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Journalists mull Asia integration outside the EU box Region's diversity, distrust less compatible with European model, forum participants say

By MARI KOSEKI

FUKUOKA -- It was Mahatma Gandhi who said friendship that insists upon agreement on all matters is not worth the name.

Journalists from Asia and Europe who took part in a recent symposium here probably walked away sharing this view after four days of discussions on issues that included whether and how cooperation among nations could lead to greater stability and prosperity in a globalizing world.

The 2004 EU-Japan-Asia Journalists Conference, co-organized by the Delegation of the European Commission in Japan and the Asia-Europe Foundation, expanded the traditional Japan-Europe forum launched in 1987 to include other parts of Asia. This effectively helped broaden the discussions, which touched on such topics as regional integration and economic development.

"The European Union is convinced that a certain amount of integration is necessary" for enhanced intergovernmental cooperation, said Ambassador Bernhard Zepter, head of the Delegation of the European Commission in Japan.

But many participants agreed the EU model was just one option for regional cooperation and need not be the only choice for Asia, should the region decide to pursue stronger bonds.

Unlike the EU, which will further expand with the accession of 10 Central and Eastern European countries on May 1, political and business leaders shoot down notions that Asia can be integrated more deeply, due to the region's diversity, and lack of a common culture, history or religion.

Rodolfo C. Severino, a former secretary general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and a professor at the Asian Institute of Management in the Philippines, said in a keynote speech that this diversity has prompted the various parts of Asia to take a more "pragmatic approach" to regional cooperation than Europe.

He also noted that various platforms for communication in the Asia-Pacific region, including the ASEAN Regional Forum, bring potential adversaries such as China, Japan and the two Koreas together under one roof.

This may at times render preventive diplomacy impossible, as such sensitive issues as nuclear proliferation, the status of Taiwan and territorial disputes in the South China Sea must be settled in other forums, he said.

"(The ARF) should go into subjects that all (members) consider threats, such as terrorism, transnational crime and piracy -- nontraditional security issues," he said.

As to a more integrated Asia, such as through the creation of the East Asian Community stipulated in the Tokyo Declaration signed between ASEAN and Japan in December, Severino's response was rather blunt.

"China and Japan must sort out the relationship between them" before such an idea can be realized, he said.

Indeed, many participants took interest in Japan's relationship vis-a-vis its Asian neighbors, especially as the Fukuoka District Court ruled while the conference was in session that Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo was unconstitutional.

The shrine is contentious as it honors Class-A war criminals as well as Japan's war dead. Koizumi's visits have sparked ire in Asia, most vocally from China and South Korea, where anti-Japanese sentiment stemming from Japan's wartime atrocities and colonial rule are still strong.

Yoichi Masuzoe, a House of Councilors member of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, told the gathering that the Yasukuni Shrine issue is "difficult."

"Creating (a memorial for the fallen) similar to Arlington (National) Cemetery (in the United States) would be ideal," he acknowledged. "But with an Upper House election coming in July, it would be difficult to find a middle ground on the issue, as there are lawmakers who are backed by war veteran groups."

But while the differences among the various parts of Asia may be starker than those among the countries of Europe, and Japan needs to continue efforts to win the full trust of its neighbors, many participants agreed that Asia would do well to look beyond such diversities and distrust.

Asia's societies should search out common interests from which a cooperative framework might be erected, they said, noting the foundations of European integration were laid in part due to the shared understanding that the pursuit of mutual interdependence could become the strongest factor for regional stability.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the questions and comments during the sessions touched upon a player not represented in the forum -- the United States -- and the roles, both positive and negative, that it might play in future world affairs, especially in Asia.

Japan's ties with the U.S., as symbolized by the bilateral security agreement, were taken up by many participants. Koizumi cited the security pact as one reason why Tokyo deployed Self-Defense Forces elements to assist in Iraq's reconstruction -- the first dispatch of ground troops to a country effectively still at war since World War II.

This apparent shift in foreign policy, coupled with recent moves to revise the pacifist Constitution, drew the attention of both European and Asian journalists, who questioned whether it was a sign that Japan would strive to become a greater military power.

Masuzoe said he believes Japan has no choice but to maintain its current security alliance with the U.S., given today's geopolitical climate.

"If not, we would have two options -- to forge an alliance with another power, such as China or Russia, or go nuclear," he argued. "Through a process of elimination, we have to stand with the U.S."

At the same time, however, he said it is possible to construct an Asia not excessively dependent on Washington economically, and noted such collaboration is moving forward on the financial front.

One Japanese journalist noted that while Japan needs to recognize the views of its neighbors on issues such as Yasukuni Shrine, revising the Constitution and militarization, this was in essence something Japan must ponder through "quiet dialogue" with itself.

Participants also placed the ongoing war against terror under close scrutiny, with one Asian journalist observing that "every country is exploiting the fight against terrorism to suit its own domestic and international agenda."

Another participant expressed concern that some regimes might also be using this battle to prop up their own despotism, effectively "worsening the domestic conditions that actually fuel the root causes of terrorism."

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PARTICIPANTS in the EU-Japan-Asia Journalists Conference held in Fukuoka last week close four days of talks on issues ranging from security to governance. MARI KOSEKI PHOTO

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