Regional Community Building in Northeast Asia

By Inoguchi Takashi

NORTHEAST Asia, or broader East Asia including Northeast and Southeast Asia, has been one of the regions where institutionalization is least developed. Yet the fact is that community building efforts have been waxing and waning in the region, and as far as regional economic integration is concerned, East Asia has registered 53% of intra-regional trade over the total trade of "member countries" by 2004 while the EU registered 61%. In other words, East Asia seems to have achieved fairly high economic integration without regional institutionalization.

Three recent waves of community building efforts can be pointed out. Firstly, the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) was the first attempt to build an economic community without the United States, riding high on the miracle in the making in broader East Asia. Secondly, the "Asian values" debate, which attempted to portray developmental authoritarianism, is not only innocent but most importantly justified. The triumph of capitalist liberal democracy portrayed by Francis Fukuyama had to be qualified to East Asia, in order to prevent American-style freedom from bringing about chaos and anarchy. It was an attempt to breakdown the vacuum created by the end of the Cold War. Thirdly, the triumph of American unilateralism in its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq led to efforts to insulate East Asia from the United States.

The common elements are the steady economic rise of the region and the overwhelming military power of the United States. This paper focuses on the third wave of community building efforts. The following five lenses are currently used in Japan to examine the degree of community building: (1) functional integration, (2) regional identity formation, (3) new transnational middle class formation, (4) regional security reconfiguration and (5) democratic union.

Before moving to how these lenses give an anatomy of community building, I must give a definition of community. It is a group of actors who share a certain set of values, norms and rules and who do not mind shouldering a certain amount of burdens and sacrificing a certain amount of those invaluables. What I am trying is to see empirically where we stand in terms of community building through each of the five lenses, which depict the key factor driving community building in the region.

Community Building through Five Lenses

1. Functional Integration

In this viewpoints, community building largely comes from the economic, financial and technological bases in the region. The most frequently used indicator is the intra-regional trade amount over the total trade of all the regional countries. The region of broader East Asia registered 53% while the EU marked 61%. Sooner or later, if the region evolves without too much disruptive or distorting political interventions, these indicators will vindicate the somewhat optimistic prospect for East Asian community building. Even without legal and institutional linchpins that have characterized the European community building, broader East Asia has been making progress. Institutionalization is ill-suited to East Asia because of its regional diversity and the developing speed. Market forces take care of many things eventually. The frameworks, concepts and rules that are to govern economic transactions including bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs), intellectual property rights and dollar pegging practices tend to be discussed as means to invigorate market forces to work more efficiently. Politically inspired incidents, such as the Chinese and South Korean anti-Japan demonstrations in the spring of 2005, are not considered as disruptive nor intrusive but are rather perceived as vigorous economic transactions.

2. Regional Identity Formation

In the context of regional identity formation, the region of Northeast Asia or broader East Asia have much in common. Northeast Asian regionalists give some common historical and cultural traits like Confucianism, Chinese ideographs and sometimes Japanese colonialism. Broader East Asianists include regional institutionalists (ASEAN+3) and maritime Asianists (littoral Asia not including Continental Asia). Regional institutionalists tend to place less emphasis on regional identity and give primary attention to the density of economic transactions and the avoidance of one actor predominance. The maritime Asianists tend to have the open and forward-looking outlook of maritime Asia and the density and speed of maritime economic transactions. Maritime Asia overlaps with those countries that have close security and economic ties and democratic affinity with the United States. More empirically, the survey shows us that regional identity is not to see. Two major factors seem to account for the paucity of solid regional identity. First, major powers, such as Japan, China and India, seem to have different cognitive maps. The Chinese cognitive map is cultural Chinese versus the rest, the Japanese one is Japanese versus Asians, and the Indian one is Indians versus the rest. The percentage of Asian identity in these countries is 5%, 26% and 12% respectively. Second, Islamic identity seems to be stronger than Asian regional identity in some countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Brunei. Curiously Malaysia seems to play down Islamic identity overtly. Such countries as South Korea, Thailand and Myanmar enjoy the highest Asian identity. Myanmar is the most enthusiastic Asianist.

3. New Transnational Middle Class

Regional community formation needs a class-based bearer. Two models exist in broader Asia: children of the achievement orientation coming from dire poverty and those with incredible affluence coming from a super-rich family. The former is symbolized by the Japanese TV drama, *Oshin,* which is most sympathetically watched in such countries as Iran and Uzbekistan. The latter is symbolized by Murakami Haruki's novel *Kafka on the Shore*, which sold well globally, especially in those societies whose average per capita income level is higher than US$10,000. Besides the two classes mentioned above, there is a newly emerged transnational middle class which is becoming a powerful actor to link the region. The problem is that the tide of globalization increases the gaps between rich and poor in the region. The likely income distribution pattern prevailing in broader East Asia is that of the 3% super-rich versus the 97% rest, different from the situation of the middle class which dominated Japan in the 1970s to 1980s. The transnationality of the new middle class is also questioned that they are not qualitatively different as far as patriotism and regional identity are concerned. Empirical evidence being scanty, all this does not mean that the new transnational middle class might become such a driving force of regional integration in the future.

4. Regional Security Reconfiguration

Community is supposed to take care of internal security and safety. Without taking them into considera-tion, no argument on regional community formation would enjoy enough credence. Two arguments are developed as to which security communities could and should be the core of East Asian regional community formation: the ASEAN and the Japan-US alliance. It seems fair to say that the EAEC of the 1990s and the East Asian Community of the early 2000s had a moment to transform themselves into a security community. The six-party talks which discussed on North Korean issues have the potentials to become a security community if the joint communique of Sept. 19, 2005 will evolve in a direction that will satisfy the six parties. The oft-advanced argument that the full-fledged development of a security community in East Asia is hindered by the Japan-US alliance is not quite the point. The real picture is in fact that the alliance has been a security community covering many other parts of broader East Asia through diplomatic and legal arrangements and sheer pragmatic practices.

5. Democratic Union

Community presupposes nurturing and sharing values, norms and rules among its members. The third wave of democratization* has transformed broader East Asia as well. Among the ASEAN+3 you can find two camps, each preferring two rival concepts for the East Asian Community. Such countries as Japan, the Philippines and Indonesia push forward the "sharing of values." The others including China, Thailand and Myanmar place more emphasis on the "diversity and coexistence of values." A democratic league of nations was put forward by George W. Bush in Riga, Latvia in 2005 on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the victory of World War II. Condoleezza Rice delivered a speech in April 2005 in Tokyo calling for a democratic union. Since democracy touches on a key foundation of regional community formation and since some authoritarian governments do not like to see such an argument so widely spread out in the region especially in the context of US proclivity to make preemptive intervention under unipolarity, this argument has not been paid full attention in East Asia.

Conclusion

Befitting a fledgling stage of community formation in East Asia, the picture given above is not conclusive. Rather it gives a picture of many "drivers" wanting to navigate in their own favorite modes to form a community. Most advocates of the five lenses have not convincingly articulated causal dynamics. Empirical studies have not yet produced sufficiently conclusive evidence in any clear direction. Any verdict that might come to these five lenses will come only when one or two drivers are able to give more credible (logically and empirically) roadmaps of East Asian community formation. **J S**

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Note : Huntington, 1993