if they could make any comment as an outsider and part two is centrality of ASEAN was the subject matter of discussion today there could be another phrase marginality of ASEAN one of the marginalized country the Western most country Myanmar, is our border and we are suffering from rohingya crisis for last six years. How does ASEAN countries or leaders or people look at the subject? thank you.”

**Question 2,** “thank you chairman for giving me in the floor let me start by saying that I just attended the Pacific round at Kuala Lumpur last month. And the subject was ASEAN centrality the three day long session and I got the impression that ASEAN is in problem it might get divided there's impression I got from that round table. There were about 400 delegates from all over. My question is- how do you see the Integrity of ASEAN in future getting divided between China and especially Dr Strating from Australia because of the Quad Ocas and many others you talked about. And ASEAN security Community is not coming forthcoming, it is basically an economic community. So how do you measure the centrality of this ASEAN? is it getting fragmented so to say because of the COC is not working out South China is disturbing the scenario, Japan is coming

in and the NATO might come in and I say again quad, oas and ASEAN is doesn't have a hard power as such?

**Question 3,** “my question is well partly I accept Australia doctors comment about the centrality of the ASEAN. I also don't agree that they are fully centrality I mean playing in this role and also the neutrality. I also don't think they are fully neutral because the world largest catastrophe humanitarian catastrophe is rohingya Crisis. And Bangladesh itself is been dealing with 10 million sorry 1 million okay 1 million rohingya in Bangladesh. But how come ASEAN is keeping quiet and they are not coming forward to help and show the solidarity with Bangladesh? we don't mean money, we mean the solidarity to solve the problem. Because this is a big problems if we don't have any peace in the region how we can have the trade I mean the prosperity in business and other things.”

**Suthikorn Kingkaew,** “I can answer the first questions from my point of view I think at the start of ASEAN or any corporations I'm sure there's a huge different large historical back age when we decide to come together we have two choice we can just keep focusing on the difference and the historical back age and cannot move forward or we can move forward and create transforming that's a statement by Late prime minister of Thailand. Who a seasonal Diplomat he said that is it better to transforming the battle crowd into a Marketplace. So if we do that properly forget the historical back age and create mutual benefits to trade to investment to social economic corporations. Then when we think about the corporation later when we think about the conflict later we feel like it's very minimal compared to the benefit we have from the corporations. Okay thank you”

**Bec Strating,** “thank you for your question I have to say I'm a little bit skeptical about when other countries use ASEAN centrality and neutrality as well. And I think in terms of the whether or not

OCAS and quad is marginalizing other Regional institutions again they don't necessarily have to be but what they symbolize is a sense in which some countries are no longer investing as much in multilateralism. Multilateralism offers you know an ad hoc approach to issues. It offers you know they're not formalized or institutionalized kind of processes they can be issue based if they want them to be. So the countries including Australia who have turned towards these other sorts of Arrangements clearly see that there is a gap and that multilateralism existing for forms of multilateralism is not filling that Gap that has emerged as a new order emerges. So and taking your point about the Rohingya I mean this is one particular issue that is very has been very significant for ASEAN and one that might actually prevent from ever becoming a full member of ASEAN so there are a range of issues I think that confront ASEAN centrality and that is an obvious one. Thank you."

**Munshi Faiz Ahmed**, "I think we've got answers to all the questions directly or indirectly and I'm being told by the organizers that we have run out of time. So the last thing I want to do is thank all the participants and thank everybody who's present here to who have given their kind hearing to us. Thank you everybody and we hope that we have all learned something from this session thank you very much."