

The Path to the East Asian Community--Transcending Diversity and Heterogeneity

Creating a Citizen Community in East Asia

*Kishore Mahbubani*¹

*Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy
at the National University of Singapore*



The past few decades have been among the best that East Asia² has experienced in centuries. There have been no major wars since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war. Despite some setbacks like the Asian Financial crisis of 1997, most of the economies seem set on a secular path of steady growth. This economic growth has been accompanied by rising trade integration. Overall, there has been a remarkable increase in living standards.

In such a happy environment, a natural development would have been the emergence of a sense of community among the East Asian nations. Instead, we have seen a number of paradoxical developments in East Asia. Firstly, growing trade and economic integration has been accompanied by growing political differences, especially in Northeast Asia, among China, Japan and Korea. Secondly, while Northeast Asia has clearly been more successful than Southeast Asia in economic terms, it is far behind Southeast Asia in political cooperation and integration. Thirdly, most of the significant initiatives for East Asian integration have come from the relatively less developed states of Southeast Asia rather than the richer Northeast Asian states.

This essay will try to explore how these paradoxical consequences came about. It will focus a little more on the two biggest countries in the region, China and Japan, and try to explain the unique “magic” of ASEAN. It will also suggest some prescriptions for the future.

Japan’s Role in East Asia

It may be useful to begin this essay by understanding why East Asia has been the first region outside Europe and North America to succeed in economic development. Here there can be no doubt that Japan made a valuable contribution. The successful economic transformation of Japan after the Meiji restoration in 1868 provided the first hint to Asians that they too could succeed. The first Prime

¹ Kishore Mahbubani is the Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, and author of “Can Asians Think?” and “Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust Between America and the World.” Special thanks to Prof. Amitav Acharya, Dr. Chin Kin Wah, Amb. Rodolfo Severino, Prof. Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, Prof. Lee Chung Min, and Denni Jayme for their contributions to this article.

² The term East Asia covers China (including Hong Kong and Macau), North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Mongolia and the ASEAN states of Southeast Asia.

Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, said that it was the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 that convinced him that Asia could rid itself of the yoke of European imperialism. Sadly, the emergence of militarism in Japan and the subsequent wars leading to World War II set back East Asia's development.

Fortunately, Japan created an economic miracle after World War II. This economic miracle in turn inspired the emergence of four tigers: South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The four tigers in turn sparked the success of the original ASEAN members, especially Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. All these economic successes around China made Deng Xiaoping acutely aware that China had chosen the wrong economic policies. With his famous dictum "it does not matter whether a cat is black or white; it is a good cat if it catches mice", Deng reversed China's economic policies and launched his "Four Modernization" policies in 1979, sparking one of the most spectacular economic success stories in the history of mankind.

Even this brief account of the economic transformation of East Asia makes it clear that Japan played a key role in generating this transformation. Logically, Japan should have played a leadership role in other spheres too, especially in the political and social arenas. Remarkably, Japan has seldom provided such leadership to East Asia. Instead, it has almost consciously decided against doing so. Most East Asians remain mystified by this Japanese decision to turn away from regional leadership. So do I. But in an effort to understand the causes of this, I have come to discover that the roots are deep.

The origins go back to the Meiji Restoration. In this period, Japan discovered both the backwardness of Asia and the spectacular success of the West, especially Europe. This led to some crucial decisions, some beneficial and some negative for Asia. The beneficial decision Japan made was to learn and apply Western best practices, especially in economic development. The negative decision Japan made was to turn its back on Asia. Since the Meiji period, Japan decided that its natural destiny was to become a mentor of the Western club, not the leader of Asia. Yukichi Fukuzawa, the great Meiji reformer, put this clearly in his 1885 article, *Datsu-A Ron* (Leaving Asia), where he said that "Our immediate policy, therefore, should be to lose no time in waiting for the enlightenment of our neighbouring countries in order to join them in developing Asia, but rather to depart from their ranks and cast our lot with the civilized countries of the West [...] We should deal with them exactly as the Westerners do."³

To put matters a little harshly, Japan's decision to turn its back to Asia over a hundred years ago may be one of the critical factors explaining the lack of a sense of community in East Asia. The natural leader walked out of the club, leaving it leaderless. Throughout the heady days of the Japanese economic miracle in the 1960's and 1970's, Japan measured its political success by the degree of its acceptance in Western circles, not Asian circles. Hence Japan became the first (and still the only) Asian member of

³ Shunsaku, Nishikawa. 1993. "Fukuzawa Yukichi". *Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education* (UNESCO: International Bureau of Education), vol. XXIII, no. 3/4, p.8. (The quote is from the article published in *Jiji-shimpo*, 16 March 1885. The translation is by Sinh Vinh in *Fukuzawa Yukichi nenkan* [Annals], vol. 11, Mita, Tokyo, Fukuzawa Yukichi kyokai, 1984.)
<<http://www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/ThinkersPdf/fukuzawe.pdf>>

the G8, the first Asian member of OECD, and – from its founding in 1973 until 2000 – the only Asian representative in the Trilateral Commission. Japanese diplomacy was clearly focused on the Western arena, not Asian. Sadly, despite all these efforts, Japan never became completely accepted as a fully-fledged Western member. In a cruel blow to Japanese aspirations, James Baker, the then American Secretary of State, announced in his 1991 speech at the Aspen Institute, Berlin that with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, a large single Western community had been created from Vancouver to Vladivostok. The only country left out of this magic Western circle was Japan.

Despite this setback, in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century and a hundred years after the Russo-Japanese war, it is not clear whether Japan has decided whether it is Western first or Asian first. Japan sends mixed signals. These mixed signals may in turn reflect the confusion in Japanese souls. However, the continuing economic success of several Asian countries, especially China, should force Japanese minds to consider the possibility that they may be trying to join the club of the past, not of the future.

China's Role in East Asia

If Japan is unwilling to provide leadership in developing an East Asian community, can China – the other large East Asian power – do so? China, however, is constrained by several factors. Firstly, despite its huge economic successes, China has a long way to go before it can declare itself a developed country like Japan. Chinese leaders have no choice but to focus on the enormous task of governing China. Internal challenges will preoccupy China for decades. Secondly, Deng Xiaoping wisely advised Chinese leaders to keep a low profile as China emerged in strength. As part of his famous twenty-eight characters, Deng said '*shanyu shouzhuo*' or meaning that China should 'be good at keeping a low profile'.⁴ Thirdly, China's major geopolitical challenge is to emerge without antagonizing America. Any effort to provide leadership and create an East Asian community led by China will naturally arouse American suspicions. Hence, China has adopted the judicious road of following rather than leading in regional initiatives. Despite this, in a wise preemptive move to prevent any possible containment of China by America, China has been steadily sharing its prosperity with its neighbors. This has led to the paradoxical situation where the communist-ruled China instead of the capitalist-ruled Japan has taken the initiative in launching free trade agreements with its neighbors.

⁴ Franklin, Zhang Wankun. 1998. *China's Foreign Relations Strategies under Mao and Deng: A Systematic Comparative Analysis*. Department of Public and Social Administration. City University of Hong Kong, p. 14.

(Deng's strategy is summarized by these twenty-eight Chinese characters:

- *lengjing guancha*--- observe and analyse [developments] calmly;
- *wenzhu zhenjiao*--- secure [our own] position;
- *chenzhuo yingfu*--- deal [with changes] patiently and confidently;
- *taoguang yanghui*---conceal [our] capabilities and avoid the limelight;
- *shanyu shouzhuo*---be good at keeping a low profile;
- *juebu dangtou*--- never become a leader;
- *yousuo zuowei*--- strive to make achievements.

In so doing, just as Japan inadvertently sparked the rise of Asia with its economic success, China may have inadvertently engineered the creation of an East Asian community with its aggressive economic integration with its neighbors. Here are some remarkable statistics: China's total trade with Japan increased from USD 16.9 billion in 1990 to USD 133.6 billion in 2003. Trade with South Korea increased from USD 669 million in 1990 to USD 63.2 billion in 2003. China's import and exports with ASEAN member countries in 2003 were almost 10 times what they were in 1990, from a total of USD 7.3 billion to USD 78.3 billion.⁵ China's trade volume with India increased from just 260 million to an amazing 7.6 billion from 1990 to 2003,⁶ reached 13 billion in 2005, and could reach 20 billion by 2006. China has also proposed FTA's with several neighbors.

The Role of Southeast Asia in Community Building

Economic integration alone cannot create a sense of community. Some degree of political leadership is required. Given the reluctance of Japan and China to provide it, the only other force capable of providing such leadership is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This in itself is a surprising development. For over a century or more Southeast Asians have been objects, rather than subjects, of history: suffering colonial rule, facing the dire prospect of becoming "dominoes" in the Cold War and, in general, buffeted by the various geopolitical winds flowing through the regions. It would have been just as natural for Southeast Asia to have emerged as a weak and disintegrated region at the end of the Cold War. Instead, the various geopolitical challenges forced the ASEAN countries to come together and develop deep habits of cooperation. Throughout its existence, the ASEAN capacity to survive and thrive has been treated with skepticism by Western scholars. Yet despite their predictions, ASEAN has continued to grow and mature. Intra-ASEAN trade has continued to expand also. Intra-ASEAN exports rose from USD 43 billion in 1993 to USD 100 billion in 2003. Also, within that decade, intra-ASEAN imports rose from USD 39 billion to USD 76 billion. In just one year from 2003-2004, intra-ASEAN exports, grew by 20.6%, while intra-ASEAN imports grew by 25.44%. Indeed, it has now developed sufficient maturity and political sophistication to provide the leadership for wider regional initiatives.

Without ASEAN leadership, the first gathering of East Asian leaders would not have taken place in Kuala Lumpur in 1997. Since then, there have been 9 East Asian leadership meetings (not including the several other meetings between East Asian trade and finance ministers), culminating in the larger East Asian Summit in December 2005 which brought together, in addition to the ten ASEAN countries and China, Japan, Korea, the countries of India, Australia and New Zealand. This should have been a path-breaking event, demonstrating the capacity of Asian countries to come together. Instead, most of the news coverage of this event, especially in the Western media, focused on the inability of the leaders of China and Korea to have bilateral meetings with the leader of Japan. Symbolically, this event demonstrated well that on the question of East Asian regional integration, Northeast Asia provides the problems and Southeast Asia provides the solutions.

⁵ ASEAN-Japan Centre. <[http://www.asean.or.jp/eng/general/statistics/index\(05\).html](http://www.asean.or.jp/eng/general/statistics/index(05).html)>

⁶ Mr. Shao Qiwei's speech at the India-China Business Conclave.
<<http://www.chinaembassy.org.in/eng/zyjh/t146620.htm>>

It is vital to understand the root causes of the paradoxical situation in East Asia where rapidly growing economic integration is matched not by growing political closeness but by political distancing. Only after developing such a sound understanding can one make a realistic attempt to assess whether social or citizen initiatives can overcome these political divides.

In theory, Northeast Asia provides a more congenial environment for such social initiatives than Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia has traditionally been described as the Balkans of Asia, with far greater ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic diversity than even the Balkans of Europe. Yet, this unpromising cultural soil has allowed the development of the most successful political, economic and social cooperation in Asia through ASEAN. Northeast Asia, by contrast, has far more promising cultural soil for social cooperation since the cultural divides in that region are far less. For example, a common Buddhist cultural strain runs through all the three major societies of China, Japan and Korea.

In trying to promote social cooperation, Northeast Asia should attempt to learn from the best practices of both Western Europe as well as Southeast Asia. While Western Europe provides the higher benchmark, Southeast Asia provides a lower benchmark that Northeast Asia can try to match. One simple example might illustrate this point. One of Southeast Asia's greater achievements since the creation of ASEAN in 1967 is that no two ASEAN states have gone to war with each other. Neither have any Northeast Asian countries gone to war since the Korean War. But Western Europe has achieved something more. Since the acceleration of postwar European integration, the EU has not just delivered zero wars among EU states; it has also delivered the zero prospect of war. This is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, achievement any society can have in the ladder of human civilization. So far, the three major Northeast Asian states have had zero war among them since World War II. Their real challenge now is to match the conditions in Europe – zero prospect of war – through integration, institutionalization of confidence building measures and overcoming bitter historical legacies.

Both Northeast and Southeast Asia should cooperate in trying to understand the best practices of Western Europe in the social and cultural areas. How did societies that had gone to war for centuries achieve this zero prospect of war? How did they change the attitudes of long antagonistic societies towards each other?

Political leadership was key. The first generation of European political leaders after World War II, especially Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle, realized that they had to reach across the political divide to draw their societies together. Such political leadership is lacking in Northeast Asia. Hence, there is a pressing need to replace the political vacuum with social initiatives. The Danish Ambassador to Singapore, Klavs Holm, has said that European integration has important lessons for Southeast Asia – lessons that can also be applied to the whole of East Asia. He says, "Europe's experience shows that integration is about people and allowing them to realize that closer cooperation is in their own interest."⁷

⁷ Holm, Klavs A. 20 January 2006. "EU holds lessons for Asean integration." *The Straits Times*, p. 29.

East Asian integration, therefore, should not be generated only by political leaders. Otherwise, there is the risk of popular rejection by referendum of citizens of any agreement made by governing bodies. The single market system in Europe came about, in fact, by a general grassroots consensus by unions, businesses, consumer groups and organizations.

Fortunately, Southeast Asia can demonstrate to Northeast Asia the value of such citizen initiatives. After the initial political successes of ASEAN, the leaders wisely decided that ASEAN could not succeed over the long term if it was seen to be primarily a vehicle for cooperation only at the level of leaders. Hence, several initiatives, some successful while others need strengthening, were taken to make ASEAN cooperation meaningful at the people-to-people level too. It may be useful to illustrate this point with a few striking examples.

The ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), a regional association of institutes, has several programs that aim to strengthen regional cooperation. Its ASEAN Young Leaders programme brings together youth to address common concerns faced by the region. The Colloquium on Human Rights seeks to promote mutual understanding about human rights and eventually establish a human rights mechanism for Southeast Asia. ASEAN-ISIS was also instrumental in forming the ASEAN People's Assembly. The first assembly held in November 2000 in Indonesia brought together government officials, government-supported think-tanks and non-government organizations, and debated the principle of "open economies, open societies". These kinds of Track-III diplomacy that includes Track-II players can serve as a bridge between the elite and "grassroots" levels.

The ASEAN University Network (AUN) was established in November 1995 and seeks to strengthen the existing network of cooperation among leading universities and scholars and deepen the understanding of the ASEAN towards more regional identity and solidarity. The ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity Conservation encourages regional cooperation to manage biodiversity conservation through more networking, training, exchange of information, and research activities. Since 2000, the ASEAN Youth Camp has brought together fifty young creative talents from the ten ASEAN countries to interact over a twelve-day period. This intense cultural immersion hopes to give the youth a deeper appreciation of their regional identity and the cultural heritage of Southeast Asia. The 6th ASEAN Youth Camp met in Brunei Darussalam on January 2006. The ASEAN Tourism Association (ASEANTA) promotes the growth of travel in the region through its network of public and private organizations, such as national tourist promotion agencies and travel associations of the various ASEAN countries. The absence of visa requirements among ASEAN nationals in order to travel among member countries also boosts tourism. The ASEAN Chambers of Commerce and Industry (ASEAN-CCI) also engage private sector participation to enhance economic cooperation and development in the Southeast Asian region. In addition, several professional networks have begun to form in recognition of their regional identity (i.e. orchid lovers, anesthesiologists, hairdressers, media, artists). Most of these groups do not have formal ties with the ASEAN organization.

To give credit where it is due, it should be noted that a large part of the financial support for the people-to-people initiatives under the ASEAN comes from Japan. Japan has been actively supporting

Track II processes, particularly those involving education and community building through the youth. It is strange that Japan's important yet quiet role in ASEAN social cooperation has been so little noticed.

The Beginnings of an East Asian Community

In November 2004, the 8th ASEAN+3 (China, Japan and South Korea) Summit officially declared the establishment of an East Asian Community as a long-term goal by 2013. In addition, by 2013, ASEAN should have set-up an FTA with the Plus Three countries. The ASEAN+3 processes have already spawned 16 areas of cooperation that include: political and security; economic, monetary and finance; trade; agriculture, fisheries and forestry; energy; environment; tourism; transportation; health; labor; arts and culture; science and technology; ICT; social welfare; youth; and rural development. Existing Track II mechanisms in East Asia such as the Network of East Asian Think-tanks (NEAT) and the East Asia Forum (EAF) have been actively providing support to the community-building process.

In his remarks on East Asia Cooperation at the Joint Study Convention of East Asia Cooperation & the Third East Asia Forum last October 2005, Amb. Wu Jianmin said, "Our exploration for regional cooperation has been going on for years. During this process, an East Asian identity has been emerging. I summarize it as 4Cs and one O. The 4 Cs refer to consultation, consensus, cooperation, and comfortable level; the one O is openness, or open regionalism. Today some scholars added one more C to my formula, that is, closeness. This is a very good idea. Now I define the emerging East Asia identity as 5Cs plus one O."⁸

Despite this progress, the region still needs more initiatives to build an East Asian community. A colleague of mine at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Prof. Chung Min Lee, shared with me some of his ideas on further initiatives that could be taken. In his words, they are as follows:

- 1) **"The Creation of an "Asian T.V. Station."** The renaissance in Asian culture is a key facet of the growing "branding" of Asia in the world today. The growing popularity of Korean T.V. dramas and movies across much of Asia, the success of Bollywood and Chinese movies in the West, and a slow but steady increase in Asian sports stars who have made it to the "major leagues" in the West all attest to the power of culture. To date, there is no such thing as a "European T.V. channel" and the closest cousin in Asia is Star TV. The success of Al-Jazeera in the Middle East can be duplicated in East Asia with the collusion of three resources: (1) capital, (2) information technologies (Asia is the world's leader), and (3) great content. This station would be staffed by Asians for Asians but with an outward looking, more globalized perspective. Still, it would be an intrinsically Asian medium.
- 2) **Creating an "Asian Nobel Prize" to recognize Asian achievements.** A non-governmental international foundation could be created with donations from the ASEAN+3 countries (weighted contributions) and corporations in order to reward outstanding Asian nationals in economics,

⁸ Remarks of Amb. Wu Jianmin, President of the China Foreign Affairs University, on East Asia Cooperation at the Joint Study Convention of East Asia Cooperation & the Third East Asia Forum. 30 – 31 October 2005. "Identity, Risks & Priority Cooperation." Network of East Asian Think-tanks. <http://www.neat.org.cn/neatweb_en/hysj/contentshow.php?content_id=63>.

culture (including literature), peace building, etc. The Magsaysay Award comes closest but it does not have the gravitas of a Nobel Prize or even the MacArthur awards.

- 3) **Targeted Elementary, Middle and High School Exchange Programs.** Educational exchange programs are usually limited to university and post-graduate students in the region. One initiative would be to set goals (e.g., 1% of each countries primary, middle and high school students) to spend one year in another Asian country. For students from less developed countries, the costs could be subsidized by the richer countries. Students from NE Asia should, in principle, go as exchange students to SE Asia and vice versa.
- 4) **An Asian version of the UN's "Junior Program Officer or JPO" for the private and public sectors.** The ASEAN+3 countries would support and launch an Asian JPO program in order to provide work experiences for young Asian leaders throughout the region for 1-2 year attachments. This has never been done before and such a program would enable college graduates to spend real time working on specific public or private sector initiatives and problems. Wherever possible, Asian JPOs from the two sub-regions would be attached to offices other than their own regions.

I support these suggestions by Prof. Chung Min. Creative ideas such as these are strongly needed to revitalize community-building in the region.

Conclusion

In short, while the overall picture of citizen-led cooperation in East Asia is a mixed one, there are reasons to be optimistic. Despite the many possibilities for regional rivalries and conflicts, the guns are silent. A tidal wave of common sense has enveloped the region. Both governments and populations realize that this is the moment for the region to focus on regional cooperation, not regional rivalries. This strong regional dynamic is likely to preserve the many positive tendencies in the region.

Japan has a crucial role to play in all this. It remains, by far, the most prosperous member of the East Asian community. It has been generous with its foreign aid programmes, including in the support of citizen-led initiatives in the region. But Japanese money may no longer be enough. Japanese ideas are also needed. Japan has to make the big decision on whether to remain as a follower of the West or a leader or companion of the East. If Japan were to decide that a strong sense of community in East Asia would be in Japan's long-term interests, there is no doubt that this would provide a huge boost to the region's community-building efforts. The time for the decision has come. The region will watch intently as Japan formulates its policies in this area.

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Japan Center for Economic Research (JCER)

Nikkei Kayabacho Bldg. 2-6-1 Nihombashi Kayabacho, Chuo-ku, Tokyo 103-0025, Japan
Phone:81-3-3639-2810 / FAX:81-3-3639-2839 / E-mail:jcernet@jcer.or.jp