

June 27, 2005

An Open Community Based on Universal Values

By ITO Kenichi

East Asia stands at the historic crossroads today. In the economic aspect, East Asia is now a tremendous source of dynamism for the entire world, and the process toward de facto regional economic integration is in progress. Wide-ranging functional cooperation is moving forward in a variety of areas including FTAs, finance, and the transnational issues. Moreover, in social and cultural spheres, a new middle class—one which shares the same lifestyles and interests—is emerging in East Asian countries, and this class is shaping new cultural phenomena and values. On the other hand, from the political and security aspects, enormous diversity and disparities still exist among the countries in the region, particularly in the political principles and regimes as well as in recognitions of security threats. Various political problems cast shadows over the future of the region, for which the current state of Japan-China relations is just an example.

In order to achieve the creation of an East Asian community, we need to develop our own original approaches based on the actual situation in the region. The experiences of Europe and other regions may give us many valuable insights and lessons regarding the creation of a region-wide community, but we cannot just apply the same approaches to East Asia. Mr. Yasushi Akashi, former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations who made great efforts for peace building in Cambodia and the former Yugoslavia, makes a very pertinent point when he says that “for peace building, a different methodology is necessary for each and every case, and each approach must be tailor-made.” In the same way, approaches for regional community-building must also be “tailor-made.” It would be a mistake to try to apply the same European methodology to East Asia. At the same time, just because the European methodology cannot be applied to East Asia, we should not be pessimistic about the prospects for the creation of an East Asian community.

Then, what kind of approach is appropriate for East Asia? Many people argue that a “functional approach” rather than an “institutional approach” is best suited to East Asia. I, too, share this view. Considering the situation in East Asia, it would be very difficult to establish anytime soon political institutions similar to the EU’s. A much more realistic approach is to start from promoting functional cooperation in various areas and sectors. But in order to create a region-wide community, it will be essential not only to promote functional cooperation but also to foster common values in the region, which could be called the ethos of the community. These common values provide the basis for the fostering of mutual trust and confidence as well as a

shared sense of community among the countries in the region. They also serve as a catalyst for bringing together the different lines of cooperation in the various functional fields and integrating them into the comprehensive entirety of the community. In light of the diversity in East Asia, fostering common values in the region is by no means an easy task. But this makes it all the more incumbent on us to develop original and effective methods for doing so.

The origins of the common values in Europe can be traced both (a) to the shared historical roots reaching back to the early days of Christianity, Roman law, Latin, and so forth, and (b) to the more modern universal values represented by liberal democracy and market economy. We can, of course, theoretically consider taking a similar approach for East Asia. However, the problem is that Asia is far more diverse in cultures, religions and ethnicities than Europe, and it is not easy to identify common traditional values shared across the region. Rather we should try to find commonality in the region's tolerance in accepting this diversity of cultures, religions, and traditions. In either case, finding the true state of values and perceptions in East Asia is an increasingly important endeavor from now. We are placing high expectations on the results of projects in this area, such as the Promotion of East Asian Studies project, headed by Professor Akihiko Tanaka of Tokyo University, and the Asia Barometer Survey project, led by Professor Takashi Inoguchi of Chuo University.

With reference to the universal values like freedom, human rights, and democracy, although we call them "universal," they are clearly originated in modern Western societies. It is thus difficult to claim that these values have taken root in East Asia to a level comparable to that in the Western world. At the same time, in East Asia the process of democratization is progressing steadily, step by step, in the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, and other countries, and the importance of these universal values is increasingly well recognized. Moreover, references to universal values like democracy have come to be incorporated as an essential element in statements and documents issued by regional summit meetings, such as the Tokyo Declaration issued by the Japan-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in 2003, the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II by the 2003 ASEAN Summit, and the Declaration of Strategic Partnership by the Asia-Africa Summit in April of this year. Moreover, the "new middle class," which is expected to be the cadre for the creation of an East Asian community in the future, is a generation of globalization. When this generation comes to occupy the nucleus of East Asian societies, greater possibilities will open up for universal values to take root in a genuine sense.

Looked at in this way, I believe we should search for the origins of East Asian common values both in Asian values rooted in the history of the region as well as in the universal values shared by the modern world. The search for, and recognition of, Asian values will serve to clarify the identity of an East Asian community and contribute to the creation of prosperous societies and cultures that retain their own uniqueness and originality. On the other side, the genuine realization of the universal values will facilitate the establishment of more dynamic and mature

social, economic, and political institutions. Moreover, the common values forged in this way will greatly contribute to the fostering of mutual trust and confidence among the countries in the region and to the enhancing of understanding of, and trust in, the creation of an East Asian community among countries outside of the region. I already alluded to the problems between Japan and China at the beginning of my remarks, but I believe that these problems currently bedeviling the Japan-China relationship have arisen largely because trust and confidence based on shared values has not been fostered between the two countries.

At the East Asia Summit to be held in December of this year, the leaders of the participating countries should agree to make the sharing of values—values both Asian and universal in nature—one of the important pillars underpinning the fundamental principles for regional cooperation with a view to creating a region-wide community in the future. They should then make clear their aspiration to realize an Asian-like East Asia, which is richly unique and diverse, as well as to build a new East Asia, in which respect for freedom, human rights, and democracy is genuinely rooted. Moreover, Japan, which has realized to a high degree both Asian and universal values, should demonstrate strong leadership in this endeavor.

(This is the text of a speech delivered by Prof. ITO Kenichi, President of the Council on East Asian Community, in the 4th “Japan-ASEAN Dialogue” on “The Prospect for East Asian Community and Regional Cooperation” held by the Global Forum of Japan in Tokyo on June 12-13, 2005.)