

From “Primordial” to “Pragmatic” Identity: A Search for Regional Identity in East Asia

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New Initiatives for an East Asian Community

In 2009, two interesting proposals for community building in East Asia were put forward: Kevin Rudd, then serving as Australia’s prime minister, proposed the creation of an Asia Pacific Community (APC) and then-Japanese prime minister Yukio Hatoyama proposed an East Asian Community (EAC).

Claiming that Australia should get more deeply involved in Asia, Rudd described his vision of what an APC should look like. Of the most importance, it should be all-embracing. All the major powers in the Asia-Pacific region should take part, including the United States, Australia, Japan, China, South Korea, India, and Indonesia. The APC should also focus on both security and economic issues.

In the meantime, Hatoyama, in a *New York Times* op-ed, came up with the idea of an East Asian Community as the cornerstone of his administration’s Asia policy. While the idea of the EAC was not totally fleshed out, he indicated that the group would include China, Japan, and South Korea as its core members. Hatoyama did not make it clear whether the United States would be invited, although he made no secret of his perception that the era of U.S.-led unilateralism and globalism was coming to an end. In this new period of growing multipolarity, he seemed to believe, it was imperative for Japan to reconceptualize East Asia, the world’s fastest-growing region which now accounts for one quarter of the total GDP of the world, as its

own “basic sphere of being.” Prime Minister Hatoyama tried his best not to give the impression that he favored East Asia over the United States (or over the West as a whole). But, it seemed quite obvious that he wanted to see Japan more consciously autonomous from the United States than had been the case under the prolonged rule of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) governments.

What prompted Rudd of Australia and Hatoyama of Japan to propose the creation of Asia Pacific and East Asian communities upon taking office? A probable cause can be found in the shift in relative power, especially between China, Japan, and the United States, that has long been in progress over the last decade. Both Rudd and Hatoyama were aware of this change. Rudd, for instance, explained that global economic and strategic weight was now shifting to Asia. Hatoyama has also conceded that China would surpass Japan in economic size “in the not-too-distant-future.” One might suspect, therefore, that their initiatives were nothing more than temporary expedients de-

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signed to cope with the recently changed international environment. That might be the case—or not. But whatever the two leaders' underlying intent, their initiatives no doubt constituted significant contributions to a series of efforts to bring about community-type regional organizations in East Asia. From 1989 on, when APEC was first created, and especially in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, a succession of regional organizations came into being in East Asia, with the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1993, ASEAN+3 in 1997, and the East Asian Summit (EAS) in 2005 being the most representative. Since the first meeting of the EAS was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2005, in particular, interest in the possibility of building an East Asian Community has become widespread. Although controversies over the proper geographical scope of such a community remain far from settled, with some countries favoring extensive, elastic membership and others favoring a limited, restrictive one, community-building in East Asia is now looked upon as a goal that is worthy of being pursued for its own sake. Australia's and Japan's initiatives, probably spurred by geostrategic considerations and not immediately realizable, will surely strengthen the case for an East Asian Community. At the very least, two initiatives have demonstrated the continued interest in an East Asian Community among politicians and decision-makers of East Asian countries.

Looking for an EU Moment in East Asia

What needs to be pointed out here, especially in relation to the future prospects for an East Asian Community, is that both Rudd's and Hatoyama's initiatives invoked the success story of European integration as a model for an East Asian Community. To be sure, both of the Asian leaders admitted that a European Union-type community still remains a distant possibility in East Asia—at least for the foreseeable future. At the same time, however, they agreed that the European

Union (EU), which has achieved, in Rudd's words, "an unparalleled degree of transnational cooperation," is a temptingly attractive model for East Asia. Hatoyama's initiative was especially emphatic in this regard. He explicitly argued for the need to create an Asian equivalent of the euro, the European single currency. He also revealed his hope that currency integration might help to facilitate political integration, albeit with a proviso that it would take a very long time for this to take place.

Rudd's and Hatoyama's initiatives show that it is now commonplace, not just in academic and policy circles but even on an official, political level, to point to the EU in discussing regional integration in East Asia. Looking for an EU moment in East Asia is now something of a standard step that almost all politicians and scholars having an interest in East Asian community building go through once in a while. This search, of course, does not mean that these scholars and politicians are so naïve as to expect an exact replication of the European Union in East Asia. All they want is to take European integration as a reference point in their efforts to envision a prospective East Asian community. There are some difficulties even in doing so, since people have very different conceptions of the significance of the EU model for East Asia. Any clear consensus is not yet in sight on what kind of lessons we could and should draw from the European experience. More than two decades have passed since APEC held its first meeting, partly in response to the sudden progress of European integration. In the midst of an enormous number of proposals, initiatives, and reports on the goals and methods of East Asian regionalism, most people are still at sea on the question of how to understand and appropriate the experiences of integration on the other side of the Eurasian Continent.

This problem is all the more serious with respect to the question of identity. With the end of the Cold War in Europe and with the conclusion of a series of important treaties for more integration, the European Union ceased to be merely an economic union and



started to evolve into an all-embracing supranational institution pushing for the economic, political, social, and cultural integration of member states. In accordance with such a development, interest in the question of European identity has substantially increased during the past decade. Today's European Union is faced with the need to elicit the cooperation not only of the governments of member states but also of their citizens. This need to rely on European citizens' voluntary cooperation became all the more salient after the French and Dutch citizens said "No" to the further integration in the referenda held to ask whether to pass the draft European Constitution. Many scholars and politicians of Europe interpreted the French and Dutch no vote as evidence that the EU was in a deep "legitimacy crisis" and turned their attention to European identity as an alternative to cure the disease of European citizens' long-held indifference and antipathy toward the Union.

Recent discussions on East Asian regionalism have also begun to take the question of identity seriously. Interestingly enough, identity has been considered both a constraining and an enabling factor in the East Asian context. On the one hand, lack of identity among citizens of East Asian countries has frequently been cited as a critical factor inhibiting the progress of integration in the area of political and economic cooperation. On the other hand, East Asian identity, especially the cultural variants rooted in historical and civilizational denominators, is also regarded, and sometimes even promoted, as the very factor likely to enable East Asian countries to surmount their political, economic, and ideological differences. Either way, identity has become a point of major concern among the supporters of an East Asian community. And it seems quite obvious that many of these supporters have the European case in mind when they propose taking identity seriously. They expect that just as Europeans have reinforced and consolidated the process of integration by strengthening citizens' identification with the EU, East Asian identity

might be of great help in encouraging and facilitating regional integration.

Many of these supporters of East Asian regionalism have believed that what might be called a "primordial identity" is the most desirable and necessary form of identity from the perspective of community-building. This identity is usually said to emanate from common historical and cultural traditions and heritages and to consist in the feelings of intimacy they generate. Growing interest in the Confucian tradition shared by East Asian countries and in so-called Asian values as its modern transformation reflects the belief that only primordial identity can provide the ties that bind different East Asian nations. And this belief, in turn, is implicitly based on the view that this has also been the case in Europe—that European identity, as a primordial identity, is the product of common European heritages such as Greco-Roman civilization or Christianity. Some people also point to the recent attempts by the European Commission to encourage the use of the flag, anthem, and other symbols of the European Union and to reevaluate the achievements of the "Founding Fathers" of the EU such as Jean Monnet or Robert Schuman. These can be seen as part of an effort to awaken and boost citizens' primordial sense of European identity by inventing and creating new traditions and heritages inherent in the EU.

Could such an effort for identity formation successfully materialize in East Asia? Because few systematic efforts have yet been made, it is too early to predict what their result might be. The experiences of the EU, however, suggest that the prospects are not so bright. A number of studies and casual observations have shown that in most cases, European citizens' identification with Europe is seldom grounded on the primordial feeling of intimacy emanating from either old or newly developed heritage and traditions of Europe and the European Union. Asked about the sources of their European identity, for instance, only a very low percentage of Europeans replied that they thought highly of the common cultural and civiliza-



tional heritage of Europe. Among those new inventions of the EU designed to generate a sense of European identity, only the European flag has had any tangible success. Other inventions—like the European anthem and Europe Day—have failed to have any lasting impact.

In fact, a significant number of scholars and commentators now agree that European identity as it is now observed among ordinary Europeans is a thoroughly practical, and far from primordial, phenomenon. One observer, for instance, speaks of “situational Europeans,” who choose to magnify or accentuate their European identity only under the right conditions—when the European Union works in a way that conforms to their political, economic, or social preference or when it demonstrates its capability to solve problems national governments are not adequate to handle. Perception of efficiency, in other words, breeds citizens’ identification with the EU. This kind of identity, being selective, changeable, and conditional, is far from primordial. Its bearers identify themselves as Europeans in a cautious and restrained manner. The identity comes into play only when its bearers believe the institutions of the EU are working efficiently enough. One commentator has named it a “utilitarian identity.” I call it a “pragmatic identity.”

Two things need to be mentioned about the general features of the pragmatic European identity. First, “pragmatic” does not mean “normatively free.” Pragmatic identity is never a “whatever goes is acceptable, so long as it is pragmatic”—type of identity. Most Europeans, while approaching the question of identity pragmatically, are also acutely on guard against the possibility that it will become excessively exclusive. The memory of aggressive nationalism and racism that plagued Europe in the first half of the twentieth century works as a kind of a “whistle-blower” that warns Europeans not to neglect or violate fundamental humanitarian norms. To be sure, we cannot say it always works well. We are currently observing the rise of xenophobia in many parts of Europe. It seems, however,

that a certain normative commitment against “over-identity,” although far from perfect, has been irreversibly inscribed in Europeans’ self-perception. To that extent, a European identity remains critical and reasonable.

Second, pragmatic European identity can coexist with national identities without being conflictual. European identity complements, and does not replace, national identities and *vice versa*. Many Europeans view themselves as sometimes having a national identity and sometimes having a European identity. Few of them feel any inconsistency in holding two identities at the same time. Such flexibility would be unthinkable if they held only primordial identity. They would find it much more difficult and uncomfortable to hold affective, primordial feelings of intimacy toward more than two objects simultaneously.

Implications for East Asian identity

Given such an understanding of European identity, a question arises: if it is true that the European case constitutes an important reference point for East Asian identity, what lessons and implications can we draw from such an observation? An immediate answer would be that we also need a theory of pragmatic East Asian identity. To be sure, given the many differences between European and East Asian regionalisms, such an identity would mean very different things in East Asia than in Europe. The relative lack of institutional infrastructure in the region, in particular, might make the formation of such an identity an elusive goal. But at least in terms of feasibility, pragmatic identity seems to promise a better future than other, more traditional type of identities. In our efforts to promote regional identity as a ground for regional cooperation, we need to stop viewing it simply as something already there or not there. We also need to refrain from regarding it either as a facilitator of or an obstacle to regionalism. Instead, we should present identity as something to be



explored and cultivated to meet certain consciously developed goals of regional integration. Four points need to be mentioned in our search for an East Asian identity.

First, best results are not necessarily obtained by stressing a cultural, civilizational understanding of identity. More than anything else, it is almost impossible to confirm the very existence of a cultural, civilizational identity in East Asia. Confucianism or Confucian tradition has long been a standard item in almost every discussion of East Asian identity. Among others, advocates of “Asian values” were particularly assertive in stressing the Confucian roots of identity. Prolonged debate on this subject, however, has failed to allay uneasiness in talking about the continued importance of Confucian values in East Asian countries, all of which have already undergone a process of intense modernization and westernization for more than a century. In addition, it should also be pointed out that each of the major East Asian countries has interpreted the Confucian tradition differently, emphasizing those aspects of it that do not run counter to the country’s political, economic, and other interests and dismissing those that do.

Controversies over the cultural identity of East Asia will remain unsolvable unless we abandon the idea of primordial identity for that of a more flexible, pragmatic identity. As of now, few can authentically tell whether there truly exists in the region a cultural common ground upon which to build a common identity and, if there is one, how to understand and define it. Under such circumstances, one is left with only two alternatives: either to take an overly expanded, overly simplified view of identity or to take a pessimistic position that the lack of a cultural common ground disproves the significance of East Asian identity and, in some cases, the plausibility of East Asian regionalism as a whole.

A pragmatic understanding of identity can provide a middle road between these two extremes. East Asian identity does not need to have deep roots; it

does not have to be “thick” and “fundamental.” Whether there is a common culture or not does not determine the plausibility of East Asian identity once and for all. Instead, it needs to be seen as something that can be promoted and constructed by the memory of relatively recent past or small successes in regional cooperation. Citizens of East Asia can be made to positively appropriate such achievements to build their own “reasonable” identification with East Asia.

Second, we also need to rethink the frequently raised complaint that the Japanese government’s continued denials of past crimes and injustices and insufficient apologies stand in the way of the formation of a genuine East Asian identity. This issue is an extremely sensitive one in Korea and also in China, and it needs to be said that the Japanese government has a moral obligation to fully acknowledge its responsibility for the past tragedies. Apart from the question of moral accountability, however, it is still true that sincere apology does not seem to be a necessary precondition for East Asian identity. That is, the problem of the connection between the question of identity and the politics of memory in East Asia does not seem insurmountable. This was also true in the case of Franco-German relations after the Second World War. In spite of the fact that one country invaded and occupied the other during the war, the two countries reconciled successfully without any contrition on the part of West Germany. Since then, the two countries have been cooperating closely on almost every issue, serving as an engine for European integration.

In East Asia too, such pragmatic, compartmentalized responses look quite plausible. Indeed, many Koreans, while periodically provoked and incensed by Japan’s denial of its past behavior, seem to have internalized the belief that this history should never damage the current cooperative relationship between the two countries. The same is true of China-Japan relations: while anti-Japanese sentiment has frequently been provoked in China, it has rarely gotten out of control. One might say East Asians are now in firm



control of their attitudes toward neighboring countries. It seems they are fully aware of to what extent they are allowed to be confrontational. They know when to stop and begin to moderate their antipathies toward their neighbors. It is only a small step from such an embedded sense of moderation to a sense of belonging to a certain community. As long as we define identity only as primordial, such a differentiated sense of belonging will remain difficult to acquire.

Third, related to the second point, the idea of pragmatic identity will also be useful in rethinking the overall impact of nationalism on East Asian identity. The problem of nationalism is partly related in East Asia to that of memory politics. Most typically, Japan's denial of past injustices has given rise to vehement nationalistic protests in China, Korea, and other countries and this, in turn, has elicited equally fierce backlash in Japan. Recently, other sources of nationalism have also become important. In China, a kind of great power nationalism has gained importance with the spectacular growth of the Chinese economy and a concomitant increase of national pride. The growth of Japanese nationalism was first triggered by North Korea's admission that it was developing nuclear weapons in 2002. It culminated in the warning by the Japanese defense minister that Japan could launch a preemptive strike against North Korean nuclear sites.

Given such developments, is it inevitable that growing nationalism would impede the emergence of regional identity in East Asia? The answer is "not necessarily." As in the case of memory politics, two identities need not permanently remain in opposition. Instead, we can find ways to make them coexist. This means that while a full reconciliation remains elusive, it would still be possible to prevent two identities from interfering with each other—to make each of them exist independently of the other. This mutual noninterference between national and regional identities would be possible only if we define the latter in terms of pragmatism. As mentioned above, average Europeans view themselves as holding European and na-

tional identities and alternately stress one or the other. I suggest that there are few reasons to presume that average East Asians could not do the same: to embrace two identities simultaneously. To be sure, nationalism is dangerous; it is basically an intense expression of exclusionary and aggressive sentiment, and this has particularly been the case in East Asia. European dual identity became feasible only with the successful civilization of nationalism. But nationalism, even in its current form, is in principle not incompatible with East Asian identity. We might get a sense of this view if we remember that the eruption of anti-Japanese and anti-Chinese sentiments a few years ago in China and in Japan, respectively, fell far short of having any long-lasting impact on cooperative interaction between the two countries. East Asians, it seems, are now sufficiently critical and reasonable to control and contain their nationalist sentiment. Of course, nationalism, and its East Asian variant in particular, needs to be tamed and refined. But this does not mean that we will have to wait for East Asian nationalism to become fully liberal and enlightened to talk meaningfully about regional identity in East Asia.

Fourth, we need to find and promote alternative sources of regional identity in East Asia other than a culture or civilization whose exact character is at best dubious. As mentioned above, East Asia, unlike Europe, currently lacks a well-developed, well-functioning institutional infrastructure for cooperation. Instead, we have in East Asia only loosely organized institutional frameworks such as APEC, ASEAN+3, or EAS, which can in no sense be equated with the European Union. While Europeans take as the objects of their identity the institutions of the EU and the products of its activities, East Asians are in no position to do the same with APEC or EAS.

Where can East Asians find their source of regional identification? Here I propose what seems to be one of the most promising sources: the common economic prosperity almost all East Asian countries have been enjoying at least since the 1980s. For those three



decades, this region has been far more successful than any other region in the world in developing its economies and rescuing societies from the clutches of poverty. According to one commentator, the rise of Asia is not just economic but also “ethical” in the sense that it has brought more “goodness” into the world by reducing poverty considerably.

To be sure, not everything has gone well. With the outbreak of the financial crisis in the late 1990s, East Asians underwent a serious crisis of self-confidence. Moreover, the gap between the rich and the poor in most East Asian societies remains substantial, posing a serious threat to the future prospects for continued growth. In some countries, economic prosperity has led to political development in the form of democratization. In other countries, this has not been the case. Many countries in fact seem to have no intention of making the necessary political transition.

Despite these problems and differences, however, successful economic development remains a staple in average East Asians’ perceptions of their region. The fact of economic prosperity continues to differentiate this region from other regions of the world. With the onset of a global financial crisis in 2007-2008, such difference has become all the more obvious. More and more East Asians are now finding the distinctiveness of their region in its growing prosperity. Under the circumstances, it seems natural that prosperity could serve as the source of regional identity in East Asia. After all, identity is a matter of sameness and difference.

In fact, East Asia’s growing prosperity is much more than the accumulation of economic wealth: prosperity also generates values. These values reinforce prosperity as the most reliable source for regional identity. In East Asia, for instance, prosperity means freedom: freedom from want, freedom in security, and freedom in employment. Of course, we cannot include political and legal freedoms. But those three freedoms are as important as and, in a sense, more fundamental than the latter two freedoms. Prosperity also implies in

East Asia hope and a belief in progress. A sense of a better future, prevalent in the region, is now transforming East Asians’ basic mindset. In the meantime, continued economic prosperity is changing East Asians’ attitude toward other regions. In particular, they want to assert their distinctiveness vis-à-vis the West. It is not that East Asians want to replace the West as the predominant civilization of the world. Rather, East Asians want to be respected. They believe they now deserve much more respect than before.

Of course, we should be careful not to be too optimistic. East Asia is not and will never be free from the turmoil caused by the current global financial crisis. Few can tell exactly what will come out of it. However, it seems fairly certain that at least in relative terms, East Asia will do better than any other region of the world. In consequence, being an East Asian will continue to mean becoming prosperous and self-confident for a fairly long time. And this will continue to serve as the surest source for common identity in the region.

Some Policy Suggestions

Based on the above observations, a few policy suggestions can be put forward as follows. First, the existing plans and proposals for regional cooperation in East Asia have intentionally avoided talking about identity in order not to cause any unnecessary misunderstanding. The price of such evasion is not insignificant. Appealing to the need for close cooperation without offering any ultimate reason to do so cannot attain much in terms of persuasiveness. Of course, one might point out that regional cooperation in East Asia is still at an early stage and identity should not be included among the issues to be addressed immediately. But it seems to me that the exact opposite is closer to the truth. Any serious talk of East Asian cooperation or regionalism should start by tackling the question of identity, because the issue is regional cooperation in East Asia and



this is the name of the region on whose exact geographical scope people have not yet reached any meaningful agreement. So when talking about East Asian regionalism, the first question people commonly ask is “what is East Asia?” or “why is cooperation among East Asian countries important?” It is necessary to be more assertive in dealing with the question of identity in plans and proposals for East Asian cooperation. As indicated in the previous section, focusing on common prosperity can provide one effective way of doing that.

Second, we need to separate deliberately the issue of East Asian identity from that of memory politics and confrontational nationalism. This is all the more necessary in the case of memory politics. In fact, the issues of memory politics will never be satisfactorily resolved within a short period of time. It does not, therefore, make much sense to regard the solution of this problem as a precondition for any meaningful talk of East Asian identity. To require that precondition would be to turn the issue into a trap. Rather, it is more appropriate to find a common denominator of the East Asian region and to cultivate and promote it “pragmatically” as a source for regional identity. To propose to make such a strategic move with regard to regional identity is not to suggest that we should dismiss the problem of reconciliation entirely. It is to suggest that the question of identity should not remain overwhelmed by other issues.

Third, while such a two-track strategy of identity building is an effective way of promoting regional identity, it is also obvious that it cannot be upheld indefinitely. The ultimate goal of identity formation, therefore, should be focused on laying and consolidating a permanent foundation for regional identity. This foundation needs to be not just pragmatic or strategic but “normative.” We need a normative foundation for East Asian identity. This is too long a story to be dealt with in detail, but it might be useful to look once again at the European experience. For several decades, Europeans have built a normative foundation for regional

identity through such regional agreements as the European Human Rights Convention or the Helsinki Accords. These agreements and the consequent consensus on the significance of human rights have played an essential part as a normative framework for European identity. Now, Europeans take it for granted that an important part of their identity as Europeans is defined in terms of human rights. To be a European now means to support and defend the human rights that have been repeatedly identified and confirmed in various regional agreements. Something similar can happen in East Asia. To be sure, “human rights” remains a sort of taboo phrase in this region. But, it also seems far easier for East Asian nations to reach an agreement on this issue than on the question of memory politics or on confrontational nationalism. In addition, human rights in East Asia need not be the human rights of Europe. It would be possible to make certain accommodations in consideration of the particular positions of some countries. In fact, in the midst of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and East European countries signed the Helsinki Accords, which contained a significant agreement on human rights. Today’s East Asia seems to be in a much more favorable condition. ■

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