

Regionalism in Asia: Why we should stick with existing structures

by Ezra Vogel
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The past half century has been a period of largely fruitful regional cooperation in the East Asia region. Some believe that a new grouping of states would further facilitate regional cooperation. I disagree, and believe that existing forums offer the best opportunity for leaders in the Asia-Pacific to work together in solving regional and global problems.

An important key to successful regional organisation is making good use of what some of the individual countries have to contribute. The strong points of some of the leading countries that can promote the region are thus detailed below.

Japan has been the pioneer in bringing modernisation to Asia. Despite its relatively small size, Japan remains one of the three largest economies in the world, with one of the best-educated and healthiest populations. Its technology and quality of production set global standards, and its law-abiding citizenry facilitate one of the lowest crime rates in the world. As the only major country in the world that has chosen not to have nuclear weapons, Japan has the moral authority to take a leading position in the fight against nuclear proliferation [1]. Finally, as the global leader in energy technology and environmental protection [2], it can make a major contribution in these areas.

China, driven by explosive economic growth and a massive population, has begun to play a central role in energising the region's economy. Its think tanks and universities have developed extraordinarily quickly, and China is now producing large numbers of young people with a deep understanding of major issues affecting the Asia-Pacific region. Whilst China was initially concerned about the speed of modernisation within Asia, it has come to realise the benefits inherent in regionalism, and has begun to take a role in strengthening regional and global organisations. As China's economy has grown, its leaders have also turned their focus onto international efforts to solve environmental problems such as global warming [3].

The United States remains the leader in higher education and research, and acts as a centre for educating talented people from around the globe. Additionally, international institutions sometimes lack the capacity to respond to urgent crises. In this context, the United States remains the country with the greatest capacity to resolve security and environmental emergencies. The United States recognises the importance of the Asia-Pacific and can be expected to take an active role in the region.

The Southeast Asian countries that formed ASEAN have set the model for the 'soft regionalism' that is the glue binding together nations on both sides of the Pacific in a cooperative framework, most notably via APEC. It has unique convening power for bringing together the big powers of the region in a neutral setting. As the largest country in South-East Asia, Indonesia inevitably plays a central role in ASEAN.

South Korea and Australia both also have unique contributions to make. South Korea, along with Singapore, is the most cosmopolitan country in East Asia, and continues to send many students to countries throughout the world. Australia has played a special role, not only as the region's key supplier of many raw materials, but also as the one sizeable Caucasian country that is in effect in Asia. No country outside South Korea has trained a higher percentage of its population in Japanese language and culture. No country outside Indonesia has done more to study Indonesia. Accordingly, Australia continues to play a key role [4] in maintaining security within the Asia-Pacific.

The regional organisations in existence are already flexible enough to make good use of the capacities of the respective countries. But India and Russia should also be absorbed in these organisations. Together, these countries, through the regional associations, can address some of the critical issues facing the region.

I will just briefly mention two of the most difficult of these issues that require our attention: historical disputes, and military balance of power issues.

At the moment, issues as to Japanese interpretations of history are relatively submerged [5], as South Korea and China are making an effort to set aside this issue. This does not mean that the issue has been resolved. On the Japanese side, efforts must be made to engage in a

thorough study of the tragedies caused by the occupation of Taiwan and Korea, and of the invasion of mainland China in World War II. Korea and China must also make an effort to communicate to their populations the fundamental changes that have occurred after World War II, as Japan has sought to maintain peace and avoid militarism.

The security balance in Asia is the single biggest issue confronting regionalism in the Asia-Pacific. In the past several decades, stability in Asia has rested upon two pillars; the overwhelming military power of the United States and the cooperation of other countries, most prominently South Korea and Japan. Now, the Chinese military is growing [6] in strength, and it is no secret that the US has an imbalanced budget that will constrain military expenses in decades ahead. If we are to maintain peace and stability in the Asia Pacific, we must have a solid understanding between the United States and China.

It is in the interests of all countries in the region to deal with these issues, and regional organisations can make an important contribution.

Thus whilst we do not need another regional organisation for East Asia, it is vital that all concerned nations continue to cooperate using the existing organisations.

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