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Don: Competitive US-China ties a boon to region

By Kamarul Yunus

bt@nstp.com.my

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KUALA LUMPUR: The current collaborative but competitive relationship between the US, the world's greatest power and China, the world's emerging power, provides abundant opportunities for Asean, says a dean at National University of Singapore.

Professor Kishore Mahbubani of Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy said both powerhouses are currently courting the 500-million strong Asean, due to its geographical location in Asia and being right in the centre of the competition.

He said both Washington and Beijing are working hard either to retain or expand their influence in the region.

Sometimes, strained relations between China and the US provide the sweetest moment for Asean because the region is "entering sweet spots in terms of economic opportunities, geopolitics and cultural", he said.

A manufacturer, who is looking for markets would not be seeking a fast-growing one in the Europe or the US, but they would go to Asia, especially Asean.

"As of today, the number of people living in the middle-class standards in Asia is about 500 million. By 2020, the middle-class population will grow to 1.75 billion. This is the moment for Asean to take advantage of," he said, adding that geopolitics sweet spot is also helping the economic sweet spot.

He said the competition tension between the US and China has been happening for quite a long time, adding that the best "geopolitical prize" for the world's two powerhouses would be Asean.

"One of the reasons why China has proposed for a free-trade agreement with Asean is because of the geopolitical reason," he said in his keynote address at the CIMB Asean Conference 2012 here yesterday.

Culturally, Mahbubani said Asean provides the best laboratory to demonstrate that different civilisations can get along with each other.

"Once became the role model, everybody wonders how the multiracial (groups) and civilisations in Asean can get along well. So this is another sweet spot for Asean. But unfortunately, not many in Asean are aware of these opportunities."

He stressed that Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's democracy leader and Nobel Peace laureate, should visit Asean countries rather than going to Europe to seek hope for Myanmar.

"She should be aware that Europe represents the past, the US represents the present and Asean represents the future," he said.

Mahbubani also reminded Asean not to be complacent with its achievement, but must stay focus on the long-term plans.

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