

Why and how to reinvent Asia?

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China and India stand out in progress in terms of economy in Asia today. In the process of change resulting into reinventing Asia we must retain our identity." — Abhisit Vejjajiva, Member of Parliament, Thailand and Deputy Leader, Democratic Party in his speech at the Asia Fellows Conference.

The third annual conference of Asia Fellows held in Bangkok from September 1-2 under the auspices of Asia Scholarship Foundation discussed in depth "Reinventing Asia in a globalising world." Participated by around 75 fellows from Korea to Pakistan, the conference dwelt at length challenges faced by Asia today and the question of why and how to reinvent Asia.

While Thailand's role in reinventing and revitalising Asia is commendable because of its commitment to promote inter-Asian economic, cultural, political and technological linkages, other countries of Asia like Japan, Korea, China, and the members of the Asean countries are also conscious about the need to provide Asia a sense of direction in meeting the challenges of today like globalisation, poverty and underdevelopment.

Asia as the biggest and the largest continent of the world also contains some of the world's deadly conflicts, particularly at the Korean peninsula in Northeast Asia and Kashmir in South Asia. If East Asia and South East Asia have moved to the road of cooperation by either freezing or resolving their conflicts, the countries of South Asia are still a victim of colonial and historical legacies, accounting for around half of world's poor and the diversion of huge resources in conventional and nuclear arms race.

Economic competitiveness, democracy, tolerance and education were identified by Mr Abhisit as the four important pre-requisites of reinventing Asia and according to him, in the process of change, the Asian countries should benefit from the positive aspects of globalisation. Asia is rich in culture and diversity yet the differences in Asian societies should be made for good and not negative use. That if the lost opportunities of the past are taken into account by the Asian countries and adequate lessons are learnt from the historical failures, much can be done to improve the image of Asia in the eyes of global community.

In his keynote address, Dr Suchit Bunbongkarn, judge of the Constitutional Court and former Dean, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, stressed that the Asian countries must have knowledge based economies because globalisation has made the world smaller. But on the negative side, globalisation has undermined the cultural values of Asia and has resulted into the erosion of traditional beliefs. Yet Asian Studies may help deal with the adverse implications of globalisation, thus helping to look Asia through the Asian eyes. Reinventing Asia is a necessity because



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only through the process of socio, economic and political change, the Asian countries can succeed in re-establishing the glory and role of their Continent in the world today. The two major giants of Asia, India and China are finally on the road to progress and the other Asian countries are also in the process of catching up with the challenges. Three important steps could be identified as to how to reinvent Asia and how Asia can deal with the impediments in this regard? First, the less developed countries of Asia, particularly in South Asia must follow the example of political stability, economic development and institutional networks of the success models like Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan and the members of the Asean countries. Myanmar and the countries of Indo-China like Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are less developed as compared to other Asean countries, but because of their participation in that regional bloc, there is a hope that eventually they will overcome their structural problems and match their Asean counterparts.

The biggest challenge in the Asian region is for South Asia because of its insurmountable economic, political and security problems. SAARC, as compared to Asean is far behind in institutionalising the process of regional cooperation, particularly in the economic sphere because of unresolved conflicts between India and Pakistan. For that purpose, inter and intra regional trade among the South Asian countries is perhaps the only solution to bring their region at par with other regions of Asia like South East and East Asia. Second, reinventing Asia would remain an unaccomplished dream if conflicts in North East and South Asia, including Afghanistan continue to destabilise the two regions. While the situation in North East Asia is only restricted to the threat, which the Communist regime of North Korea poses to its neighbours, particularly South Korea and Japan, the situation in South Asia is quite delicate because of unresolved intra, and inter state conflicts.

Third, the challenge of reinventing Asia would mean sustained people-to-people interaction, economic and trade activities and sharing of information/ideas on issues, which affect the countries of Asia. While China has opened up its economy for the world long time ago, its political order is still considered to discourage interaction with other Asian countries in the political arena. The military government in Myanmar is also not amenable to forge linkages with other Asian countries because of the threats, which the ruling junta perceives from the outside world. As far as South Asia is con-

cerned, the two major regional countries, India and Pakistan are locked up in sustained confrontation since their inception as independent nations in August 1947. The region is the most deadly and explosive area in this world because of the threat, which exists from their nuclear weapons; and the possibility that the two nuclear rivals may end up in a nuclear war if their unresolved conflicts cross the threshold point.

The former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto, in her article, "A road map for South Asia" published in August-September 2003 issue of *Journal South Asia* (a publication brought out by the South Asia Free Media Association from Lahore) pointed out the fact that, "it is through the experience of Europe, racked by war and conflict for centuries, that we can learn to make a peaceful environment in our region. Europe buried the arms and wars to focus on trade flows to enrich its people and give them a better quality of life. Today European culture is largely anti-war, tolerant and accommodative of other races, religions and ethnic groups. If we are to rescue the people of South Asia from the scourge of poverty, disease, war, ignorance, pestilence and hunger, this is the model to follow."

At the Asia fellows annual conference also, several references by speakers were made on the European model for Asia and the lessons which the Asian countries can learn from the experience of Europe, particularly in the area of economic and political integration.

Some positive things, which have happened in the last 20 years, tend to raise hopes and expectations about the future of Asia. Largely, East and South East Asia have emerged as stable and mature economies. India, in South Asia is trying to meet the challenges of trade and economy. According to a news item from IMF/Reuters, Asian forex reserves top \$ 1.6 trillion. Out of 1.6 trillion dollars, Japan has foreign exchange reserves of \$ 556.8 billion, followed by China, \$ 346.5 billion, Taiwan \$ 182.2 billion, South Korea \$ 134.8 billion, Hong Kong \$ 112.6 billion, Singapore \$ 87.0 billion, India \$ 85.0 billion, Malaysia, \$ 38.2 billion, Thailand \$ 38.1 billion, Indonesia \$ 33.6 billion, Pakistan \$ 11.1 billion and Bangladesh \$ 2.4 billion. From the statistics, it appears that East and South East Asia rank quite high in terms of foreign exchange reserves, as compared to South Asia. However, one can see a marked improved in the Indian and Pakistani foreign exchange reserves but such a plus point must have a sound impact on the socio, economic position of people of the two countries.

Reinventing Asia is thus both a challenge and an opportunity. If 19th century can be a European Century, 20th century is an American Century, why cannot 21st century become an Asian Century? From any account, Asia deserves to play a leadership role in world affairs in the days to come.