

## A New Asian Community

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The title of Prof. Benito Lim's presentation on a New Asian Community (with a question mark) alone leaves us with a number of questions many of which may not be answered in this forum.

Talking about the concept of "Asian Community" is not only problematic but also highly contested because it involves two controversial words that are still subject to intense academic debates and policy discussions.

The first word is Asia. It is not clear until now what Asia exactly consists of. Some "Asian" scholars divide Asia into East Asia, West Asia, South Asia, North Asia and Central Asia or what Western colonizers would call Near East, Far East, and Middle East.

But it becomes difficult when one starts identifying specific states belonging to these categories. There is no doubt that China, India, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and others belong to Asia.

But do Russia, Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan belong to Asia? Cyprus and Armenia may be geographically part of Western Asia but they socio-politically identify themselves with Europe. Egypt is a recognized power in North Africa but it is considered part of West Asia. East Timor is part of Southeast Asia but there are claims that it is part of Australian Oceania.

Having said this, building a "New Asian Community" is

very conceptually fuzzy. It is all the more blurry when we start grappling with the concept of community, which has more than 50 different scholarly definitions. Benedict Anderson (2006) argues that a community is something imagined for identity building. But is there a new Asian identity that can promote a "New Asian Community?" What is new about this concept?

Anwar Ibrahim, former deputy prime minister of Malaysia, talks of an "Asian Renaissance" to describe the monumental process of rapid transformation occurring in Asia after the end of the Cold War (Ibrahim 1996). Asia of the past is already different from the Asia of the 21st century. In fact, the 21st century is an Asian century propelled primarily by the rapid rise of China and India and positive growth of South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam, to name a few.

At present, China is the second largest economy in the world surpassing Germany and Japan. If China's rapid growth is sustained, it can even surpass the United States before 2050. Is the evolving Asian Community a result of or because of rapid ascendancy of China? Is the "New Asian Community" something shared by all countries in Asia?

Indeed, we are witnessing the unfolding of a new Asia. But are we really expecting the development of a "New Asian Community"?

In 2000, the ten-member states of ASEAN, China, Japan, and South Korea dreamed of establishing an East Asian Community (EAC), which is in fact a trade community to be built by ASEAN + 3. Originally advanced by Malaysia through its concept of East Asian Economic Caucus, the present idea of EAC is primarily based on Japanese proposal.

In 2005, the ASEAN + 6 was introduced to EAC to include India, Australia, and New Zealand. Now, we are talking about ASEAN + 8 to include Russia and the U.S. Is this what we mean by New Asian Community?



In 2009, Australia introduced the idea of Asia Pacific Community, which calls for the rationalization of already existing institutions in Asia involved in community-building.

In ASEAN, we have the aspiration to build a caring and sharing community of Southeast Asian nations anchored on three pillars: Economic community, socio-cultural community, and political and security community. Can ASEAN still be the main driver of a New Asian Community?

Based on the European experiences, building a community at the regional level takes a long, gradual and protracted processes (Banlaoi 2010). It took Europe more than 40 years before it reached its present level of regional community building as exemplified by the European Union.

Until now, Europe still faces many challenges in its regional community building, particularly in the area of foreign policy, defense and security. ASEAN community building also evolved very slowly and it will take more time for ASEAN to approximate the present level of EU.

Thus, in the wider Asian region, much more time is needed because of the region's immense cultural, economic and political diversities. That is the reason why Asian community-building efforts are primarily elite-driven and a great deal of patience is essential before the regional community building efforts get social ownership.

What really drives the initiatives for a building of a new Asian community is the economic dynamism of the region powered by China's sustained economic growth, which to date is considered the second largest economy in the world. The rapid development of information communication technology also deepens the complex interdependence of many economies in Asia and this facilitates the movement towards regional community building.

Though *realpolitik* among nations poses a challenge to community building, "increasing regional investment and capital flow, trades and markets, labor movements, finan-

cial markets and others are demanding the high degree of integration and cooperation among the countries in the region" (*APU Times* Staff Writer, 2009) and this process leads the way to community building.

Of course, building a new Asian community cannot be complete without taking into account the role of the U.S., the preeminent world superpower. It is argued that the U.S. is in Asia (Hassig, 2010) and it continues to play a very influential role in the current trends and future directions of economic, political and security architecture of Asia.

In fact, in the latest American National Security Strategy (2010) under President Barack Obama, the U.S. wants to renew its leadership in Asia by shaping the regional environment. Thus, there is a U.S. factor in building a new Asian community. With China as a rapidly emerging world superpower and the recognized major Asian power, a new Asian community will depend largely on the state of China-U.S. relations (Rosecrance and Gu 2009).

Let me conclude that the idea of a New Asian Community is still an idea whose time is yet coming. It remains an aspiration rather than a reality. What begs the question is how ready the Philippines is in the evolving New Asian Community. That is something we need to grapple with, particularly in the context of Philippine relations with China, U.S., and ASEAN (Banlaoi 2007).



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## Philippines and China Today

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"Ni chifan le meiyou (你吃饭了没有 Have you eaten yet)?"

For many, many years, that's how many Chinese typically greeted each other. It's like saying "how do you do!" Because life was so hard and food was so scarce, experts explained, the Chinese then deemed it was a major personal triumph if one had eaten a meal – thus the greetings.

In recent years, however, some upwardly mobile residents came up with novel ways to greet each other.

In the early 1980s, it was: "Ni chuguo le meiyou (你出国了没 Have you gone overseas yet)?"

In the early 2000s, it was: "Ni shangwang le meiyou (你上网了没有 Are you Internet connected yet)?"

Nowadays, it is, "Ni li le meiyou (你离了没有 Are you divorced yet)?"

China has undergone dramatic changes in recent years. I've witnessed them in the 39 years I've lived and worked there.

### Tremendous Growth and Change

Although it remains an authoritarian, communist state, China's open door policy and market reforms over the past three decades have produced tremendous growth and change. China is now getting more and more interdependent with the international system – the global village – through trade, investments, tourism, academic exchanges,