

Asia's Role in Global Governance



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Asia as a Method

The concept of global governance emerged with the end of the Cold War. Amid a new trend of globalization – the quick and massive transnational circulation of money, goods, people, and ideas – the basic concept was inseparable from the Cold War winners' fundamental values. As Francis Fukuyama wrote, Western liberal democracy was dealt with as if it were “the end point of mankind's ideological evolution” or “the final form of human government” (*The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992).

At the turn of the 21st century, the advanced practice and enlarging process of European integration was reasonably believed to be a role model for future global governance. In fact, for former Eastern bloc countries to accede to the European Union, the Copenhagen Criteria (1993) required strict conditions such as “democracy, the rule of law, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union”. Thus, the EU essentially attempted to homogenize the new members in terms of values by legal power.

We all know the reality. By the 2010s, the EU model was seriously hamstrung and receiving a backlash. In particular, social and economic frictions between new immigrants and old local inhabitants raised fundamental questions. The original “European” peoples gradually became more anxious, frustrated, and antagonized by this mission to universalize their liberal values, and gradually shifted toward “Euroscepticism” or “anti-globalism” sentiments, as now most immediately symbolized by “Brexit”.

Today, Asia is expected to take initiatives in leading global governance against the background of its increasing economic power. This reminds me of a famous remark of Takeuchi Yoshimi, a Japanese critic of the postwar period. In 1961, in a lecture titled *Hoho to shite no Aja* (“Asia as a Method”), this China expert stated: “Contemporary Asia can digest excellent Western values again and adjust them to Asian society in its favor in order to accomplish them on a larger scale, and thus the Eastern can proactively reform the Western. This rollback of cultures and values can create universality.” Though Asia nations still struggle with many challenges in their domestic economies on their own, I would like to highlight in this essay the possibility of Asian contributions to global governance.

ASEAN Diversity & Sustainability

It is interesting to note that ASEAN was formed in the same year as the official birth of the European Communities (EC), the precursor of the EU. In 1967, the Brussels Treaty, signed two years earlier, came into

force, merging the three executive bodies of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom) and the European Economic Community (EEC) into the EC, with 39 articles in 5 chapters. In contrast, the formation of ASEAN was lightly declared by five foreign ministers (not top leaders) with a signature paper of merely about 735 words. Unlike the EC, which comprised similar political systems, economic levels, religion and culture, ASEAN started with very different countries of diverse backgrounds. The founding members even included territorial disputants with war memories still fresh. Indonesia's national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (“Unity in diversity”) was naturally applied to ASEAN's proposition.

In contrast to many expectations, ASEAN has successfully developed into Asia's oldest such institution, surviving the volatility in the international order. By 1999, all Southeast Asian countries including former socialist countries had become members. ASEAN slowly but surely evolved into a permanent institutional body and became a legal entity with the ASEAN Charter (effectuated in 2008). In addition, in the post-Cold War era, ASEAN actively proposed and engaged in broader regional cooperation with external powers, sitting in the “driver's seat”. Frameworks such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), ASEAN Plus Three, and the East Asia Summit (EAS) – even though often sarcastically called “initiative without threats”, “rented tatami rooms” and “merely talk shops” – have enabled extra-regional members to meet and associate with each other on a global scale. Thus, ASEAN could be said to be more diverse and perhaps more sustainable than the EU, and it has contributed modestly toward global governance.

Scholars of regionalism often compare the hard integration or rigid institutionalism of the EU with the softer and looser approach of ASEAN. ASEAN's traditional *modus operandi*, known as the “ASEAN Way”, essentially consists of two historically indigenous customs: consultation (*musyawarah*) and consensus (*muafakat*). In fact, in 1963 when Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines first organized regional cooperation to solve territorial disputes, the three countries of Malay origin named their Greater Malay Confederation “*musyawarah Maphilindo*” and emphasized the native bonds by intentionally retaining the Malay expression. (The organization dismantled a month later.)

Consultation and consensus were traditional ways of decision-making practiced in Java Island villages. Its management style was totally different from Western colonial ways which depended on force or regulations. It was also distinct from Northeast Asia's stable hierarchical structures based on Confucianism. In fact, its central idea is participation on the basis of equality for conflict prevention. Consultation is a voluntary action of listening to different opinions in advance, while consensus, with no apparent winners or losers,

guarantees the sustainability of the decision made. They knew that losers would be potential enemies or avengers in the future. This culture of local governance is basically a negation of the mechanism of the majority vote, or Benthamism (“It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong”) in the Western tradition.

Yet ASEAN methods also have risky elements. To achieve a compromise between different interests often relies on the personal qualities of leaders or intermediaries. This basically does not sit well with open legal procedures, transparent manners or accountability. Rather, it easily shifts into a grey zone which generates possible corruption. The key players need to be wise. Another weak point is that consensus-based decisions tend to merely produce low levels of achievement and effectivity. Yet Asian pacifists tend to think “slow” is better than “conflictive” and accept gradualism as a safer way or proceeding.

House of Liberalism for Non-state Actors

People may think that Asia is full of nationalism, but we can also see the region’s hidden liberalism from different perspectives. ASEAN is a legal entity and in fact a signatory of many treaties and agreements. Asian regional architecture under the initiative of smaller Southeast Asian countries’ union seems to support the liberal theory of international relations that says states ultimately can cooperate rather than compete.

Internally, ASEAN also embraces further liberal thinking. Even though its traditional non-interventionist principle remains formally in place, ASEAN as a collective unit conspicuously stands as a “People’s ASEAN” under the ASEAN Charter. Its guiding principles do cover liberal values such as adherence to the rule of law, good governance, democracy, human rights, and trade rules (ASEAN Charter, Article 2, especially Section (h), (i), (n)). Thus, the existence of ASEAN is theoretically to free people or individuals from the control of national sovereignty, which is an idea similar to global governance.

Further evidence of Asia’s liberal nature is the unique presence of Taiwan, which is diplomatically a “non-state” actor but functioning as a real “civil society”. No Asian country formally recognizes Taiwan’s sovereignty, yet all its neighbors maintain substantial socio-economic relations with Taiwan independently from mainland China. They have acquired diplomatic techniques in a customized formula and China flexibly tolerates Taiwan’s unofficial relations with foreign countries. Despite consistent cross-straits controversy, bilateral relations between Taiwan and mainland China through NGOs have advanced practically in this region. Taiwan’s regional and global experience would suggest how a civil society can situate itself or function under a form of global governance without governmental relations.

The presence of non-state actors such as ASEAN and Taiwan symbolizes Asia’s essentially liberal nature. Without professional wisdom in managing differences and difficulties, such unique non-state actors could not have prevailed for such a long time. Japan’s postwar diplomacy has also contributed significantly to this regional order. Japan has always supported the liberal direction of ASEAN’s institutional growth, especially after the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine, in which Japan openly promised to cooperate as an “equal partner” positively with ASEAN in their own efforts to strengthen their solidarity and

resilience. And with Taiwan it first practiced such a formula by maintaining substantial private relations even after the 1972 diplomatic rupture between Taiwan and Japan after the normalization of Japan-China diplomatic relations that same year. Nevertheless, Japan maintained substantive socio-economic relations with Taiwan in a non-governmental capacity through private windows such as the Interchange Association (Japan side) and the Association of East Asian Relations (Taiwan side). This so called “Japanese Formula” was then used as a model by other countries that switched official relations from Taipei to Beijing. In fact, creating such “free and open” space in Asia has been Japan’s goal for its own interests. For postwar Japan, a small island pacifist trading nation with few natural resources, Asia’s peaceful stability and economic prosperity was fundamental to its survival and prosperity.

China-Japan Responsibility for Producing Asian Method

Japan is not Asia’s economic frontrunner anymore. In the 2010s, China started its own initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, while openly questioning Western-value based institutions. Meanwhile, however, it still struggles to formulate a definition of global governance because it must follow the interests of the Chinese Communist Party. Fortunately, China is sufficiently aware of its own difference and has consistently affirmed the traditional diplomatic principle of “peaceful coexistence”. Yet, it still basically presumes a national sovereignty-oriented international governance. Other Asian nations will need to accommodate China’s state-oriented approach with more liberal approaches.

So what can Asia do for future global governance? I think Sino-Japanese relations will be crucially important. If the two top Asian economies can find or create ways to coexist beyond their big political and economic differences, it would be a very promising reference point for global governance. Since the era of Deng Xiaoping, Japan has remained engaged in relations with China. Even after the 1989 Tiananmen Square bloodshed, Japan insisted on not isolating China from the international community, while Western countries imposed economic sanctions.

Japan today stands in a similar position. Unlike US Vice President Mike Pence’s severe anti-China policy speech on Oct. 4, 2018 at the Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C., Japan announced its consistent engagement policy by introducing the Japan-China Forum on Third Country Business Cooperation. Japan’s responsibility is to carefully bring out the wise and pragmatic dimensions of China and by doing so to show that Western liberal values could be adopted by China as well. This would be an attempt to “embrace” Western values by the Asian method and could lead to hybrid liberal values which are more globally applicable.

Helping China to maintain face, Japan should strategically prepare to bring about the moment when, as the *I Ching* (“Book of Changes”) says, “a wise man changes his mind, a fool never.”

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