

Can Asians Resolve Global Problems?

[Simon Chesterman](#) and [Kishore Mahbubani](#)

2010-03-01



DAVOS – Is there an “Asian way” to resolving global challenges? The conventional answer is no. But elements of an Asian way are gradually emerging. Given Asia’s growing influence, the world should pay attention – and may have much to gain.

The key to understanding Asian approaches is their pragmatism. Asians constantly adapt and change.

In the past, Asians put a premium on protecting their sovereignty and were wary of any multilateral approaches that could dilute it. Now, in response to global challenges – for example, pandemics, financial crises, and climate change – the vast majority of Asian countries understand that collective action does not erode but instead protects sovereignty. For example, despite losing faith in the International Monetary Fund after the region’s financial crisis in 1997, they agreed to contribute billions to the IMF after the recent global financial meltdown.

There has also been another significant shift in Asian attitudes. Instead of *legitimacy*, or simply getting more seats at the table to provide input, the discussion in Asia is increasingly about outputs: how to create institutions that are more *effective*. At the same time, reflecting their pragmatism, the Asians remain ready to accept continuing American leadership and domination of global institutions. Nor do they challenge the United States-led security umbrella for the Asia-Pacific region.

At a recent workshop that we co-chaired in Singapore, the inevitable question was raised: Can Asians lead in meeting global challenges? The responses from the Chinese and Indian participants were striking. They argued that by taking care of more than two billion people – and taking care of them well – both China and India were already making a major contribution to global stability and order.

That is a reasonable response. Indeed, if the vast majority of the four billion Asians continue to improve their livelihoods, the world would become a better place.

Still, there are both positive and negative aspects of the Asian approach to the challenges of global governance. The positive aspects include respect for diversity and an emphasis on consensus-building

over conflict, practical solutions over lofty principles, and gradualism over abrupt change. On the other hand, the desire to avoid confrontation can prevent meaningful agreements from being reached in a reasonable timeframe, and the appearance of consensus may merely mask the true politics at work.

Drawing on the positive aspects of the Asian way suggests the possibility of more inclusive decision-making in the institutions of global governance. The danger in such an approach is that decisions may not be taken, or that those that are put rhetoric ahead of substance, thereby failing to resolve fundamental political challenges.

So what might this mean in practice? Here are a few areas in which Asia – or, more properly, Asians – can contribute to solving some key global challenges:

Peace and Security: Asia includes many new naval powers, such as China and India, which could help bolster the security of sea-lanes by creating partnerships with traditional naval powers such as the US. Various Asian countries joined efforts to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia. China is developing a deployable police capacity that may provide an important new tool in peace operations in fragile states.

Climate Change: Asia needs to build up innovative markets that enable technology transfer. China, Japan, and Korea have become leading producers of green technology. Asian governments are in a position to take the lead in developing alternative energy sources.

Financial Regulation: Asian countries need to take more leadership in regulating financial markets. China, questioning the wisdom of putting the fate of the world economy in the US dollar, has proposed the creation of a global currency. Progress has been made on the Chiang Mai Initiative – a multilateral currency swap arrangement among the ten ASEAN members, China, Japan, and South Korea – and the possibility of an Asian Monetary Fund remains on (or at least not far off) the table.

Health: Asia's experience in dealing with SARS, bird flu, H1N1, and other diseases should be studied carefully – for both positive and negative lessons – with a view to developing a new global consensus on handling pandemics.

Social Enterprises: Asia has emerged as a leader in social entrepreneurship. The successes of social businesses such as Grameen Bank and BRAC in Bangladesh have contributed to renewed thinking about how social objectives can be fused with revenue-generating practices.

In short, there is no coherent or systematic Asian approach to meeting global challenges. In response to each challenge, Asians respond pragmatically. But, given that some of the biggest challenges are the result of failed policies, pragmatism may offer a constructive way forward.