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Participatory Regionalism: Strengthening People-to-People Cooperation for an East Asia Community

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UP UNTIL THE last three decades, intra-ASEAN cooperation and inter-regional partnership between East and Southeast Asia had been token in nature. The historical fault lines between individual countries were modern trenches in the geopolitical struggles of the day. But the advent of ASEAN Summits—beginning with Bali in 1976, Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda’s presence at the second ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 1977, and the beginning of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reform in 1978—provided an impetus that would eventually change the regional cooperative framework forever.

Since then, cooperation has progressed to today’s dizzying pace, with multilateral arrangements in almost all conceivable fields. The birth of the 21st century seemed to provide new impetus, as the attitudes of those involved in interregional partnership shifted from a focus on “cooperation” and agreements between nations toward a sense of regional “community.”

One of the key efforts with the foresight to detail this vision of community in a more thorough and more academic manner was the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG). In its 2001 report, *Towards an East Asian Community: Region of Peace, Prosperity and Progress*, the group outlined a vision of an integrated region “ultimately leading to an East Asia Economic Community” through the establishment of an East Asia free trade and investment area. It was clear that the formula was one of trade, investment, and finance as catalysts for the community-building process, similar to the

recipe that guided ASEAN's own slow intensification toward community and region building.

Ten years later, a follow-up report by a second EAVG further advanced the founding vision of the first EAVG. In its report, it also underlined the significance of addressing a wider swath of crosscutting challenges that go beyond the economic dimensions to sociocultural and security challenges, including aging populations, the regional development gap, and environmental challenges. The executive summary of the 2012 report explicitly stated, "We need to enhance efforts of cooperation in political-security, as well as social-cultural areas. EAVG II also recognizes the importance of cross-sectoral cooperation."¹

The shift in emphasis away from solely economic and trade aspects has been an emerging and consistent trend both within ASEAN and among its dialogue partners. Japan, for example, is currently ASEAN's second-largest trade partner, with bilateral trade amounting to over US\$229 billion in total,² as well as a major source of foreign direct investment (FDI), with the total stock of Japanese FDI into ASEAN standing at US\$136 billion.³ Also, Japan has served as a "bridge" in reducing the development gap between the ASEAN-6 and ASEAN's newer "CLMV" members—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Yet the relationship has blossomed beyond the elementary interests of economics.

In November 2011, during the 14th ASEAN-Japan Summit meeting in Bali, the participating leaders issued a Joint Declaration for Enhancing ASEAN-Japan Strategic Partnership for Prospering Together. The declaration endorsed strategies for "strengthening political-security cooperation," "intensifying cooperation toward community building," "creating a more disaster-resilient society," and "addressing common regional and global challenges."

At a commemorative summit held on December 14, 2013, which marked the 40th anniversary of ASEAN-Japan dialogue relations, a Vision Statement on ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation: Shared Vision, Shared Identity, Shared Future was adopted. One of the highlights of this vision statement was the stress on ASEAN and Japan as "heart-to-heart partners," recognizing their intent to strengthen mutual trust and understanding and to nurture friendship by, among others, promoting cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

It is clear that the recognition of a "people-to-people" element is in ascendance, at least in terms of awareness if not in practice. This ascendancy reflects both the global recognition of the importance of nonstate actors and ASEAN's own mindset, as reflected in its proclaimed aspiration to be a "people-centered community." In fact, the ASEAN Charter explicitly

recognizes the importance of civil society participation in the ASEAN community. Not surprisingly, then, the 40th anniversary celebrations of ASEAN-Japan dialogue relations embraced the more emotive motto of “*tsunagaru omoi, tsunagaru mirai*” (thoughts connected, future connected). There is also a compelling historical context to the greater focus on the non-economic aspects of community building. When Prime Minister Fukuda became the first non-ASEAN leader to attend the ASEAN Summit in 1977, Japan’s emphasis during those meetings with ASEAN was on noneconomic aspects of the relationship, which actually ran counter to ASEAN’s own priority at that time of seeking economic assistance from Japan.⁴

Even China, which seems to be in a predominantly realist mode recently, flexing its hard power, is likely to increasingly employ its soft power in the coming years to reinforce its sphere of influence. In 2007, at the National Congress of the Communist Party of China, President Hu Jintao underlined the need to boost China’s soft power assets. “Culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength,” Hu said, while stressing the necessity to “enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people’s basic cultural rights and interests.”⁵ Academics such as Gungwu Wang also note, “It could be assumed that China’s rise to regional power for the fourth time will have cultural implications for the region.”⁶

Despite this growing narrative, the role of people-to-people networks and civil society organizations within the ASEAN framework and its dialogue partners has historically remained under tight scrutiny or been sidelined altogether. The predominant role of nonstate actors within the grouping has been played by think tanks and academic institutions engaged in Track 2 frameworks while other civil society groups have had limited interaction. The asymmetric state of liberalization and democratization in Southeast and East Asia creates an unequal space for Track 3 civil society initiatives within the context of state-sponsored community building, as most governments continue to perceive Track 3 activities with suspicion. Given this context, it is questionable whether efforts to forge people-to-people cooperation that advances community building can truly be realized beyond the preordained projects endorsed by the ASEAN member states.

One particular exception has been the business sector. Given their nature, business enterprises will always find a way to connect and interact—with or without state facilitation—if it might increase their fortunes. ASEAN businesspeople have councils and forums with almost every major economic partner and region (e.g., the US-ASEAN Business Council, ASEAN-Japan

Business Meeting, China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit, EU-ASEAN Business Council, ASEAN New Zealand Business Council, etc.). These business links are driven by the quest for profit, not any higher common value.

If we accept the notion that an emancipated and informed civil society is crucial to a vibrant democracy and community, then greater consideration should be given to promoting civil society as a partner within the so-called community-building project.

Despite the work of the EAVG and other initiatives, however, there is still no exact or concrete impression as to what shape the community should take by the mid-21st century. It will remain an evolving concept, molded and reformatted according to the changing sway of geopolitics and national leadership. But one thing is certain: the monopoly of state-centric regionalism is fading. Amitav Acharya describes this shift toward “participatory regionalism” as follows:

The term “participatory regionalism” as used here is distinguished by two key features. The first, at the level of official regionalism, is the acceptance by governments of a more relaxed view of state sovereignty and the attendant norm of non-interference in the internal affairs of states. This allows for more open discussion of, and action on, problems facing a region and creates more space for non-governmental actors in the decision-making process. A second feature of participatory regionalism is the development of a close nexus between governments and civil society in managing regional and transnational issues. This means not just greater cooperation among the social movements leading to the emergence of a regional civil society, but also closer and positive interaction between the latter and the official regionalism of states.⁷

This concept of “participatory regionalism” is on the rise, and will increasingly become an important footing for community building.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “community” as a group of people with common characteristics or interests living together within a larger society. Community—whether it be 50 people or 500 million—does not arise out of sheer tangible economic objectives alone. It is molded from a sense of the shared values that drive a community together. However, due to their varying political circumstances, the peoples of Southeast Asia do not yet share common values. There is no identifiable rallying point that morally unites this community.

Taking the European experience for the sake of comparison, it can be said that the foundation for the success of the EU's integration into a community has not been just its treaties or its comparable levels of economic development, but the commonality of the political values that the European states had already embraced. Given the dissimilar state of liberalization and democratization within East and Southeast Asia, it is unlikely that a truly defined set of values can be adopted. Thus, identity needs to become a key characteristic of this community.

As alluded to by former *Asahi Shimbun* chief editor Yoichi Funabashi, among others, a regional consciousness has surfaced over the last few decades—an identity that was nurtured in the initial phases by regional economic interdependence.⁸ But trade and economic interdependence alone will not mitigate political tensions, as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute has shown. Nor will they prevent cross-border hostilities, as proven by the way in which the Thai-Cambodian temple dispute has claimed dozens of lives. These emotional, historical issues present the biggest hurdles to the interactions needed for the evolution of a regional identity.

People-to-people cooperation, social interaction, and civil society networks can provide a way to help overcome these hurdles. The proposals for people-to-people cooperation should go beyond the declared intent of business, disaster relief, and other professionally oriented cooperative frameworks. Money and tragedy are always common denominators that arouse the primary human nature of greed or compassion. The appeal of profits does not require that people divided by the oceans come together as a community, nor is a charter or declaration needed for people from around the world to donate and help those in need.

To give one example, Japan has invested heavily in China, yet this has not stopped relations between Tokyo and Beijing from reaching a dangerous low in recent years. The lack of convincing people-to-people interactions may be one factor that has resulted in public perceptions of the other that are so negative.

Thus, over the next few years, East and Southeast Asia should endeavor to form a community based not simply on solving common problems, but on a commitment to advancing common interests. In other words, it should be a community conceived not in terms of threats, but rather in terms of finding ways to alleviate suffering and broaden understanding. This engagement should create epistemic communities, in the sense described by political scientist Peter M. Haas:

As demands for such information arise, networks or communities of specialists capable of producing and providing the information emerge and

proliferate. The members of a prevailing community become strong actors at the national and transnational level as decision makers solicit their information and delegate responsibility to them.

Members of transnational epistemic communities can influence state interests either by directly identifying them for decision makers or by illuminating the salient dimensions of an issue from which the decision makers may then deduce their interests. The decision makers in one state may, in turn, influence the interests and behavior of other states, thereby increasing the likelihood of convergent state behavior and international policy coordination, informed by the causal beliefs and policy preferences of the epistemic community.⁹

By allowing transnational activism, the creation of such epistemic communities within the regional context helps stimulate the kind of emancipatory form of politics that strengthens communal bonding and a sense of common purpose, building on the plethora of government-sponsored initiatives already underway. But in order for this to happen, it is imperative that governments provide an enabling environment for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the rest of civil society to develop, engage, and even challenge set policy decisions. Without ceding greater space for civil society to engage in all public life, an East Asia Community will likely remain legalistic and formal in nature.

The rationale for proposing the next step toward greater people-to-people cooperation should be based on efforts that further promote the ideals already stated in the purposes and principles of the ASEAN Charter. Of particular importance is the seventh point of Article 1 on the purposes of the charter:

To strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and the rule of law, and to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, with due regard to the rights and responsibilities of the Member States of ASEAN.¹⁰

This is further reinforced in Article 2 on principles:

(2h) Adherence to the rule of law, good governance, the principles of democracy and constitutional government.

(2i) Respect for fundamental freedoms, the promotion and protection of human rights, and the promotion of social justice.¹¹

These goals and principles offer a clear foundation on which the ASEAN-Japan partnership can help develop and enhance people-to-people connectivity as a means of building the East Asia Community. The following section offers a number of concrete steps that should be taken.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enhance the role of women in regional interaction

Politics in Asia is very much a male-dominated arena. The perceptions and analyses that drive policy decisions are male-centered in nature yet, as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe asserted in a 2004 resolution, “conflict is a gendered activity.”¹² The perspectives of women and mothers can dramatically change the dynamics of regionalism and nurture stronger community bonds. Consequently, as early as 1988, the ASEAN foreign ministers recognized the important role of women in a declaration pledging to promote the participation of community groups and NGOs focusing on women as a means of strengthening national and regional resilience.

In 2000, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. It was the first ever Security Council resolution that specifically addressed women’s contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace. In it, they urged countries “to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional, and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.”¹³ The Council of Europe, in its 2004 resolution, also said, “Women can play a particularly important role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts,” and it noted, “Women also bring alternative perspectives to conflict prevention which is more focused on the grass-roots and community levels.”¹⁴

The East Asia Community building process should take particular heed of these resolutions and build on the goals of ASEAN’s 1988 Declaration on the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN Region by prioritizing national gender empowerment programs to ensure women are active agents in peace and development. To advance this objective, a fund can be established that supports women’s groups specifically dealing with cross-border and peace issues. An exchange program focused on women should also be started, with an emphasis on building ties among women in parliament, those working in conflict areas, and female military officers.

2. Facilitate foreign language centers

English is the lingua franca of academia, business, and ASEAN diplomacy. So much emphasis has been placed on English proficiency in recent years,

with individual nations investing heavily in elevating the proficiency of their officials in order to better interact, negotiate, and debate in the glut of regional meetings. Arguably, more money and resources have been invested in a tongue that is not indigenous to Asia (i.e., English) than in Asia's own rich languages.

More than a modicum of English-language competence is necessary, but every nation also needs a critical mass within its ranks that are proficient in other foreign languages, especially Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. "Language," the late anthropologist Edward Sapir said, "is the key to the heart of a people."¹⁵ Language provides an understanding of differing worldviews. There is no better method to truly understand the way that a nation thinks of itself and of others than to understand its language. More importantly, language connects people at their most earnest.

A network of language and cultural promotion centers, very much like the British Council or the Goethe-Institut, should be established throughout all of East and Southeast Asia. They can work either alongside or independently of local educational institutions by providing classes, instructors, and teaching materials.

China has been one of the most active in this area by establishing Confucius institutes around the world to promote the Chinese language. It is a good template to emulate, minus the Institute's connection to the Chinese government. These language centers must work independently, free from state intervention or association, so they are beyond reproach as instruments of propaganda.

3. Develop a CSO Wiki Knowledge Center

A "CSO (civil society organization) Wiki Knowledge Center" that is a repository of knowledge and activities should be developed, and it should include a catalog of experts and activities from NGOs and other CSOs working in the sociopolitical field, including in international relations, in both ASEAN countries and Japan. In many ways it would be similar to a national industry and trade database available to businesses seeking to export or invest abroad.

This accessible online resource would connect groups and individuals working on transnational issues, enabling them to link up and share perspectives, including best practices. Organizations should also be encouraged to make organizational reports available through this platform, since by submitting themselves to the principle of transparency, they will invite public trust. Such an online resource will also be valuable to academics

and journalists searching for resource people when conducting studies on developments in the region.

The creation of such an online resource could be contracted to a Track 2 entity, with the aim of developing it into a wiki type of content management system. It is critical that the wiki should adopt an open philosophy, free of censorship and qualitative political screening. Any entity assigned responsibility for its upkeep should merely serve as an aggregator and host of the website itself.

4. Create a bridge program for community-based CSOs and NGOs

Workshops, discussions, and seminars that involve CSOs and NGOs in the sociopolitical sphere are important instruments for interaction and need sustained support. However these programs are expensive and their reach is usually limited to senior figures and to organizations that have either strong representation in major metropolitan areas or an established international network. The countless groups working in local communities, which tend to receive little publicity but carry out no less worthy work, are often not afforded the same opportunities.

Developing a bridge program that connects local groups with their counterparts can be an alternative tool for encouraging new interactions. The program would involve online engagement that connects activists and groups to increase mutual awareness and understanding. Issues of local governance that are of concern to a group in a Sulawesi province, for example, are probably more relatable to a local Japanese group working at the prefectural level rather than to a major Jakarta-based CSO.

Technology is advanced enough that these groups can be connected through the Internet for face-to-face dialogue. The most crucial issue will be identifying and connecting comparable organizations. Therefore, the development of a CSO wiki, as mentioned above, would provide a key resource for extending this activity.

5. Connecting the media

Social media may have taken the world by storm, with Asians among the more intensive users. However, as much as these new tools for transferring information have evolved, opinion making in Asia remains largely dependent upon the traditional media outlets. In fact, much of the news and opinion that goes viral on social media is sourced from these traditional media outlets.

The irony is that, despite the onset of the information age, the perspectives that nations have of each other remain very skewed due to the lack of exposure to and knowledge of one another. Garnering alternative perspectives is crucial if we are to create a broad public understanding that is neither shortsightedly nationalistic nor adopted from “Western-driven” preconceptions. For example, most editors who have overseen reporting about Yasukuni Shrine for their media outlets do so from the comfort of their desks and have never visited the religious site. Likewise, editors who handle reports about Islamic radicalism in Indonesian politics have limited knowledge of the dynamics of the Indonesian archipelago.

To this end, three programs can be proposed in the area of media exchange and cooperation:

i. Establishment of a journalism fellowship program

A competitive scholarship program can be created whereby each year a certain number of journalists from across the region are given a fellowship, running between two weeks to a month, that places them in counterpart news organizations in other countries. Similar programs exist in the academic field and for think tanks, but this program would focus specifically on journalists. There are already fellowship programs run by individual news organizations, but they are intermittent and smaller in scale. Apart from having their journalists gain a broader perspective, budding media organizations would also benefit from the professional experience gained by their journalists when they work with a large, established media company.

ii. Extension of lifting rights

Foreign news coverage comes primarily from three sources: most commonly, from a subscription with a Western-dominated wire agency (Reuters, AFP, Associated Press, etc.); via foreign correspondents and bureaus maintained at great expense by a very few large media outlets; or from dispatching journalists to individual countries for a very limited time for ad hoc assignments that are usually event driven.

Given the time demands of a breaking news event, more often than not media outlets simply rely on a single wire agency, while adding perspectives from local government officials. There is usually scant opportunity to balance a breaking story with the “foreign” view of the news. Very rarely do local newspapers subscribe to the national news agencies of another country. One of the main reasons is that those subscriptions become a financial burden, and the national agencies are perceived to lack independence.

Given that national news agencies are state-funded institutions, governments can subsidize reputable foreign news organizations by giving them “lifting rights” (the ability to immediately publish articles from another news organization) to access and publish reports produced by those agencies. For example, the Chinese government can provide access and extend lifting rights for the Xinhua news agency articles to major newspapers in Indonesia. This would provide an opportunity to balance any report involving China by giving a “Chinese perspective” on breaking news.

iii. Promotion of exchanges of opinion articles

Opinion articles hold a unique status that differs from regular news items as they are usually written and read by decision-makers and policy influencers. Disseminating high-quality opinion articles would do much to encourage the spread of analysis across borders in very much the same way as think tanks can, but in a more open public sphere. The open debate sparked by opinion pieces would be a priceless tool for cataloging the various perspectives that they reflect.

Individual embassies should be encouraged to distribute opinion articles to local news outlets on either a regular or ad hoc basis. It is imperative, however, that these articles be written by reputable scholars or experts who work independently from their governments. Any perception of these pieces being government propaganda will reduce their credibility and render them undeserving of publication.

6. Foster the development of regional civil society

CSOs throughout the region remain largely inward-looking in their agendas and activities. Apart from a few internationally funded organizations, most CSOs lack incentives to develop a regional outlook.

As the community-building process advances, an East Asia Community secretariat will need to be established. Those developing this secretariat should draw on the lessons of the ASEAN Secretariat, which has largely shunned civil society engagement. From the outset, there should be a commitment to granting a future East Asia Community secretariat a greater mandate and more independence to engage CSOs as participatory partners in the community-building endeavor. Rather than operating as a conventional secretariat, the initiative could be taken at the formative stages to enable this new secretariat to be more of a Track 2 “Regional Civil Society Center.”

Finally, another means to develop regional civil society would be to promote regular cooperation among national human rights commissions. This would be a highly strategic enterprise, as these exchanges will help promote social growth by building community norms regarding a minimum standard of human and civil rights.

NOTES

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