The Imagined Community of East Asia

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“Even the ‘imagined communities’ that are East Asia’s nation-states were late in crystallizing...More problematic still has been any imagined community that is regional in nature.” T.J Pempel (2005:257)

(Abstract: This paper argues that the proposed East Asian Community is an imagined community. To describe it this way is not to dismiss it as an illusion, or to deny its potential for transforming East Asia’s future, but to emphasize the bold aspirations that underlie the notion, aspirations which seek to transcend powerful physical, political and even cultural barriers confronting them. The imagined community of East Asia has a long way to travel before it translates itself into to a living and breathing institution. Happily for those outside, it is not entirely driven by negative impulses. Most acts of imagination involve some element of wishful thinking. The East Asian Community could turn out to be more wishful than most such regionalist dreams in world politics. The challenge for its proponents is to prevent this by resolving questions about its membership, objectives, and institutional mechanisms and by demonstrating a genuine desire for togetherness.)

The proposed East Asian Community is an imagined community. To describe it this way is not to dismiss it as an illusion, or to deny its potential for transforming East Asia’s future. My usage of the term ‘imagined’ is meant to emphasize the bold aspirations that underlie the notion, aspirations which seek to transcend powerful physical, political and even cultural barriers confronting them. Many great transformations in history start with a vision, which is essentially an imagined outcome. Some acts of imagination carry a strong dose of wishful thinking that remains unfulfilled. The East Asian Community could turn out to be just that. But some imaginations can and do find their cherished outcome. The East Asian Community idea could usher in a genuine sense of regional community, backed by collective action to address the region’s common problems. As an idea or a vision, the East Asian Community is hardly absurd or wishful thinking. The key to success or failure lies not in its imaginary beginning, but in the process of translating it into reality.
What does it mean and take to be an “imagined community” in international relations? Imagined regional communities have three core features. First, the area or “region” upon which the community is supposed to be based does not, and need not, enjoy automatic coherence, whether in physical, cultural or civilizational terms. Regions, like nation-states, can be imagined communities (Acharya 2000). A growing body of work on regions views them as ‘social constructs’, entities that are neither geographically determined nor culturally preordained, but politically and socially made.

Second, imagined regional communities often begin with a psychological impulse. This is not to say that they are purely ideational, or “ideas all the way down”. They may reflect long-term historical processes, such as the integrative forces of internationalization and globalization. But their social purpose is inter-subjectively, and not just materially derived. Hence, community building can be an emotional response, either positive emotions or negative ones, or combining both. It can thus spark from feelings of pride and accomplishment, or anxiety (about the future) and anger generated by perceived insult, neglect or acts seen as challenging its dignity and well-being by a social group.

Third, there can be no community without a sense of collective identity, or aspirations towards a shared identity, underpinned by common institutions. Imagined regional communities originate from the regionalist ideas of visionary leaders enjoying broad legitimacy within a group of nations. They find expression in common institutions that give concrete meaning to these ideas and develop processes of socialization to realize them.

The move towards an East Asian community has resulted as much from the interplay of regionalist ideas, impulses and identity-seeking discourses as from functional necessities and material forces associated with globalization and regional economic interdependence. And the imagining of the East Asian Community has been spurred as much by feelings of anxiety and anger as by positive sentiments founded on shared values or a desire for collective self-help.

The Regional Idea

Take the question of geographic or cultural coherence first. The ‘historic’ inaugural East Asia Summit (EAS) held in Kuala Lumpur on 14 December 2005 managed to rationalize the participation of India, Australia and New Zealand by professing a supposedly ‘functional’, rather than geographic view of the region. This underscored the problematic nature of regional construction. To be sure, the East Asian Community is not without some geographic coherence. Indeed, there is a surprising degree of consensus in the academic and policy literature that East Asia includes the ASEAN members plus China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. Decades ago, Donald Hellman (1969:423) had identified the ‘International Subsystem of East Asia’ precisely in this way. He excluded India and Pakistan, because they ‘stand in the periphery of East Asian politics, militarily, economically and politically’. He also excluded the antipodeans because; ‘although Australia and New Zealand are increasingly involved in both defense arrangements and
trade relations’, their ‘limited capabilities… to act alone and their obvious non-Asian identity place them in a special, but clearly external position.’

Hellman’s conception of East Asia would accurately describe the attitude of Malaysia’s former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohammed, who is widely credited (or blamed) for the momentum towards an East Asian regional institution and who has made the exclusion of Australia and New Zealand from East Asia something of a political crusade (hence his very public disowning of the EAS when it invited these two nations plus India to the table at Kuala Lumpur). Yet, equally unsurprisingly, Mahathir’s former deputy and political nemesis, Anwar Ibrahim (2006:2), has taken the opposite position. ‘The term East Asia is of course a misnomer,’ he has said, adding, ‘the summit must begin to think in terms of a truly Asian, original identity.’

Speaking of the coherence of East Asia, T.J. Pempel (2005: 24-25) writes: ‘East Asia today is a much more closely knit region than it was at the end of World War II or even a decade ago.’ Yet ‘no single map of East Asia is so inherently self-evident and logical as to preclude the consideration of equally plausible alternatives.’ No single conception of East Asia can thus be taken for granted, at least for three reasons.

The first relates to the ambiguous position of Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia, with the possible exception of Vietnam, is both historically and culturally Indic, and until the 1960s, considered inseparable from South Asia. Indeed, during the early Cold War period, the term ‘Southern Asia’ combined nations which are now classified separately as South Asian and Southeast Asian (members of ASEAN). The most prominent diplomatic example of this would be the sponsors of another, far larger, and even more historic regional gathering, the Asia Africa Conference held in Bandung in 1955. Few people realize today that this group – another imagined community offered a vision but failed to institutionalize - was officially known as the ‘Conference of the South-East Asian Prime Ministers’, or the ‘Colombo Powers’. And India, a co-sponsor of both Bandung Conference and two earlier ‘Asian Relations’ conferences (in 1947 and 1949), was the champion of Asian regionalism that included all of Southeast Asia as well as Northeast Asian states.

There is a second reason why East Asia remains a problematic regional idea. This relates to the narrower culture-bound conception of the region advanced by some of the region’s most prominent historians. John Fairbank and Edwin Reischauer for example defined East Asia as ‘the Chinese culture area’. In this conception, only Vietnam from the current ASEAN membership fits the East Asian region.

A third reason to be skeptical about a ‘natural’ region of East Asia stems from functionally and politically inspired namings that subsume the traditionalist formulations of the region by Messrs Fairbank and Reischauer. These constructs are too well-known in the diplomatic and business circles to be described here in detail; Paul Evans (1999) counts about two dozen such regional categories, including Asia-Pacific, Pacific-Asia, Asia/Pacific, Asia Pacific, Asia, Pacific Rim, etc. etc. The institutional expressions of
some of these notions subsume the narrower regional concept advocated by Mahathir Mohammed and reflected in the ASEAN-Plus-Three (APT) institution.

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the problem of regional definition has led to competing pathways to the development of the East Asian Community. Controversy accompanying the decision to broaden the summit by inviting Australia, New Zealand and India has led to differences and uncertainty over the relative importance of the APT over the EAS as the institutional means for realizing an “East Asian Community”. The most serious differences, ironically, are between two nations who would unquestionably be accepted as core members of the region of East Asia, however is it defined. China prefers the APT process, involving ASEAN and the three Northeast Asian states, to take the lead in moving the Community process forward, while Japan would prefer to see the East Asian Summit, with the participation of India, Australia, and New Zealand (and possibly others such as Russia) to assume centre-state in regional community-building.

**Impulsive Regionalism?**

What about the second element of being an ‘imagined community’: the psychological impulse? The term ‘impulsive regionalism’ was used by Gilbert Rozman (1998:3) to describe “regionalist dreams” of Northeast Asian elites in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As he put it, among these elites:

…the appreciation for the dynamism of the Asia-Pacific region was rising. Those on the outside such as Russia recognized the need to become a part of the region…while others on the inside such as China that had initially feared the emergence of APEC or a similar entity and were reluctant to view themselves in regional terms now championed Eastern civilization (sometimes even including Japan) and cross-national affinities.”

What Rozman describes in the context of Northeast Asian regionalism is also true of East Asia. Joseph Estrada, when he was the President of the Philippines, could ‘dream of’ the day when there would be “an East Asian Common Market, an East Asian currency and one East Asian community.” (Cited in Acharya, 2003: 337) To be sure, East Asian regionalism has a lot with market-led regional integration, which has seen intra-regional trade now accounting for over half of the region’s total trade. There has also been a massive spread of regional production networks, first driven by outward Japanese investment, and more recently by China’s boom. But to a large extent, the East Asian Community derives from the impulsive dreams and ideas of regional elites. It has been imagined both negatively and positively.

Mahathir Mohammed’s proposal for an East Asian Economic Grouping (later named as East Asian Economic Caucus) was basically an impulsive reaction to what seemed like the imminent collapse of the GATT Uruguay Round. There was little planning, no study groups, not even a vision group, behind this initiative. Instead, it was mostly the outcome of two powerful emotions: anxiety and anger.
The anxiety stemmed from two main sources. The first was a fear that the EU was about to become ‘fortress Europe’, a single market that would discriminate against East Asian exports, while North America was moving along similar lines with the emergence of NAFTA. Regional blocs were forming; if East Asia did not follow suit, it would invite economic marginalization. A second source of Mahathir’s anxiety was the crisis over the Uruguay Round of the GATT. In fact, Mahathir’s proposal for EAEG days after talks in the Uruguay Round had broken down over the issue of agricultural subsidies.

While anxiety marked the first stage in the evolution of the East Asian Community, anger was what would lead to its revival after stiff US opposition had neutralized the EAEC. With the outbreak of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the idea got a new lease of life, partly due to regional disappointment and anger over the perceived failure of the US to provide timely aid to Thailand and also East Asian counties hit by the crisis. Comparisons were made between the very different responses from Washington to the crisis in Thailand and the one in Mexico. In Mexico, American response was seen to have been both prompt and generous, while in the case of Thailand, Washington was happy to let the IMF take the lead and provided little sum of money. Moreover, American rejection of Tokyo’s proposal for an Asian Monetary Fund which could have eased the psychological effects of the crisis ‘agonized opinion leaders of the region’ (Stubbs 2002:449) Could East Asia count on American generosity in future regional crises? Was America to be trusted as a true friend in need, as Mahathir would ask. The crisis was thus a direct impetus for the formation of the APT, whose initial agenda focused on organizing regional financial cooperation.

But the origin of the East Asian Community idea was not entirely due to Mahathir’s impulses. There were positive elements as well. This positive imagining of the EAC followed the APT’s creation, and owed substantially to South Korea’s President Kim Dae Jung. It was President Kim who proposed the establishment of the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG), an unofficial group whose mandate was to develop and articulate, true to its name, a ‘vision’ for East Asia’s communitarian future. The Report of the EAVG, released in 2001 and entitled ‘Towards an East Asian Community – a Region of Peace, Prosperity and Progress’, is a bold act of positive regionalist imagination. Describing East Asia as ‘a distinctive and crucial region in the world’, it called for moving East Asia from being a ‘region of nations’ to ‘a bona fide regional community of shared challenges, common aspirations, and a parallel destiny’. (EAVG 2001: 1-6).

The EAVG was succeeded by the East Asia Study Group (EASG 2002), an inter-governmental grouping who task was to consider the EAVG’s recommendations and translate them into official policies. It came up with two sets of recommendations: 17 short-term measures, which could be implemented quickly and 9 medium-term/long-term measures, that would require further study. Among the short-term measures is the forming an East Asian Business Council, establishing an East Asian Investment Network, building a Network of East Asian Think Tanks, establishment of an East Asian Forum, strengthening of mechanisms for cooperation over non-traditional security issues like migration, drug trafficking and human smuggling. Among the medium-/long-term
measures requiring further study was the proposal for an East Asian Free Trade Area, establishment of a regional financing facility and an East Asian Investment Area and convening of an East Asian Summit based on the existing summit of APT member nations.

Although these recommendations are frequently referred to as ‘concrete’ measures, most have the characteristics of the ‘ASEAN Way’ of multilateralism. With the exception of proposals such as the East Asian Free Trade Area, which would require further study, they are broad and general in nature, vague about their intended outcome, and make no discernable departure from the sacred principle of non-interference. They represent a collective aspiration the realization of which, as both the EAVG and the EASG members well understood, could prove immensely challenging.

Identity and Institutions

The key to overcoming these obstacles, according to both the groups, is the forging of a East Asian regional identity. The EAVG stressed ‘fostering the identity of an East Asian community’ as well as ‘promotion of regional identity and consciousness’. (EAVG 2001:1-6). The EASG, despite having a more functional task, nonetheless devotes a fair amount of attention to the quest for a regional identity:

Fostering a strong sense of East Asian identity and congeniality is essential for expediting genuine regional cooperation and, moreover, for helping reach the ultimate goal of East Asian integration…East Asian countries should attach great importance to the issue of regional identity and work closely to develop it. Building a strong sense of identity and an East Asian consciousness is a goal to be sought through continuous efforts by both government and civic leaders, since it is related to having people realize the common fate of the region and to changing the way of thinking. (EASG 2002:39)

While EAVG articulated the ambition, the EASG provided the agenda. In defining the EAVG’s call for ‘work together with cultural and education institutions to promote a strong sense of identity and an East Asian consciousness,’ the EASG noted:

Cultural and educational institutions will be the main actors in promoting a sense of identity through education, publicity, and research. They will provide regional people with information and knowledge on the historical background of the region and on both similar and different aspects of culture. They will also provide the ways and means for the people to strengthen their identity… With support from the governments, more educational and cultural institutions of Northeast Asian countries will be able to engage in intensive cooperation and collaborative projects with related institutions and universities of ASEAN countries. (EASG 2002:39-40).

The challenge for East Asia in developing a shared identity or cognitive personality is of course immense. If Samuel Huntington is right, East Asia could be the “test case for
developing meaningful organizations not rooted in common civilization” (Huntington, 1996:132). His sharp distinction between Chinese and Japanese civilizations is of course questionable. Moreover, as Peter Katzenstein (2005) argues, regional identity need not supplant national identities, but may co-exist with and compliment, the latter. But developing even a basic regional identity of East Asia is problematic, if the experience of ASEAN is any guide (Acharya, 2000). Many of these obstacles were demonstrated both before and during the first East Asian summit. Growing Sino-Japanese mistrust, fuelled by Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine cast a shadow over the summit and would pose a long-term challenge to the success of East Asian regionalism. This episode underscores the crucial need for ‘perceptual reconciliation’ between Japan and its neighbours before the realization of a genuine sense of togetherness – a ‘we feeling – required of social communities. In Dalchoong Kim and Chung - in Moon’s (Kim and Moon, p.18) words, ‘peace and stability in the region [East Asia] cannot be achieved without first healing the fractured cognitive pain and facilitating perceptual reconciliation’ between Japan, China and Korea.’

Shouldn’t North Korea belong to the imagined community of East Asia? This would certainly be consistent the fundamental objectives of the ‘Sunshine policy’ of Kim Dae Jung, who also happens to be a key actor in the imagining of East Asian Community. It might look odd if North Korea were to be invited to the EAS while the US is kept out of it. But there may be good reasons to seek Pyongyang’s participation in the EAC, despite the difficulties and problems involved. Would Pyongyang find membership in a wider East Asian forum more palatable than in a smaller Northeast Asian grouping?

The role of the US is a critical uncertainty in the East Asian community-building process. The US is clearly not a part of the imagined community of East Asia, even though it is the dominant strategic and economic player in the East Asian region; some would say a de facto East Asian nation. But even such a staunch US supporter as Singapore’s former prime minister, Goh Chok Tong contends that “East Asia cannot be extending to countries in the Pacific, for then even the political definitions would get stretched beyond belief.” In Goh’s view, East Asia’s region’s “engagement with the US could be through the APEC and the ARF.”1 Hitoshi Tanaka, a former Japanese Deputy Foreign Minister, agrees: “I do not think the United States is committed to the East Asia community building and I do not think that the United States is a member of the East Asian Community.”2 While Washington feigns disinterest in EAS membership, it is also wary of the possibility that the East Asian process could lead to its own marginalization and exclusion from regional interactions. This could translate into opposition and insidious, if not overt, diplomatic moves to upset the East Asian institution-building process.

What about the institutions of the East Asian Community? A major question for the EAC’s proponents is how the newer East Asian institutions such as APT and EAS would relate to existing Asia-Pacific organizations, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation. Avoiding duplication of tasks between these

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groupings would be a key consideration in the rationale for keeping them separate, but would not be easily done.

While they managed to obtain a seat at the table, the ‘non-East Asians’ - India, Australia and New Zealand – are not assured of equal status within the East Asian Community, or being part of the core group who could drive the community building process. Should the ‘purist’ (Han 2005:147) view of East Asia prevail, these nations would have good reason to be unhappy over their “second-class” status. And while the broadening of the EAS might have dispelled fears of Chinese dominance, this could engender Chinese disinterest in the summit process. The key challenge for East Asian visionaries and leaders would be to find the balance between Chinese dominance and Chinese disinterest.

The imagined community of East Asia thus has a long way to travel before it translates itself into a living and breathing institution. Happily for those outside, it is not entirely driven by negative impulses. Most acts of imagination involve some element of wishful thinking. The East Asian Community could turn out to be more wishful than most such regionalist dreams in world politics. The challenge for its proponents is to prevent this by resolving questions about its membership, objectives, and institutional mechanisms and by demonstrating a genuine desire for togetherness.

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