

Speaking up for Asean in the battle of narratives

Whether it is the Viet occupation of Cambodia or the US-China contest, powerful narratives can shape the course of human history

Kishore Mahbubani

As I am turning 75 this year, I have decided that the time has finally come to write my memoirs. A word of advice to all: Keep a diary! Writing a memoir has been difficult because I have forgotten many stories from my life, even ones that ought to be unforgettable.

Here's one example. My oldest friend, Jeffery Sng, whom I have known for almost 70 years, vividly recalls the time when my alcoholic dad got into a bruising battle using broken beer bottles at the coffee shop across from our house and I had to escort him home, blood-stained shirt and all. Shockingly, I have absolutely no memory of this dramatic incident. Stories aren't just important for human interest. Stories, or narratives, drive the course of human history. This is especially true of geopolitical contests.

The side that creates the more compelling narrative has a better chance of winning support. This is why it is often said that truth is the first casualty in war.

Hence, I hope to record in my memoir stories of how, throughout my long career, geopolitical battles were fought with contrasting narratives.

In the 1980s, Singapore was deeply involved in a global campaign to persuade Vietnam to withdraw from its occupation of Cambodia, since its occupation

was in violation of international law. But Vietnam had an alternative narrative: It had sent its military into Cambodia to "liberate" the Cambodian people from the murderous and genocidal rule of Pol Pot. So which narrative would win?

I made a small contribution to this battle of narratives when I managed to persuade Foreign Affairs, then (as now) a leading journal of international affairs, to publish an article explaining why the Asean opposition to the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia was both legitimate and worthy of support by the international community. Since the creation of the United Nations Charter in 1945, the invasion and occupation of other countries had become clearly illegal. Most member states of the UN are also small states. Hence, they had a vested interest in ensuring that the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia didn't succeed and become a precedent for other states.

I felt incredibly overwhelmed walking into the office of the legendary editor of Foreign Affairs, Mr Bill Bundy, in 1983. He was tall and patrician. Indeed, the Bundy family was regarded as almost being aristocratic in New York circles. He could have easily been arrogant and condescending. Instead, he was remarkably kind and generous in spirit. Crucially, he agreed to publish the article.

In the battle of narratives,



Asean countries know the geopolitical contest between the United States and China is not over ideology. It is over power, says the writer. And, in this contest for power, they don't want to take sides. ST FILE PHOTO

getting an article published in Foreign Affairs made a huge difference. It was read in most key capitals. I recall the remarkably warm and generous letter of appreciation I received from the then Foreign Minister of Thailand, Air Chief Marshal Siddhi Savetsila.

The battle of narratives will become especially acute over the next 10 years as there's no doubt that the biggest geopolitical contest of all time – the US-China geopolitical contest – will become more acute during this period. As I document in my book *Has China Won?*, the US believes that it has about 10 years to stop China from becoming No. 1. Hence, measures like the trade war and the US Chips Act will emerge with great frequency. And balloons will be shot down.

Yet, even though this is clearly a battle for primacy, the US will not gain support if its narrative is that it is fighting to retain its primacy. Neither more thoughtful

Americans nor the international community will support such a cause.

Hence, the Biden administration is actively pushing the narrative that this is a global battle between democracy and autocracy. It released a National Strategy Document on Oct 12, 2022, which stated that "autocrats are working overtime to undermine democracy and export a model of governance marked by repression at home and coercion abroad... Democracies and autocracies are engaged in a contest to show which system of governance can best deliver for their people and the world."

To some extent, this narrative is working. Some European leaders, like Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, share this narrative that this is a global contest between democracy and autocracy. Mr Stoltenberg has said: "What we see now is that democracy and freedom is under pressure and we see autocracy

and tyranny is actually pushing and trying to get more control also of other countries, as we see for instance in Ukraine."

The Asean countries are clearly not comfortable with this "democracy versus autocracy" narrative. Where would Singapore stand, for example, in such a contest? We are a democracy. Our Government is in power because Singapore citizens voted it into power. Despite this, Singapore wasn't invited to the Summit for Democracy organised by the US in December 2021.

In my memoirs, I will describe the withering, if not scornful, looks I got from New York liberals in the 1980s and 90s when I defended Singapore's political system. Many Western media reporters still refuse to describe Singapore as a democracy. Instead, they use terms such as "illiberal democracy", "enlightened dictatorship" or "authoritarian regime". This is a battle of narratives that we have

yet to win.

The other Asean countries are even more uncomfortable with this "democracy versus autocracy" narrative. Relations between Vietnam and the US have never been closer. Yet, Vietnam would not be included in the "democracy" camp.

At the same time, the Asean countries know the geopolitical contest between the US and China is not over ideology. It is over power. And, in this contest for power, they don't want to take sides. They want to remain good friends with both the US and China. Clearly, this Asean position is not very popular in Washington circles, as the US wants Asean to work with it against China.

This is why I was delighted when the current editor of Foreign Affairs, Mr Daniel Kurtz-Phelan, agreed to publish my article in its March/April 2023 issue on how Asean survives – and thrives – amid great-power competition. By sharing Asean's narrative in Foreign Affairs once again, 40 years after my Kampuchea article was published, I hope to make a small contribution in protecting Asean (and Singapore) from having to take sides in the US-China contest.

The article advocates three rules for a more pragmatic approach from Washington towards Asean and the Global South: avoid forcing a choice between the US and China; take a neutral position on other countries' political systems; and cooperate with all on global challenges.

Having listened recently to leaders from the Global South who spoke on panels with me, I know that many of them will be sympathetic to the arguments.

At the end of the day, most countries in the world, especially in the Global South, want to focus on their domestic challenges and their economic growth and development. This is why they have stepped up their ties with both the US and China. Very few in the Global South have explicitly taken sides. They would therefore welcome a narrative that explains and clarifies their stand.

And for my part, as I continue to work on my memoirs, I would truly welcome more stories from the past from friends whose memories are better than mine.

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