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Stirrings of Asian unity to shake up world

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WORLD VIEW: ‘THINK ASIA!’ That’s what the organisers of the sixth international conference of Asian scholars urged those attending it to do last week in the South Korean city of Daejeon. Over 1,000 people discussed all manner of subjects in 200 different panels, from Aspects of Nomadism in Mongolia to Nature in Chinese Prose, Poetry and Philosophy to Security in the Post-Bush era to Europe in the Eyes of Asia.

The question of how best to define Asia, whether geographically, culturally or functionally, was a preoccupation. Geographers debate whether it is a continent, subcontinent or region, part of Eurasia or the Asia-Pacific. What of Russia, Central Asia, Turkey, India and the Middle East? Our vocabulary of Near, Middle and Far East originated in 19th century European imperial geopolitics. Seen from China or Korea it is just as plausible to define Europe as the “western excrescence of the continent of Asia”, as geographer Barry Cunliffe puts it. The Danes, after all, have a saying that Asia begins in Malmö.

Culturally it is assumed that Asia, however defined, is qualitatively more diverse than Europe. Linguistically, religiously and in terms of separate histories and civilisations this is commonly asserted – although rarely examined systematically. Large conclusions are thereby drawn about the possible future and forms of Asian common action: the more diverse it is, the less capable it will be of becoming a coherent actor in world affairs.

Whether that will continue to be so, or if it is in any case true now or in the past, is a fascinating debate thrown up by current developments. During the cold war period Asia was fragmented by conflicts between the two blocs and associated political and economic dependencies on the United States, Russia or China. These made efforts to assert a common Asian post-colonial identity difficult, despite the efforts of Nehru, Sukarno and others in the 1950s. Pan-Asian ideology used to justify Japan’s imperialism in the inter-war period discredited the notion.

Nevertheless the Association of South-East Asian Nations was formed by Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand in 1967 and has now grown to include Brunei, Burma, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. In response to greater regional

interdependence and the need to interact with other world regions it has since spawned Asean+3 to create a relationship with China, South Korea and Japan, and more recently Asean+6 to include India, Australia and New Zealand.

Asean's institutional capacity has been strengthened to match these developments, which have made it a hub others gather around. It altogether lacks the EU sharing of sovereignty, being strongly committed to norms of non-interference in domestic affairs – “the Asean way”. But could the growing effects of transnational production links in the Asian region, the need to co-ordinate monetary, financial and economic responses to international shocks like those of 1997 and 2008, together with the desire to develop more common political action in a world setting create conditions for a closer political integration of Asian states? In that case the EU would become at least a referent, if not a model, for the Asian region.

Partly in anticipation of such a development the EU has opened more offices in the region, reinforced its commitment to political dialogue there and sponsored the Asia-Europe Foundation (Asef) based in Singapore as a joint cultural and research centre. These efforts to develop links between the two regions supplement those of individual EU member states.

Explaining this commitment in a speech to the conference, Asef's director general Dominique Girard said it was intended to diminish mutual indifference and dissolve prejudices arising from history and distance. It should encourage inter-regional partnerships of a new kind, based on an understanding that while conflicting interests will persist they can be attenuated by a better comprehension based on realities rather than presuppositions. That is all the more important as global governing structures shift away from the brief US unipolar hegemony to a more multi-polar world in which a Europe-Asia dialogue can reinforce their mutual identities.

Research shows the EU is almost invisible in Asian media, public opinion and elite groups as an actor in world affairs, compared to action by the US or individual EU member states. But there is some increasing recognition that with the euro, in world trade talks and on issues like climate change, the EU has a capacity for action. And Javier Solana, its outgoing high representative on foreign affairs, is understood as a representative figure in Asia – a finding that reinforces expectations of improved external perceptions if the Lisbon Treaty is passed. A forthcoming study of how Asia is perceived in the EU will allow comparisons to be made.

Another keynote speaker, the Korean philosopher Young-Oak Kim, argued that “the Eurocentric historical view of the world can no longer hold itself as a model of universally valid values”, but that Asia can do so. Originally, indeed, Graeco-Roman civilisation was a derivative and secondary offshoot of more original self-originating Asian and Middle Eastern ones. So were all the major religions – Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Besides being a Jew, Jesus was also an Asian, familiar with these traditions.

Looking forward, Kim hopes China can demonstrate the moral leadership that would allow Asia “to create a union similar to the EU”, on which its fate depends. That unlikely scenario would certainly transform Europe-Asia relations.

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