

Problems and New Challenges in East and Southeast Asia

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Executive Summary

It appears that Asia and particularly China, India, and Japan have a claim on the future. There is no denying that large portions of east and southeast Asia as well as, to an increasing extent, India are rising swiftly in the political and economic sphere of the world. This rise goes hand in hand with a shift in the weights of the international system that points away from the West. The question is how this development will affect us in concrete terms, and what the problems and challenges are that stir the region and radiate from it into the world. There are seven complex issues that appear in this context.

First: There is no evidence of any epoch-making paradigm change, meaning a transition from one culture that guided and shaped an entire century to another. While Asia's strengths are there for all to see, the West still has an entire civilization package to offer, so that it would be inappropriate to postulate that the West is being supplanted by Asia.

Second: The Asia-Pacific region is building a tightly-knit network of regional cooperation while Latin America is losing that part of its substance that gave it unity. In south Asia, Africa, and the Arab world, there is at least no evidence that unity is advancing. The ASEAN+3 process established a pattern in east Asia that is based on a multitude of bilateral trade agreements and created a dialogue on security policy that is conducted within the ASEAN Regional Forum and includes the Europeans. This development may be seen from various angles: The ASEAN attempts to maintain its leading position. We are looking at a comprehensive process of regional net-working which involves economic, security-policy, political-cooperation, and increasingly even cultural elements and is guided by political intentions. ASEAN+3 is based on Japanese efforts to establish an Asian monetary fund in response to the Asian crisis. Many of the ultimate goals of this cooperation movement still stand in need of clarification. Developments in the region are powered by the European process of unification, although Asia itself refused for a long time to imitate it. Another item that must be cleared up is the role of the US, whose absence from the east Asian summit shows that the Asians wished to keep themselves to themselves. Finally, the ASEAN basically originated from a desire of its member states to reduce conflicts among themselves at the higher and lower regional level.

Third: In the last few centuries, the world was shaped by modernization and development, Asia included. In the words of Felipe Mansilla, a Bolivian, development is a highly complex stage of civilization that should be understood integrally, involves target-setting autonomy, is shaped by a triangle formed by tradition, imitation, and innovation, and is based on individual concepts of the world and the social system. Modernization is no more than an aspect of development, which itself is more integral, being based on multi-dimensional networks.

Fourth: The debate about order policy implies thinking about desirable social constitutions as well as political and economic systems. Particularly in our multi-faceted world that is swiftly growing together nevertheless, gender equality, education and learning, and the need to mitigate the consequences of urbanization and industrialization call for a large measure of sensitivity in development policy that was not always present in the past. The same holds true for political constitutions. Even though a trend towards democratization can be identified in some countries, this does not necessarily mean that the Western model of democracy will win

there. Thus, for instance, experts predict that Asia will develop its own characteristic political systems that will include a heritage of authoritarianism, corporatism, and clientelism, although the nation state as such is hardly likely to be challenged.

Fifth: There is no denying that Asia follows a trend towards Asianness, with some aggressive nationalist undertones. The sources of this nationalism include the experience of a colonial past as well as the pressure of globalization and modernization, which challenges living cultural structures. Next to nationalism, however, there is a trend towards Asianness in the field of culture and cooperation. Asia's We-feeling, Asia's emerging cultural identity stem from the ongoing debate about Asian values that is far from over, and are closely related to the process of regionalization in the area.

Sixth: There is a high price to pay for Asia's economic success. Thus, China's environment is suffering considerably as desertification spreads in the north, reforestation reaches its limitations, and more and more of the available fresh-water volume becomes undrinkable. Similarly, there is ample cause for concern in the social field: Barely one in ten Chinese has his or her own health insurance, as many as 200 million migrant workers barely manage to eke out a living, and the development gradient between the coastal region and the interior of the country is 1 in 100. What is more, the political situation is ambivalent as well: On the one hand, public unrest is growing in the rural areas, and there is violent ferment in other countries as well, including Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar. On the other hand, there is no denying that progress has been made in modernizing the political system of east and southeast Asia. Finally, international politics in the region are anything but smooth and easy. Open and latent tensions, territorial conflicts, ethnic and/or religious tension, and nationalist jealousies are aspects of a situation which was so far kept from escalating only by the 'Asian way' of soft negotiations practiced by the ASEAN. It is true that the reasons why security in the east and southeast Asian countries is so vulnerable are partially external, including, for instance, the dominant military presence of the US, the latent conflict between Japan and China, and the general threat which, in the perception of many states within the region, emanates from China. Others, however, are internal, including terrorism and piracy, natural disasters, catastrophic industrial accidents, and social or religious upheavals.

Seventh: For some time, Germany's official development policy has been based on a new concept which launched a rethinking process that aims for cooperation with 'anchor countries'. This rethinking process might take any of several directions: A development policy that is guided by international solidarity cannot ignore development-policy concepts that are traditional in Europe as well as in Germany. If development policy is to be based on cooperation at eyelevel, rethinking will be successful whenever it focusses on problems which both partners tackle in a similar way. Having remained stable for a long time, the character of Europe and Germany as role models will have to be challenged. As neither development-policy nor underdevelopment have ever been purely economic in nature, future considerations will have to focus more on political structures, i.e. on nationality, regionality, and global governance. Cooperation with anchor countries distinguished by their particular influence within their respective region imperatively calls for addressing regional profiles as well as regional forms of cooperation and integration. For both Germany and Europe, it will be similarly imperative to remember their own interests. Finally, we should not overlook the fact that neither history itself nor cultural identity can be disregarded without consequences.