

Regional Outlook Forum 2021

Keynote Address: The Geopolitical Panorama Facing Southeast Asia

The Regional Outlook Forum 2021 began with a keynote address delivered by Professor Wang Gungwu (University Professor, National University of Singapore) which laid out the broad salient trends in Southeast Asia and challenges facing the region.

Professor Wang began his speech that that geopolitics within the region remains dynamic, and the chronological sequence of events reveals a geopolitical shift within Southeast Asia. In recent decades, there have been momentous events which, in his opinion, have had immense consequences for the region. These include: the end of Cold War; the failed United States intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq; the 2008 Global Financial Crisis; and the rise of China.

Professor Wang commented that the end of Cold War ushered in widespread optimism that the United States, as the world's sole remaining superpower, would leverage upon its hegemonic position to pursue global peace and security. Professor Wang noted that Southeast Asia came under a single entity for the first time during the Post-Cold War era, as the Association of Southeast Asian states (ASEAN) was enlarged to include countries previously aligned with the communist bloc. Since the late 1990s, ASEAN has transformed and has incorporated all ten states within the region. The establishment of a single entity accorded Southeast Asia with substantial autonomy, which was an unprecedented development in the history of the region.

Professor Wang opined that the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq became the barometer to gauge if United States was a competent superpower to deliver global peace and security. However, as the United States became mired in protracted wars in the Middle East, it gradually lost its credibility as a superpower. Simultaneously, China rose to become a major economic powerhouse, whilst increasing its engagement with Southeast Asia. Unlike imperial China, which was primarily concerned about its northern and western borders, Professor Wang commented that Southeast Asia has gained much attention among Chinese policy makers in recent decades. China has since expanded its presence in the region through its maritime network and trade made possible through a globalised neoliberal economy. Similarly, India was also expanding its presence into Southeast Asia during the same period, albeit to a lesser extent than China.

The rise of China has provided Southeast Asia an alternative capitalist model – premised upon state authoritarianism – against the conventional neoliberal capitalism propagated by the United States. Despite widespread scepticism during the early 2000s, Professor Wang opined that the Chinese capitalist model has proven to be a credible challenger and alternative to neoliberal capitalism, given that the former has generated tremendous economic growth and stability for China. Southeast Asian states are presently facing with two competing economic models, as each country seeks to find an optimal balance between both systems for their domestic economy.

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) exposed the fragility of neoliberal global economy, while exacerbating domestic economic inequalities within the developed Western states. Professor Wang opined that developed states have witnessed serious social conflicts since the GFC and have, as a result, turned increasingly inwards. He highlighted that the developed states have lost some of their past economic dynamism, while the driver of economic growth

has shifted from the West Atlantic to Asia. Southeast Asia, apart from reaping economic benefits, also stands to gain centrality as countries in the region place more attention on their Asian counterparts instead of the former Western-centric approach. However, Professor Wang cautioned that the region is not immune to populist forces which have led to severe political polarisation in the liberal democracies of developed states.