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Managing the Rise Of Asia

by *Surakiart Sathirathai*



THE RISE OF Southeast Asia is changing Asia, and the rise of Asia is changing the world. No question facing the international community is more urgent than whether Asia's economic, political and cultural rise will be peaceful and Asia's increasing prosperity widely shared. The commonplace observation has all too often proved true: Rising powers can disturb their neighborhoods and destabilize world order. We in Asia have a special responsibility now to ensure that these changes are peaceful, that they spread prosperity, and that they contribute to global respect for our common environment and for the values of our common humanity.

To meet these obligations, we must remain open to one another, respecting the diversity of our paths forward, and cooperating with one another as we build our common future. We must also remain open to the world and to new ideas. Dramatic

changes demand the most creative responses. We succeed only in partnership with friends outside Asia and with the help of the institutions of the world community.

In Europe, it took three generations of Franco-German warfare before an entente between them could drive economic, legal and political cooperation. For all the contributions the other smaller nations made over the years, the engine for European integration has remained the larger powers. The result is a complex, but largely unified economic, legal and increasingly political union.

In Asia, we have also had wars—but the engine for cooperation has been shaped more directly by economic opportunities and cultural links. We did not begin with an entente among the larger players, exhausted from conflict; rather the smaller

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powers have played a more central role. Indeed, the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have moved most quickly to institutionalize multilateral collaboration.

The history of the European Union cannot be told without appreciating its relationship to the North Atlantic Alliance, to the Bretton Woods institutions, and to the broader context of East-West relations before and after the Cold War. Nevertheless, the project of European unification has often functioned as a *de facto* geographical and cultural limit on European statecraft. Although Europe is certainly not a “fortress,” there is no question that European “identity” remains central in designing the political agenda for common efforts.

As in Europe, Asian cooperation has always been undertaken in the context of a diverse network of bilateral and multilateral alliances, collaborative institutions and economic partnerships with the rest of the world. Nevertheless, our experience of the Cold War was different—for many Asian nations, it was not at all cold, and nor did it end as dramatically. We suffered hot wars in Korea and Vietnam during the “post-war” period. The sharp regime changes in East and Central Europe after 1989, and the rapid transition from outside to inside the European framework, had no parallel in Asia. Rather, our national regimes have followed diverse patterns of transformation—some rapid, some less so—with quite different end points in view.

Throughout, economic arrangements were closer to the center of our collaborative imagination. Economic opening has often proceeded more swiftly than political

opening. At the same time, all major Asian powers have very significant cultural, economic and political alliances with powers outside Asia. “Asian identity” and “Asian integration” have not been at the center of our institutional collaboration.

Significant fault lines continue to cross the Asian political landscape. The Korean peninsula remains the most salient, but conflict at any number of international flash points in Asia is not difficult to imagine. Over the past year we have been reminded, for example, of tension between China and Japan. As a result, the structure of inter-Asian cooperation will differ from that in Europe. More significantly, the peaceful rise of Asia will depend on the steady, patient help of friends and allies outside Asia, and on the availability of global multilateral institutions.

Inside Asia, we find more diverse institutions and diplomatic arrangements for cooperation, spearheaded by various players. Many have been rooted in bilateral cooperation, often among the larger Asian states. We should be encouraged by the strengthening of bilateral cooperation between China and India, or India and Russia. Across Asia, the result is a complex landscape of longstanding bilateral friendships and new partnerships.

Institutions Hold the Key

MANAGING ASIA’S RISE is, in the language of the League of Nations, a project of “peaceful change.” It will require the subtle and dynamic engagement of bilateral and multilateral institutions and more informal arrangements. There is much ex-

perience on which we can draw. We have also long had more ad hoc multilateral efforts to address particular issues, often involving powers outside Asia; the response to SARS, tsunami relief and the talks with North Korea are examples. Many other collaborative efforts have come from the private sector, or had strong public/private partnerships as a foundation.

Consequently, the institutional resources and experiences at our disposal as we think about managing Asia's peaceful rise are complex. Henry Kissinger famously quipped that Europe has no telephone number to call. Neither does Asia—nor should it aspire to have one. Asia's multilateral future will be a complex and changing tapestry of diverse arrangements, all linked to partners outside Asia. Managing Asia's rise will be a game played on many boards at once. Only by being knit to one another and to the world will we develop the capacity to manage the dramatic political and economic transformations in Asia peacefully.

Our common experience is one of extremely rapid change. Globalization has brought new threats to all of our doors—threats to our security, to our prosperity, to our health, to our most cherished ways of life. Astonishing advances have left behind an equally astonishing world of crushing poverty. To face these challenges our diplomatic and institutional machinery—in Asia as in the larger world—must be reinvented, reformed and reinforced.

Our multilateral institutions must be made more effective and accountable. Wise plans for reform abound—we must have the will and commitment to see them through. We will also need new ideas and

new tools. Our multilateral institutions should be incubators for new ideas, clearing houses for sharing experience, resources for national and local experimentation. Global cities, transnational enterprises, nongovernmental institutions—all must be partners. We must learn from the experiences of government—but we must be open to ideas and practices from other sectors—management tools from the private sector, spiritual tools from the world's religious communities. Working in the private sector, I have seen the significance of the entrepreneurial spirit and the importance of wise and steady management.

The diverse and overlapping plurality of cooperative frameworks in Asia may offer lessons for the global community. No one institution can do it all. We must be prepared to experiment, to change course. Programs and institutions must be reviewed regularly to ensure that resources devoted to them are still productive, and to open space for new initiatives.

Poverty, the Great Enemy

OUR PROSPERITY WILL continue to be a function of our openness to the world. Asian prosperity is rooted in trade and relies on the stable financial, legal and political structures that are the foundation for commerce. We have learned that there is no single way forward to prosperity—there are many. But all require accountable institutions and stable global markets. We also know that prosperity must be shared to be stable.

For all its economic progress, Asia remains home to 60% of the world's poor.

Poverty eradication must be our first priority. All poverty is local—to the family, the village, the neighborhood. Solutions must be local. But local solutions must be linked to the global economy and supported at national and international levels.

The United Nations Millennium Development Goals are a strong beginning. We must find the commitment to redeem their promises by action. Much can be done through South-South cooperation to build the local conditions—and share the local knowledge—necessary to turn financial resources into real economic prosperity. In some nations, roads, air links and Internet connectivity will be the first priority—in others disease control, soil fertility and expanded educational opportunities. The competitiveness of small- and medium-sized enterprises—and the sound institutions and security necessary for all individuals to make choices to improve their standard of living—will be crucial everywhere. Markets rest on institutions, and institutions are embedded in cultures. Whatever we wish our institutions to achieve, they must first be well managed, their staff alive to new possibilities, their procedures transparent and accountable.

Sustainable development begins at home, but it does not stay at home. The principle of “Prosper Thy Neighbor” guides Thailand’s policy with our immediate neighbors. We are forging strategic economic cooperation in our neighborhood, to improve use of our natural resources, share responsibility for infrastructure, develop new products, link our markets, and strengthen our joint participation in the in-

ternational economy. We can help one another meet the Millenium Development Goals. With proper leadership, the “Prosper Thy Neighbor” principle yields more than a better living standard. It can encourage a stronger real commitment to human rights and freedom. Respect for one’s neighbors must always be tempered by an insistence that all respect human rights and human dignity. Only by working together will we achieve an Asian future that embraces human freedom and provides for our common security.

In Asia, we must also strengthen our regional financial institutions. That we must no longer strive for reckless economic growth is well recognized. A new regional financial infrastructure could help prevent—and manage—future crises. An Asian bond market, improved multilateral machinery for swapping foreign reserves to ease liquidity problems in times of crisis, and improved surveillance mechanisms would all strengthen our regional financial architecture. As we learn to prevent financial crises, we will contribute to global financial stability.

Prosperity is more than economic performance. It is also, in Amartya Sen’s words, a matter of “human flourishing” and the possibilities for human freedom. Economic growth must enhance respect for our environment, for human dignity and human rights. Health and education are not only important for development—their achievement defines development. The rise of Asia will be a boon for the world if we contribute to the global respect for human dignity, if we add to our common local, national and global experience of democracy and offer

new opportunities for the responsible exercise of political freedom.

Prosperity and peace are linked. Conflict can wipe out a generation of economic progress in an afternoon. Communities trapped in the nightmare of poverty can stoke the embers of ethnic conflict and political extremism. Many of the world's most urgent issues of peace and security, most intractable boundary disputes, most tense bilateral relations, are found in Asia—non-proliferation, the threat of new epidemics, of humanitarian catastrophe, of ideological terrorism, the threat of nationalist division. Here too the call for new ideas and practices is urgent. Above all, we know that the peace we seek will not be the peace of the status quo—urgent change is upon us. We must rekindle the aspiration for collective security and peaceful change. To manage peace we must learn to manage change.

There are hopeful signs. Diplomatic and institutional cooperation across Asia has never been deeper. Maritime cooperation in Southeast Asia is intensifying. We see new regional confidence-building measures and security cooperation paradigms taking shape. The conflict-prevention experience of the Asean Regional Forum serves as a significant security dialogue in the Asia-Pacific region. I am particularly proud to have been part of the effort to build the Asian Cooperation Dialogue. In this, the first ever pan-Asian framework, we have stressed inclusiveness and respect for diversity—rather than institutional form. We have quite consciously avoided institutionalization, as we have sought to avoid pushing any one nation or government beyond their own comfort level with

cooperative endeavors. Now in its fourth year, the ACD has matured into a dynamic and unique framework. This novel structure now comprises 28 members representing 85% of all the subregions of Asia with 19 areas of broad cooperation projects that are yielding results. We should nourish these institutions. But we also need new ways to manage crises and promote peace. In Asia, we stress the principle of noninterference in one another's internal affairs—even as we seek one another's advice. We should strengthen the frameworks for informal dialogue and consultation, crisscrossing the region with opportunities for collaboration.

Asia's Commitment to Action

IT IS OFTEN said that in Asia one speaks clearest when one speaks indirectly. I may know someone very well, but should we have a problem, I might turn to a third person, whom I may know far less well, and speak to them so that they might speak to my friend. In diplomacy, we call this “good offices” or “third-party mediation.”

Many countries in Asia have had positive experiences in providing such good offices. Whether it is done multilaterally, for example, in the Asean Regional Forum “playing field,” or unilaterally, as Indonesia has done in the Moro conflict in the Philippines, these are useful lessons for managing the process of peaceful change in Asia—and in the world. The friend who offers good offices must be a fair and honest broker, and act as trustee for the aspirations of all parties. If the rise of Asia is to be managed peacefully we will need the

good offices of all our friends and international institutions.

As we build the institutions to manage Asia's rise, accountability should be our motto: accountability of states to their citizens, of states to one another, of international institutions to their members, and of this present generation to future ones. We should be careful that this means the right thing in the right context. The accountability of international institutions is a matter of strategic partnership and shared objectives. The accountability of our institutional management is one of honesty and absolutely faithful adherence to rules. The accountability of our institutions and diplomatic initiatives to citizens is a matter of political and moral commitment, requiring transparency and opportunities for dialogue and democratic choice.

I am convinced that Southeast Asia is pivotal to Asia's peaceful and prosperous rise in the world. Our neighborhood is a natural bridge between West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia and Northeast Asia. Through multilateral cooperation within Southeast Asia we have helped each other find solutions to common problems. We can be a crossroads for new ideas, new collaboration, new modes of management.

Through our multilateral frameworks we affirm a common vision that peace is more than the absence of conflict, and that prosperity is more than a growing GDP. In Southeast Asia, we know that prosperity must be shared to be stable. We have learned that for peace to endure, it must put down roots in social justice and social inclusion. Where prosperity remains a promise only for the few, the many can look in,

but may find no entry other than to smash the screen. For Asia's rise to contribute to global peace and prosperity, our integration must not be inward-looking. The emerging Asian community will be inclusive, not exclusive. We seek not only our own prosperity, but global prosperity. Ours will be an open regionalism.

Asian cooperation must link our economies, cultures and politics to the broader world. Partnerships for peace and prosperity must extend beyond neighboring countries. South-South cooperation, regional solutions—all this can multiply the force of self-reliance and build habits of peaceful change. There are many promising beginnings, such as enhanced linkages between Asia and Africa, and the recent Latin American and Arab Summit. We have also strengthened our regional linkages with Europe and the Pacific. Together, we will be better equipped to respond to new threats, such as epidemics, terrorism and transnational crime, all of which can only be defeated through collective strategies and collective responsibility.

Looking at all we have accomplished together here in Asia over the last generation, I am profoundly encouraged that the rise of Asia will be managed peacefully. Moreover, by building Asia into the world, we have the potential to reinvigorate the broader multilateral system. We have heard the slogan "Asia is rising" for many generations. Our aspirations have so often before been thwarted by complex and destabilizing forces both at home and in the international system. This time, let us translate our commitments into action. I am hopeful that the goal is within reach. ■