

Asian Positive Regionalism*

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We have gone through the two-day deliberations on one most crucial problem of our time, i.e. Natural Resource Management and Cooperation Mechanism in the Mekong Region. A fairly wide range of topics have been touched upon, starting from the issue of development in general to those concerning energy development and the rights and liberties of the grass-root people and communities. As well comes along the immediate problems arising from the controversial Upper Mekong Navigation Improvement Project (UMNP), providing for a comprehensive dredging and blasting of the hindering rapids and shoals along the way. It is indeed this shared sense of concern and urgency that prompted our gathering here.

As we all know, this UMNP was initiated by China, and soon after agreed upon by the three participating nations: Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Thailand. The whole rationale for China is to serve as a means to improve the capability of commercial vessels to navigate from Yunnan Province into Laos and Southeast Asia along the Lancang and Mekong Rivers. As for the other three junior parties, it is looked upon as a great opportunity to benefit from potential economic growth in neighbouring China through increased trade – so-called “free trade” for that matter. That is to say, “to catch the express train” in the current Thai jargon.

Now that it is time for presentation of the outcomes of the previous two-day seminar, I beg all of us, if I may, to pause for a moment to do some hard rethinking about the whole matter. For, in spite of the specific focus on the Mekong river basin involving such problematics like the inter-state relations and the equitable and sustainable use of natural resources, as pointed out in the seminar programme, the real issue and challenge goes far beyond that. It is not just the matter of specific cases or circumstances, but involves the whole spectrum of human world view and understanding. In other words, the Mekong river basin issue and solution just could not possibly serve as an end unto itself. In view of current globalization and along with it, regionalization, it inevitably forms part of global perspective and challenge. It is indeed the fundamental question of what kind of regional order is desirable appropriate for Asia to develop and progress with freedom, justice, and peace vis-à-vis the Hobbesian-styled politics of domination that has been going on for so long under the impact of century-old globalization and self-

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aggrandizement. Asia, including China as dominant power, certainly can no longer afford that kind of contradictions and divisiveness from within imposed upon itself.

The point is that this dialogue on the Mekong region should not confine itself to mere specifics and technicalities where one more often than not gets lost with no effective and long-term solution in sight. Let me just elaborate a little further.

The fact is that China and Southeast Asian nations have come a long, long way since after collapse of the Soviet empire and end of the cold war in early 1990s. All are practically free and independent from the heavy burden of polarization and ideological and armed rivalry and confrontation. This is not just for the absence of big power play of some twenty years ago. It is basically the built-in quality inherent in the indigenous aspirations, resourcefulness and resilience as demonstrated in their life-time and persistent struggles. On my then optimistic note, it is the fundamental question of how these potential qualities can be mobilized to bring about cohesiveness and solidarity. Mind you, this is not only to serve as countervailing force thereby warding off the politics of domination from outside, both politically and economically, but also to create a new and positive sense of regionalism.** Along this line of perception and thinking, then, the existing inter-state relationships could be transformed into the bridge for mutual understanding and co-existence, instead of mutual insecurity and rivalry.

All this clearly has great relevance to what is being attempted at this dialogue on the Mekong region. The way one sees it, it could very well serve as starting point for furthering the cause for Asia as whole, somewhere along the line of European Union development. It is all the more significant and necessary in the case of Asia as tropical resource-rich region. So first and foremost, an objective knowledge and understanding of our natural resource base needs to be sufficiently grasped. The Mekong river basin, for instance, must needs be seen as forming part of the whole tropical resource base of Asia, not for its own sake. All are inherently inter-related. Any adverse repercussions on one part are bound to affect the rest. The implication here is that it is far from enough to see into the Mekong issue as a mere problem of specific inter-state relations and equitable use of resources. It is the question of resource-base integrity as a whole that really matters. And this tells a lot of things about the so-called assessment of social and environmental impacts, which more often than not tends to serve economic growth.

This brings us to another problematic concerning the idea of economic growth. It is historically an ideology of self-aggrandizement and domination both within and without, and still remains very much so. Unfortunately, most if not all Asian nations, willy-nilly, subject themselves to it, despite their declared freedom and independence

** Saneh Chamarik, "Towards Positive Regionalism in Southeast Asia", paper delivered at the conference on Peace and Transformation in the Asia-Pacific Region, Yokohama, Kanagawa, Japan, 26-29 March, 1984.

after long years of struggles and hardships. The point here is that the hoped-for positive regionalism promoting mutual trust and co-existence can hardly, if at all, be brought about under the aegis of growth ideology. This is not to go against growth per se. It is growth for its own sake and for domination that must needs be done away with. Here, the issue of common people's rights and liberties comes into the picture. Mind you, again, it is to be not just so-called participatory rights handed down from above. It is inherent in the right to livelihood and self-reliance as well as self-development. How this aspect of basic human rights is to be translated into practice in matter of natural resource management, is something that earnestly needs close attention in this particular forum.

Last, but not least, is the question of national sovereignty that significantly stands in the path towards positive regionalism as here suggested. The principle and practice of national sovereignty is now some three centuries old. It did serve its purpose as international institution in establishing peace and security against widespread anarchy in Europe. And this then was extended to all other parts of the world in the course of colonial expansion. No doubt it has been a great help in the course of nation building and security in the past century. That is to be seen as part of historical process of human and social development. But then along the line, state security with its inherent absolutism turns against human rights and security. This is of course one most delicate and sensitive point to be carefully worked out. At any rate, one thing is clear: that is, the absolutism of national sovereignty needs to be closely scrutinized so that political reform could appropriately be carried out, especially in the sphere of human rights and liberties as well as the right to livelihood and self-development of the grass-root people and communities. It should not be difficult to see that this line of thought and action would have a very significant bearing on the specific problem of natural resource management under discussion.

Finally, my apology for a somewhat long-winded opening address. The main purpose is to collectively find ways and means towards meaningful and effective solution. The ultimate answer lies in the alternative regional order that could accommodate the integrity and sustainable management of Asia's tropical resource base. Then as prerequisites, the inter-related issues of growth and sovereignty needs to be thoroughly looked into, so that an appropriate and just solution could be found, at least in terms of political and institutional reforms with a view to alternative and positive regional order in Asia.

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