

# SOCIOCULTURAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES IN EMERGING ASIA PACIFIC COMMUNITY

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The idea of an Asia Pacific Community was launched rhetorically last year, when the United States President Bill Clinton called for a "new Pacific Community" during his visits to Seoul and Tokyo in July, and again during the first summit of APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) forum.

He announced in Seattle that the United States was placing its prestige behind the endeavor to make nascent Asia Pacific Community a practical reality, creating regional processes that

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\* Professor, Chung Ang University. This Paper was presented to the APEC JOURNALIST SEMINAR: "The Role of the Newsmedia in Shaping The Future of APEC," November 1-2, 1994, Press Center, Seoul.

would form another layer of relations among the countries of the Pacific Rim. Leaders of NAFTA, East Asia, and Australasia generally endorsed their vision in Seattle, although they remain divided on the speed of integration and goals to achieve.

Today we are witnessing that the prediction by the former U.S. Secretary of State John Hay - proponent of the Open Door Policy at the turn of the century - that the Pacific would become "the ocean of the future" come true. The Asia Pacific region accounts for a quarter of the world's population, two fifths of its surface, more than a third of its economic activity. The region is the fastest growing economies of the world. Altogether, the 17 APEC members have more than 2 billion people, engage in 40% of all international trade and account for half the total world production of goods and services. The World Bank forecasts that by the year 2000, a half of gross world product and trade will be contributed by Asia (*Time*, 22/11/1993, p.18; *The Economist*, 30/10/1993, p.5)

APEC member countries are all proponents of free trade, and currently considering a timetable to realize an ambitious vision of free trade in the region, which will boost economic dynamism to an unprecedented degree by removing tariff and non-tariff barriers. This issue will become the major agenda again at the forthcoming second APEC Summit Meeting in Bogor, Indonesia.

Attempts of Asian States for closer cooperation were many in the past. Starting with the Asian Relations Conference in 1947 at New Delhi, the endeavor has gone through the Colombo Conference in April, 1954, the Colombo Plan consultative

committee in May, 1955, SEATO (South East Asian Treaty Organization), ASPAC (Asia Pacific Council), ASA (Association of Southeast Asia), Maphilindo (Malay Confederation), ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) with its adjunct meetings - ASEAN-PMC and ARF (Asean Regional Forum).

We cannot neglect the efforts of United Nations in bridging the differences among the Asia Pacific countries, namely ECAFE and its successor ESCAP until today. In private sector PBECC (Pacific Basin Economic Council) ever since its establishment in 1967 has been active in fostering an favorable environment conducive to closer cooperation among Asia Pacific nations.

However PECC (Pacific Economic Cooperation Council) established in 1980, was the first building block in the architecture of regional economic policy consultation encompassing East Asia, Australasia and North America. PECC - with its informal, tripartite structure, which includes participation at the government, industry and academic level - carried forward the process of fostering consultation in regional cooperation through its trade forums and task forces. PECC's semi-official processes laid the ground work for the next, probably ultimate step in the development of Pacific Rim Cooperation - the evolution of APEC group.

APEC was formed at ministerial level in 1989, and rapidly established itself as the main regional forum for discussion of trade liberalization and expansion. APEC has fostered consistency between regional economic policy objectives and multilateral

international economic policy goals - and sought to strengthen the GATT (WTO from next year) based multilateral trading system.

On the other hand, Asia Pacific Community is emerging naturally because, in the region, there is a strong need to cooperate; regional countries have been unable to solve their problems internally and it is apparent to them that to compete against each other brings more losses than gain. For this first pre-requisite of intergration, statistics of inter-Asia Pacific trade, transportation, communication, and tourism proves itself the degree of inter-dependency of the member countries. No wonder Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, Senior Minister of Singapore, told the American Congress that "The alternative to free trade is not just poverty, it is war" (*The Economist*, 30/10/1993).

In Political Science, the formation of a 'community of state' is defined as a high and self-sustaining level of diplomatic, economic, social and cultural exchange between its members. The states are engaged in a continuous process of sensitive adjustment to each other's actions, supported usually by socio-political behavior and attitudes of their populations.

Therefore, this second pre-requisite of community building is mutual understanding and confidence among societies "which lead to a 'sense of community' or 'community of sentiments' operate initially at the elite levels, and later, imbibed by the masses" (Solidum, 1974: 202).

In the following pages, I would like to focus on several

socio-cultural and political issues related to this 'sense of community' which are the most essential and instrumental in building a true and viable Asia Pacific Community.

## II. GEOGRAPHY

The Asia Pacific region is characterized by its diversity than unity in geography, history, language, culture, religion, political system and economic development. However, if we look into the region more closely, there are common themes and changes that give impetus to region's countries to rely upon these commonalities than their differences.

The region consisted of two economic superpowers -the United States and Japan - followed by Newly Industrialized economies - Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, which has given opportunities to the next generation of NIES - Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia. China will catch up soon and 'certainly become a great economic power for the rest of the world to reckon with in the first half of the 21st Century.

The first argument against the idea of Asia Pacific unity is the geography of the region. In such a vast expanse of land and sea interconnection or community building was thought impossible until modern times. Therefore, traditionally many scholars thought that the Asia Pacific had been and would be divided. However, as a result of sciences and technologies many of the divisive elements no longer function as a hindrance to unity.

Expansion in trade of goods, services, technologies; increasing volume of investment and foreign exchanges; growing number of visitors and tourists; rapid growth of mutual communication, transportation, and air traffic are all the symptoms of vibrant economic growth of the Asia Pacific region which force the thinning of national boundaries between regional countries. For example, Asia Pacific people travelling within the region has increased from just 11 million in 1980 to about 27 million in 1990 (Dobbs- Higginson, 1994: 7).

Historically, especially during the past three centuries, poverty, economic opportunites, religious differences, war and political turmoils have caused Asian people to immigrate from country to country and take part in a slow cultural mixing and sharing. However, from now on they will begin to mix more actively and freely in their pursuit of business opportunities and natural desire to explore.

### III. RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

The diversity of religious belief is another argument insisted against regional unity. However, religions of Asia have many positive factors in forming a viable society. The major faiths of Asia tended to influence the development of highly organized societies, solidifying ties within groups and different groups together. And primacy of family has been encouraged by most of religions. In Chinese character the word 'country' is made of 'nation' and 'family'. Although the Korean and the Japanese have difficulties with each other from time to time, their

family-based societies have a similarity in structure, which enables them to find common ground from which they can express their positions (Dobbs-Higginson, 1994).

Importance of family and group in East Asian minds is closely linked to values such as thrift, strong work ethics, discipline, cooperation and respect for authority. It is no surprise that in the recent *World Competitiveness Report* by a Swiss research institute five Asian countries - Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan - ranked among world's top ten in getting new products to market quickly.

Asian religion and culture have also led governments to develop policy by consensus rather than the principle of majority rule of Western tradition. Tolerance is an important trait shared by all the Asian beliefs. The sub-region of Australasia is not entirely at odds with the rest of the region. China, Korea, Japan and even Indonesia have substantial, strong Christian communities.

Asian religions left people of Asia Pacific better prepared for a new era of active interaction among themselves. And one of the most important religious legacies is the concept of death. Because of Asian belief in reincarnation, taking one's own life to accept responsibility for his actions or the interest of the group has had an honourable tradition in Asia. This belief freed them to act. It has allowed them to be willing to make personal sacrifices and to take a long term view.

Asian people have come through painful history at least during

the past century. Most of Asia had to bow before the West's gunboat diplomacy causing tremendous pain in a region where 'face' is one of the important concept of society. Many of them also have been forced to embrace and understand alien cultures under the colonial rule.

Wars and political turmoils are not unique to Asia, but in the region they have been most brutal and endured until very recently since the beginning of this century. The Japanese have contributed considerable pain in the process of achieving their dream - 'Great East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere.' Korea, China, and whole Southeast Asia shared the unprecedented pain. The Korean Conflict and Indochina War claimed millions of casualties, while internal political turmoils such as China's Cultural Revolution and Khmer Rouge, Philippines Red Army inflicted the same degree of pain to millions.

Also the region has long been battered by natural disasters and famines. These painful experiences have given Asians a different outlook on life. They have remained tough and willing to make personal sacrifices for the benefit of future generations.

Above mentioned sociocultural elements not only explain East Asian societies' growing global competitiveness but also serve common denomination among East Asian economies in building a Asia Pacific Community together with Australasia and North America.



#### IV. LIBERALISM

The major issue that has divided two sides of the Pacific, North America and Australasia on the one hand and East Asia on the other, is liberalism. Until recently, liberalism as a political philosophy was perceived by most East Asians as a threat to the very fabric of their cultures. Liberalism's stress on human rights and equality appeared to conflict with prevailing group centered and hierarchical pattern in East Asian society. In North America and Australasia, liberal voices have placed the rights of the individual far above the claims of the group, while for centuries individualism in the East Asia have been criticized as elements for social disorder and confusion.

Furthermore the West's concept of international relations and political philosophy including liberalism was introduced to East Asian cultures by military force. However, East Asian leaders have become gradually but surprisingly liberal in their outlook, because they discovered liberalism was the cause of "wealth and power", sufficient to make East Asia as rich and powerful as their colonial masters.

Consequently, in East Asia, even as patriarchal family patterns prevail, the value of equal opportunity for all is gaining popularity. Even as the interests of group continue to dominate human relations, the concept of personal freedom and human rights have slowly taken root in East Asian cultures. And even as political institutions remain authoritarian compared to North America or Australasia, East Asian leaders place great premium

on democracy and moving toward greater political freedoms and open accountability through more open political processes. Even the eating habits, music and fashions in today's East Asia carry the overtones of individualism.

There seems to be a strong causal link between economic development and expansion of political liberalism based on a common wisdom ever since Aristotle emphasized the role of the middle class in maintaining stable democracy in his *Politics*.

Economic growth enlarges the size of the middle class, which in turn demands for more political and social freedom in proportion to their living standard, and it becomes ever more difficult for governments to deny them.<sup>1)</sup>

The American presence in East Asia since the World War II has exerted positive influence on East Asians. It has not only opened East Asian minds to the most generous aspects of western civilization but has prevented the emergence of conflicts among traditionally suspicious East Asian neighbors. Therefore, it is not surprising a belief has settled in American mind that the United States mission in East Asia is to teach, not to learn. True, the United States is in essence an evangelical state that has spreading liberalism - democracy and human rights through the world.

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1) There are some scholars who call our attention to the affinity between economic growth and authoritarianism. Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism*, Berkeley : Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1973.

However, while the United States enjoys a political stability that is the envy of East Asia, today it does not appear to be a well-ordered society in the Confucian ideal.- "a society where a sense of sharing displaces the effects of selfishness and materialism, a devotion to the public duty leaves no room for idleness" (Mahbubani, 1994: 20).

To East Asians, America's excessive emphasis of political liberalism resulted in today's social decay where freedom of small number of individuals (criminals, terrorists, street gang members, drug dealers), who are known to pose a threat to society, should not be constrained, even if to do so would enhance the freedom of the majority. To East Asian mind, liberty must not be allowed to degenerate into immorality and permissiveness.

I believe no society is perfect and although all member countries in APEC subscribe to political and economic liberalism, we should humbly learn from each other. I hope American 'human rights' diplomacy vis-a-vis a few East Asian countries would be moderated if not suspended until a strong and viable middle class takes root in those nations. In that sense, President Bill Clinton's recent policy to delink the Most Favored Nations privileges for China and its human rights status was a decision well taken.

Nevertheless, on the part of East Asians, too much emphasis on group's interest over individual freedom may turn the clock backward to the narrow and oppressive order of the authoritarian past.

In that sense, the speech of Mr. Anwar Ibrahim, deputy prime minister of Malaysia is worth quoting:

The experience of Southeast Asia in economic, social and political development is indeed rich and varied. Yet today we see Asian, especially Confucian, values now invoked in support of the proposition that democracy is inimical to political stability and economic growth. But this notion has been effectively debunked by the experience of both Thailand and Malaysia (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6/10/1994, p.34).

## V. 'ASIA WAY' STYLE OF NEGOTIATION

The leaders of APEC has a good reference in ASEAN's experiences. Cultural attributes such as the appeal to brotherhood and kinship based on the perception of 'group' and behind-the-scenes negotiation based on respect for others' 'faces' and the use of 'mushawarah' (consensus) in discussions successfully led to the building of a Southeast Asian Community. This style of negotiation known as the 'Asian Way' has supplied an important element to the integration theory by indicating that the most promising form of discussion between countries seeking to improve relations or building a community begins with areas of agreements, moves to areas of ambiguity but scrupulously avoids stating contentious issues.

Other observations derived from ASEAN's experiences are:

1. Territorial contiguity is not always a factor predisposing to

cooperation.

2. A state that is beset by internal and external pressures tends to be unreliable as a partner.
3. Mere interactions do not imply cooperation. It is only when goals and values are shared that cooperation exists.
4. Frequent contacts of communication among the political elite help crystallize a community of sentiments.
5. No Single nation takes a leadership position.
6. All members are equal partners.
7. Association should be free and voluntary (Solidum, 1974: 94, 204-5).

## VI. PEACEFUL POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Since the APEC is at its infant stage, and slowly moving toward an uncharted course, there are many skeptics. Some view that APEC is a "big brotherism" in a new form where the U.S. is scheming to transform into a trading bloc.

Although each and every member of the APEC believes that no nation can prosper in isolation from the others, some of them call for an exclusive regional bloc, should the GATT or WTO round collapse, and should EU or NAFTA turn into economic fortress Europe or America. Another proponent call for a grouping consist

of Southeast Asia, Japan, China, Korea, Australasia, India, even Asiatic Russia and all the other nations of Asia Pacific to deal with EU and NAFTA which would eventually become a exclusive economic bloc, thus forming a tripartite economic balance of power.

However, I personally don't see coming of the doomsday when the GATT or WTO collapses to open a Pandora's box which would certainly lead the humanity to a Hobbesian anarchy. Open regionalism as was declared as the principle of APEC not only calls for the abolishment of trade barriers inside the region but also imposing no discriminatory barriers against the rest of the world. In this inter-dependent world this principle has better chance to be adopted by the NAFTA and EU than risking a plunge into the doomsday, in which every body shoots each other.

One must remember that when APEC was founded in Canberra in 1989 the intention was not to create a regional trade bloc but an economic forum, in which the members were to be provided with instrument for economic dialogue and cooperation.

I don't believe political environment is yet conducive to building a regional community in Asia Pacific region. Mutual suspicions and hostility, danger of civil wars, conventional and nuclear arms building, and territorial disputes are not likely to disappear soon in Asia. Thus, the biggest danger for APEC or emerging Asia Pacific Community is that the region, under political stress, might split down in the middle.

Today, old world order has gone with the collapse of the

Socialist Bloc, but the world is waiting for an emergence of new order with a balance yet to be achieved by the big powers. Although the current transformation leaves the United States as a sole superpower, as Paul Kennedy predicted, American economic hegemony will rapidly come to an end. Therefore, through APEC or other framework, a new regional political structure are needed to define rules governing the relations between Asia Pacific states, and establish a forum for discussing regional and sub-regional security issues.

Furthermore, the United States, being a strong stabilizing factor in regional security, should maintain a military presence in the Western Pacific. Its presence would certainly mitigate fear of Southeast Asian countries whether new hegemons appear over thier horizon.

China may have its own reasons and rational to claim the Paracel and Spratlys in South China Sea which are a bone of contention between six claimants. Asean Foreign Ministers' declaration of July, 1992 as to the resolution of the sovereignty and jurisdictional issues pertaining to the South China Sea by peaceful means was only cautiously agreed by China. We certainly hope not whether this issue upset the apple cart - heretofore relatively smooth sailing of APEC.

Japan is an economic superpower. Asia Pacific needs its capital, technology, markets, and global clout, while today offers best opportunities for Japan to join the rest of Asia Pacific as a good neighbor, friend, and co-leader. If it waits too long, Greater China

and/or another country of the region may grow to the point where they no longer really need Japan.

Here the question is Japan's attitude regarding its past military behavior vis-a-vis Asia. General sentiment of Asians is summed up into one question : "Why can't Japan simply acknowledge what it did and express remorse just as the Germans did for Nazi atrocities ? " For that matter former Prime Minister Hosokawa did the right thing in expressing sincere apologies, formally and unequivocally for Japan's aggression and brutality in Asia. The rest of Asia would like to accept that apologies wholeheartedly, to put the whole matter behind and get on with the future. However, we feel there is still lingering reluctance on the part of the Japanese leaders for this matter, as the sentiment from time to time breaks out like the case of MITI Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro's remarks as recently as one week ago.

If Japan is determined to proceed to take positive steps to deal with the matter and writing more objective accounts of its past history, building a more viable Asia Pacific Community would be expedited.

## VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Asia Pacific region is characterized by its diversity than unity. The first pessimistic argument on the prospects of a regional community in Asia Pacific has been the geography of the region. In such a vast expanse of land and ocean interconnection and community building was thought impossible.

However, modern technological breakthroughs and rapid



economic growth of the region have caused the thinning of geographical and national barriers between regional countries. Therefore, geography serves no longer as a hindrance to building an Asia Pacific Community.

The second pessimistic argument has been focused on the diversity of religious beliefs. However, Asian religions has many positive elements in forming a larger community. Primacy of group, discipline, cooperation, decision-making based on consensus, and other relevant concepts left people of Asia Pacific better prepared for building a community among themselves.

The major issue that has divided two sides of the Pacific, North America and Australasia on the one hand and East Asia on the other, is liberalism. In East Asia, while the interests of group continue to dominate human relations, the concept of personal freedom and human rights have slowly taken roots in its culture. However, to East Asian people, America's excessive emphasis of political liberalism seems to have resulted in today's social decay where freedom of criminals are tolerated over the freedom of the majority. I believe no society is perfect and although all member countries of the APEC subscribe to liberalism, we should learn from each other.

The political environment is not yet conducive to building a visible regional community. Mutual suspicions and hostility, danger of civil wars, conventional and nuclear arms build-up, and territorial disputes are not likely to disappear soon in Asia.

Therefore, through APEC or other framework, a new regional forum for discussing political and security issues is imperative.

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