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# The Idea of New International Order China Is Seeking and An East Asia Community (3)

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### 3. The Concept of the East Asia Community for China

Up to now, China's foreign policy has consisted of the basic principle of addressing specific problems through bilateral negotiations with the parties involved and a global grand strategy (for example, the "Three World theory," meaning a strategy against hegemonism, the "Big Triangle theory," referring to a power game among the United States, the Soviet Union and China), and there was a lack of ideas for an intermediate strategic space in between. However, as mentioned earlier, China began to actively seek to establish mechanisms for cooperation with neighboring countries and areas from around 2000. As a strategic reason for this, since the 16th Party Congress, it came to regard East Asia clearly as an important strategic region. This recognition was explicit in Wang Yi's statements such as "make friends with neighbors and make neighbors partners" and "neighboring countries form the most important foothold for China to defend its sovereignty and interests and play an international role." Another paper emphasizes that "Giving priority to multilateral mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific region should contribute to establishing a strong foothold for China to advocate the solidarity and mutual assistance of Asian countries and to defend the sovereignty and interests of our country...China will have powerful backing if it can forge friendship with neighboring countries, stabilize the areas surrounding it and promote cooperation in the region."

These arguments developed into the idea of an "East Asia Community." Men Honghua, associate professor at the Central Party School, points out that "strengthening cooperative and collaborative relationships with neighboring countries is the most important objective in China's geopolitical strategy. China should establish the leading position in economic cooperation with neighboring countries and promote the 'integration of East Asia' through economic cooperation." Ruan Zongze goes as far as emphasizing that "diplomacy toward neighboring countries is a new thinking" and "China's position in economic cooperation in East Asia stands out, and the scale of the market it can provide for East Asia exceeds that of Japan," adding that "China and neighboring countries are developing and prospering as one and beginning to share a common destiny."

In 2004, moves were launched at the government level to promote the "East Asia Community."

In April, the Institute of Diplomacy, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sponsored a symposium on the “East Asia Community,” at which then Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi delivered a keynote speech. In that speech, he put forward China’s strategy, in a very cautious but comprehensive way. He emphasized: (1) there is no need to define the significance of the East Asia Community prematurely, and for the time being, China will focus on economic cooperation and proceed steadily with security dialogue and cooperation; (2) China will support the leading role of ASEAN, and at the same time China, Japan and South Korea will try to make use of their advantages and play the greatest roles possible; (3) China does not think that China and Japan are vying for leadership and hopes to see the development of regional cooperation in East Asia through China-Japan cooperation; and (4) China will place weight on dialogue and cooperation with outside countries such as the United States and practice “open regionalism.” At the ASEAN+China meeting, held in Qingdao in June, Chinese officials described the realization of the East Asia Community as the long-term objective of East Asian cooperation and emphasized the need to hold a summit meeting of East Asian countries and China’s support for the leading role to be played by ASEAN. Further, at the ASEAN+3 Summit in Jakarta in July, Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing in his remarks reemphasized the above-described points.

Outside of the economic realm, what moves is China making concerning the “integration of East Asia” (the community)? One such move is related to the issue of identity. At the level of “social integration theory,” the above-mentioned “actually progressing (economic) regional integration” should be interpreted absolutely in a functional context, and the expansion and institutionalization of functional integration does not necessarily result in a “community.” Integration in terms of social structures cannot be said to be making “progress” and is only at the stage of “signs.” Under such circumstances, the idea of “building a common home for Asia” which China has been espousing since around 2000 merits some attention. Subsequently, experts from many countries have put forth ideas for “a common home of Northeast Asia” and “a common home of East Asia,” with several activities actually under way to realize these ideas.

In a sense, these moves may indicate the beginning of an approach toward what Benedict Anderson calls the “awareness of ‘we’” that is to be created through languages of ethnic groups, religious rites and cultural activities, or the process of vaguely condensing “something envisaged as an image,” that is, the creation of “imagined political communities.” However, as is well known, the structure of the identity of East Asia is not so simple that it can be explained by the single term “multi-layered.” It is an “intricate situation,” where national identities, ethnic identities, religions as supranational identities are found and despite some forms of elite identities chaos is common among common people.

Moreover, there is an unavoidable problem in addressing the “Chinese identity” though China is potentially the biggest comprehensive identity. If the “Chinese nation” with its population of over 1.3 billion forms a cohesive identity, it becomes the core identity, overwhelming Japan (130 million), South Korea (47 million) and ASEAN (a little less than 500 million). Moreover, if

its identity as Confucian culture (Chinese culture) is pursued, it covers all of Northeast Asia and Vietnam. Is the “common home of Asia” idea as proposed by China based on this Chinese identity? Certainly, there are some scholars in China who argue for that kind of Chinese identity.

However, as long as the identity is defined as an “awareness of ‘we’” that is formed endogenously through certain activities, the idea of a “common home of Asia” cannot be considered the same as the “expanded Chinese identity.” In fact, it is common knowledge that there is a serious and widening identity rift between mainland China and Taiwan, both of which can be described as the same Chinese nation. Moreover, the problem of the identity of ASEAN itself, which has grown into a stable organization for regional cooperation following many twists and turns since its inception in 1967, cannot be made light of either. Thus, the formation of a “common home of East Asia” (the identity) corresponding to the economic EAC is still in a process of groping.

Another important non-economic matter involves ideas and developments regarding regional cooperation in the area of security. Developments in the past couple of years show that China is eager to build a mechanism for East Asian regional cooperation in the area of security as well as economy. For example, though the statement has only a symbolic significance at present, in the summer of 2003 China expressed its intention to join the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and in July 2004 the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing stated China would “actively participate in regional security cooperation” and proposed the holding of a first meeting of security policy in China, which the ARF officially accepted. China has also taken the initiative at the six-party consultations on the Korean Peninsula nuclear problem, which began in August 2003. In fact, China is seeking to turn the six-party consultations into a future permanent forum, the “Northeast Asia Security Organization” (overseas edition of the People’s Daily, August 30, 2003) and to build a “peace mechanism” that also covers non-traditional security issues (White Paper on Diplomacy, 2004). Though not designed for East Asia, the Shanghai Five, formed in 1996 with the objectives of monitoring and exchanging information on independence movements of ethnic minorities and the promotion of economic cooperation, evolved into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which since last year also covers security cooperation such as joint military exercises.

Why, then, did China change its policy and start to eagerly to seek the establishment of a “regional community”? The establishment and development of a framework for regional cooperation in East Asia would: (1) allow China to develop stable economic interdependence with neighboring countries to promote mutual benefits in economic development and to respond through cooperation with other countries to economic attacks (including the precedent of the Asian monetary crisis in 1997) from the outside (particularly the United States), and (2) contribute to the realization of the “great restoration of the Chinese nation,” the priority goal of China’s national strategy. The key point in (2) is for China to win the appreciation and respect befitting a leader of international society while maintaining the national strength to allow it to

spurn the imposition of other countries' intentions.

However, going beyond that, China seems to be also seeking: (3) to build a "framework for an East Asian order" of its own that could influence the international society as a whole in the future. Before anything else, if the East Asian region as a whole can increase its comprehensive strength as a regional bloc and if China can take the initiative in the region, though initially in a restrained manner, it would be able to acquire the capacity to avoid China bashing (e.g., the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999) and interference in domestic affairs (Tibet, Taiwan, democratization and so forth) by the United States. In the longer perspective, however, it appears that China thinks it may be able to destabilize the "hegemonistic order imposed by the United States alone" that China has never fundamentally accepted. China seems to design the establishment of a three sphere-oriented international order (North America led by the United States + the EU + the East Asia Community) in the future, over a certain period of time (perhaps over 10 to 20 years).

For example, Zhang Yunling, director of the Institute of Asian and Pacific Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, made the following remarks at a round-table discussion on "regional cooperation in East Asia and the United States": "We do not need the United States for regional cooperation in East Asia. We are not saying that its existence is not important. We are trying to find our own independent way of cooperation in economics, politics and security in the East Asian region. For example, needless to say, the United States is not in the European Union (EU). Still, the United States and Europe maintain relations. In U.S.-Europe relations, the United States is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). I think an ideal for relations between the United States and East Asia would be the relationship that exists between the United States and Europe. To achieve that sort of relationship, first, we have to firmly establish a system of cooperation in East Asia."

Admittedly, whether Zhang Yunling's ideas are commonly accepted in China needs to be examined further. For example, his ideas sound slightly different from the above-mentioned keynote speech by Wang Yi. However, as pointed out earlier, China is fundamentally raising an objection to the "unipolar hegemonistic order" imposed by the United States, and previously advocated "multipolarization" to back up this opposition. But this opposition is not as effective as China might have hoped. Given this, however, it would not be so off the mark to judge that China is setting its sights on a new "three sphere-oriented order." Besides, its emphasis on ASEAN's leading role sounds more like just a compliment to ASEAN nations. In reality, China-led moves are actively underway toward the establishment of mechanisms for regional cooperation, such as FTAs with ASEAN, the creation of the SCO, the six-party consultations on North Korea, and the proposal for a Northeast Asian security organization. Needless to say, China is taking advantage of its status as the only permanent member of the U.N. Security Council from Asia to push its own initiatives for the promotion of regional cooperation.

**(This is the text of an article by Prof. AMAKO Satoshi, Professor of Waseda University and Member of the Council on East Asian Community, which was originally posted on the website of “Amako Ajia-ron” (<http://eac.cocolog-nifty.com/amako/>).)**