

Preface

Keynote Speech by The Right Honorable Joe Clark

When I served as Minister of External Affairs, I was privileged to participate in six Post-Ministerial Conferences of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). I also traveled to Southeast Asia on numerous other occasions. This is one reason why I was pleased to join the conversation on May 30, 2017, on Canada's future relationship with Southeast Asia and ASEAN. To divine the future, we sometimes have to look at the past. In the extraordinary decades since the end of the Second World War, our world has become accustomed to connection – multilateralism, trade, treaties, travel. In that period, Canada played an outsized role, in part because we chose to mobilise and apply our capacity to draw differences together. Canada could have been just another trading nation, just another mid-size economy, just a small military power. Yet, we chose to build a community, within and among nations.

The contrasting threat and trend today is of things coming apart: an age of walls and Brexits, of artificial islands, ISIS and insularity. Most significantly, there is a growing sense that our vaunted institutions of connection – multilateralism, market forces, the unifying power of hope, or of optimism – have lost their edge, and appear to be failing and in crisis. Nostalgia is no answer to those challenges of our time; indeed, nostalgia merely helps blind our eye. Instead, we need to remember how those post-war instruments of connection came into existence. They were themselves built gradually, opportunity by opportunity, over time, and by many different actors sharing dissimilar agendas. Citizens and nations recognized the dangers of the then-status quo and sought new ways to connect interests that were, or could become, common or acceptable to us all.

In my view, that is the story of the twentieth century. In its time, that is also how ASEAN began: step-by-step, with relatively weak states connecting to gain strength, build cooperation, and ultimately influence. Historically, that is the way Canada began too, first as a nation out of colonies, and later as a “middle power” larger than its size. How do nations – Canada, the members of ASEAN, individually and together – reverse this disheartening trend of disconnection?

One response to disconnection is to forge new and deep connections. In viable institutions which still can still be effective, and can renew themselves, we must work creatively at reforming the multilateral, market and related institutions which transformed the twentieth century. But we must also look beyond the past or the familiar to existing and potential connections that have been under-developed so far, but can materially shape the future. For me, the Canada-ASEAN connection is an obvious case in point.

A related response to “what can we do?” could prove to be more challenging, both for private actors and for public policy practitioners. But it is a challenge which we – together – are uniquely equipped to meet. That is to build reliable partnerships across belief systems

– religious, cultural, historic – which often inspire suspicions, and are sometimes actually hostile. That has never been easy and it may be that, today, to do so is more difficult than in times past. But it is a challenge which we – together – are uniquely equipped to meet; we have done it before, overcoming profound suspicions and doubts. We should not assume that reconciliation, and working arrangements, are suddenly impossible. Fatalism, after all, is only one step away from nihilism.

To revert to the sophisticated language of “us” and “them”, there are potential partnerships that do not require any of us to change who we are, but rather to accept the other. We are talking about partnerships, not conversions. Trade, technology, frank and frequent talk are all essential tools to connect, but each is too narrow on its own. The challenge is not to make a deal – it is to apply, in threatening times, a will to reconnect, and a practice of determined cooperation. A quarter century ago, multilateral and regional initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region were relatively rare outside of ASEAN. Today, trade and other agreements, and multilateral cooperation, have been catalysts of unparalleled economic growth and integration in the Asia-Pacific region. But they are approached cautiously, even in ASEAN, in this age of inwardness. The road away from that dangerous trend must be led by nations and citizens with experience of the benefits of respect and cooperation. The ASEAN idea. The Canada idea. The respectful relations among us.

Canadians have to look at ASEAN beyond the looming and beguiling shadows of China, India and Japan. And ASEAN has to look beyond the caricature of Canada as a mere proxy of the United States. Canada is, of course and proudly, a close ally to the United States. But not being the United States has also been a critical asset in establishing our own worth and reputation. That is what enabled Canada to be the developed country which earned trust and practiced partnership with the developing world, including as an active partner of ASEAN. It also enabled Canada to be the reasonable consensus-builder which does not need to be at the head of the table to influence decisions.

What has set us apart has been our earned reputation as a respectful partner – and that could well be a more important asset in this contentious world than it was in the past. There are cynical definitions of both politics and diplomacy. Let me put an activist tinge to an old phrase: politics is the art of making things possible. Diplomacy is about going abroad to tell enough truth about your country to find common interests and build on them. We have not been consistent enough in identifying the common interests of Canada and ASEAN, and that is the opportunity which awaits us now. This volume, which I am proud to introduce, is merely one out of a myriad of opportunities.

The Right Honorable Joe Clark
Former Prime Minister of Canada