

Regional Governance: Are We Ready?

The changing world order is creating exciting possibilities for the emergence of some form of regional governance in Southeast Asia. For one, the last three (Laos, Cambodia and Burma/Myanmar) of the 10 countries making up, in the academic tradition, Southeast Asia will sooner or later be part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). For another, Southeast Asia as a unified region is no longer the impossible dream that it was during the Cold War period. Some other countries even want to get into the ASEAN regional frame — Papua New Guinea, India, Sri Lanka, Australia are some of the names that have cropped up, strange (for now) as it may seem.

The demands of the global economy and the formative security alignments also provide a strong impetus for regional members to enhance cooperation and integration. But not only market forces and states are creating this momentum. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are equally important actors with both horizontal and vertical reach. Witness the growth of all sorts of NGO networks in the region, especially in areas states were hesitant to tread: human rights, popular education, women, food security, illegal migration. These NGO networks create parallel ties that bind the region toward an increasingly shared agenda.

From the

TWS
Desk

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Moreover, the educational system is slowly creating an ontological identification with the region among Southeast Asians. As a child, I had to reach second year high school to learn more about our Asian neighbors. Social studies classes at the elementary level focused on national history, of which significant chunks were eaten up by Spain and the United States. Today, grade school pupils learn about the founding of the ASEAN in grade four. I was a masteral student when I read Kartini's letters. My daughter met the Javanese princess in grade five.

Communications technology is also making people-to-people exposures a matter of course. Indonesian friends tell me how they enjoy watching Carmi Martin and other local stars on satellite television. News reports filtering in despite heavy guarding by zealous state forces give us glimpses of the day-to-day realities of one another.

Al these incremental factors make the notion of a regional governance plausible, that is, the formation of a regional order with a shared view of common interests, co-existing harmoniously and cooperatively working for mutual enhancement.

Certainly, the ASEAN, as the most institutionalized high-level regional unit, appears to have the greatest potential to undertake the function of regional governance. Despite its successes, however, the ASEAN still has to strengthen its capabilities. These strength and weakness have been manifested in the Cambodian peace process, which ASEAN initiated but could not see through without the aid of the United Nations and other countries. While committed to peaceful conflict resolution, it has yet to evolve more effective means and structures to enhance this capacity. In the regional security arrangements that are shaping up, it still has to battle the dominant posturings not only of some partners but also among themselves.

In any case, governance need not be operationalized in terms of a single system or unit, nor of hierarchies and hegemonic structures, nor merely governments and states, militaries and defense pacts. Non-centralized multi-sectoral and multi-level networks of groups, institutions and individuals with their respective contributions will best serve the diverse nature of the forces at work. At best, more and more fora should be allowed to flourish to deal with competing agendas and allow both convergence and divergence in deeds and in words.

The conceptual framework for a regional governance is not yet cohesive, and its elements are felt only as trends and directions for the moment. There is also uneasiness on the region to bat for — Southeast Asia, East Asia, Asia-Pacific? Dynamics are different in each frame.

That states are supposed to pursue national interests and, by virtue of sovereignty, be shielded from the prying eyes of the international community set concrete limits to the effectiveness of an enlightened regional order. Discourses limited to the more negatively oriented notion of security also narrow down perspectives for envisioning a future governance not based on military strength or hegemonic relations.

It is thus helpful to envision the ideal, and move backwards to reality. On our end, our vision of regional governance is that of a plurality, rather than a contest, of civilizations; and a non-hierarchical order able to balance national-regional, state-people, and developmental-environmental interests, among others.

By looking at regional security issues, the articles in this issue somehow provide us with some facets of an evolving regional order. Prof. Carolina G. Hernandez stresses the notions of concentric circles of bonds and track-two diplomacy in the ASEAN post-Cold War security strategy. National security adviser Jose T. Almonte points to multilateralism founded on a community of interests as the wave of the future in regional security. Foreign Affairs Secretary Domingo L. Siazon Jr. posits that so-called strategic imponderables can be overcome by strengthening interdependence where it is already relatively strong, that is, in the economic sphere. That China is one such imponderable is assessed by Prof. Renato De Castro.

Autonomy and democratization in cultural production, for outgoing TWSC Director Alexander R. Magno, is the key to a cultural world order of popular empowerment. Finally, Prof. Raul Pertierra's critical look at the Philippine educational system pinpoints to us areas for structural/cultural reforms.

This first of four volumes dealing with regional issues will, hopefully, give a clear picture of current concerns, open up perspectives, and provide the elements and frame for building good governance in the region.