

## Forging An East-Asian Community: Good For Asia, Good For America



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**D**r. Surin Pitsuwan hails from Thailand, but his American roots spread from coast to coast.

Pitsuwan attended high school in Minnesota as an exchange student, earned his bachelor's degree in political science at Claremont Men's College in Claremont and his master's degree and doctorate from Harvard.

So Southern California was familiar ground for Pitsuwan as he met recently with local political figures, talking about the efforts of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to forge an economic

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**Dr. Surin Pitsuwan**  
**Secretary General**  
**Association of**  
**Southeast Asian Nations**

and political community among the nations of that region of the globe. ASEAN's core members include Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

ASEAN has made international news for its recent announcement that it will create a \$120 billion foreign currency reserve pool by the end of the year, accessible by its member nations for the purpose of stabilizing their currencies.

The fund is intended, in part, to demonstrate to outside investors the region's commitment to economic stabilization, says Pitsuwan, ASEAN's secretary general through December 2012.

But the fund's establishment is also the latest step in a series of cooperative actions among nations in East Asia that will increase the region's impact on the global community by making ASEAN's sphere of influence an

important, integrated economic player on the world stage.

“East Asia is a rising market, with rising purchasing power and a rising middle class,” Pitsuwan said in an interview aboard a luxurious yacht prior to a harbor cruise with local political figures.

“We are creating a more cohesive, more integrated community of nations in Southeast Asia to prepare for competition – competition from the rest of the world.”

The economic crisis that hit Asian nations in the late 1990s formed the basis for the stabilization fund that will see Japan, China and South Korea joining the 10 core countries of ASEAN in a web of financial agreements to support each nation’s currency, Pitsuwan says.

“In 1997, the world stood aside and said, ‘You grew, you accumulated wealth, you failed, you take care of yourself,’” Pitsuwan says. “That gave us a wake-up call. That gave us a new sense of urgency that we had to build up our own community.”

There was international intervention during that crisis. The International Monetary Fund arranged for \$100 billion in loans to Thailand, South Korea and Indonesia, whose currencies collapsed. But the loans came at a steep price – the countries were forced to cut spending and sell off government assets and companies. East Asian nations, stung by the harsh terms of the financial bailout, began creating a network designed to help each other through future times of crisis, Pitsuwan says.

“But the way globalization was going, to keep these agreements bilateral was not enough. We said, ‘Let’s multilateralize it. Let’s open it up to Japan, Korea, China,’” Pitsuwan says.

The idea is to reassure investors who have sunk money into the region. Foreign investment has made the region a significant competitor in the manufacturing, education, human resources and technology sectors, and has contributed to the growth of the middle-class and professional class in those countries, Pitsuwan says.

“When there is stability, when there is security and confidence, when we know that we have our own resources to help ourselves, that makes our

engagement with the rest of the world even more effective,” Pitsuwan says.

“That will give the rest of the world more confidence that these countries will help each other. They’re not going to lose out on their investments there. When they are more integrated, they will make sure we live by the rules – that we contribute to the landscape of economic cooperation.”

That cooperation among the nations of East Asia is what ASEAN and Pitsuwan aim to foster and improve. Starting by ratifying the ASEAN charter in 2007, the group is facilitating trade agreements among member countries, reaching out to nations on the edge of its sphere of influence and honing a unified voice with which to speak to the rest of the global community. With its affiliated nations in the region – a group known as ASEAN+6 – the association represents 3.2 billion people. That represents a potent political and economic force.

ASEAN provides a mechanism for countries that have differences to come together on the issues they can agree on, Pitsuwan says.

“We can make China very comfortable with Japan in our forum,” he says. “We can make Japan and Korea comfortable. We can make India and China more comfortable with each other through this process. We create a network of cooperation among the nations in East Asia that is emerging as a community. It is difficult for big countries to come together. We make it easier for them.”

As the region’s economies grow, it is in the United States’ interest to remain closely engaged on a number of fronts, Pitsuwan says.

“America had better remain engaged. Through the Bush years, there were so many crises around the world, the Middle East, Southeast Asia was not critical enough to attract attention,” Pitsuwan says. “Because of that, there was a sense of disengagement, an absence from the scene, from the head table. Now Mr. Obama has indicated a willingness to talk, to engage, with us to explore common interests.

“The role of America is extremely critical in East Asia. I think that political and security engagement is still very, very important, and that will serve as a

backdrop for economic cooperation and advance mutual economic interests. We hope that America will not disengage. There will be returns – economic, stability, security.”

The world is becoming a global village, he says, where nations must collaborate on common issues.

“No one country can solve any problem, no matter how big, no matter how huge, how powerful the country is. No one region can do that,” Pitsuwan says. “The world has become integrated, smaller. It is requiring cooperation more than before. Precisely because of integration, we are vulnerable to each other’s problems. There is a downside to integration.”

And the East Asian countries are committed to playing their part on the global stage, he adds.

“We are duty-bound because we have accumulated so much, we have benefited so much,” Pitsuwan says. “It is about time we contributed back. And what’s the best way to contribute back? By solving our own problems – or [trying] to set up mechanisms that help us help ourselves without having to rely entirely on the world institutions again.

“I have always said that the measure of our success is not how much we accumulate; the measure of our success is how much we can contribute to the search for the solutions to some of these intractable problems – whether it’s economic, finance, tourism, drugs, the climate agenda, global governance. These are the areas where these Asian countries must contribute.”

Pitsuwan had a personal reason for visiting Southern California. He was the commencement speaker at Claremont McKenna Colleges, and the school awarded him an honorary law degree. It has been 37 years since he graduated from there, and the world has changed. For Pitsuwan, a lifetime statesman, preparing East Asia for the new global community has become his mission.

“There is no foreign frontier. There is a global frontier for all of us,” he says. “If we don’t change our mindsets, our attitudes, and adopt new strategies to deal with these common challenges, we will be at the mercy of those challenges for those people who advance those challenges.” ■