

Nishinippon Shimbun article: (morning, 22 April 2004)

Column: Fukaku yomu (reading deeply)

From the EU-Japan-Asia Journalists Conference

The writer of this article participated in the “EU-Japan-Asia Journalists Conference” (organised by the Delegation of the European Commission in Japan and the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)) held in Fukuoka City. The conference brought together journalists from the European Union (EU) and Asia—two regions may seem at first glance to have little connection with each other; however, as the participants pursued discussions on topics such as security and regional integration, it gradually became clear that all of the journalists from each of the various countries were asking themselves the same questions: how should their country continue in its relations with the US, now the world’s only superpower? and how can we build a multinational cooperation?, while searching for possible solutions.

(article by Suehiko Ide, International News Dept.)

Seeking to establish regional stability through identity-building

Asia, whose main focus is on relations with the US, may benefit from considering: **Cooperation based on the European model**

View of Japan from the outside

“When has Prime Minister Koizumi ever advised President Bush that the US unilateralist policies should be kept moderate? Has the President lent an open ear to such suggestions?” (The Times, UK).

Such questions assailed guest speaker Hatsuhisa Takashima, press secretary for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in response to his explanation of Japan’s foreign policy, which is centred on the Japan-US alliance.

The MoFA spokesman gave as an example the fact that before the start of the war in Iraq, Japan continually suggested that the US discuss the matter with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council. However, it did not come across, even to the Japanese journalists present, as if the Prime Minister, who is said to be on personal terms with Mr. Bush, was making any objection to the President’s policies. It must have been still less clear to the foreign media.

On the other hand, the common understanding among the foreign journalists is that Japan, against the backdrop of changes in political climate, for example, with the North Korea issue, is now looking to exercise the right of collective self-defence. Questions anticipating the revision of the constitution were also posed in succession: “Is the revision to the constitution a step to becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council?” “When will Article 9 of the Constitution be amended?”

Although discussions on this topic have long been in progress, for example, at the Diet’s Research Commission on the Constitution, perhaps Japan has given the impression to the world of being impatient to revise its constitution.

As consultants

The ruling of the Fukuoka District court declaring Prime Minister Koizumi’s visit to Yasukuni shrine unconstitutional was also of interest to the journalists from all the countries. In particular, there were many journalists who expressed concern over the possible effects of the strained relations between China,

now a driving force in the world economy, and Japan. Visits between the two countries by their heads of states have been suspended.

Some of the views on Japan were quite severe: "Why doesn't Japan settle its past accounts and move forward?" (Strait Times, Singapore) "Couldn't we say that (the comment by the Prime Minister that he will continue to visit Yasukuni) is giving the wrong message to the world?" (Minister-Counsellor, Delegation of the European Commission in Japan).

On the other hand, there was also great expectation for Japan to take the initiative in achieving regional cooperation in Asia.

Professor Hirotaka Watanabe, of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies mentioned the fact that, before the Iraq war, after Japan expressed support for the US attacks in the Security Council, the other Asian countries stopped expressing over opposition and pointed out that "If Japan had consulted with the Asian countries in advance and had presented an opinion that respected the results of such consultations, we might have been able to present Asia's position to the world".

The stance that Japan will establish relations with the Asian nations, not only in the field of economic cooperation, but also as consultants to each other in the field of international politics, is an important one for Japan's future foreign policy. In this connection, Japan will be held accountable to the other countries for its actions. However, this will also lead to wiping away the mistrust that the Asian countries harbour towards Japan's becoming a potential military threat.

Common interests

On 1 May, the EU welcomes ten new member states from Central and Eastern Europe to contain twenty-five member states. What can Asia learn from the EU's endeavours?

In terms of regional cooperation in Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with its policy of non-intervention in the affairs of member states and informal meetings, served to help maintain a non-belligerent region. However, ASEAN has also been criticised: "Is it enough to have an organisation that just discusses matters?" (Die Welt, Germany) and there have been voices calling for the establishment of a supranational organisation to deal with such issues as further economic development and human rights issues.

In Asia, there are great differences in the size of the economy of each country, and so it will be difficult for Asia to aim for regional cooperation like the EU in one step. However, a participant from the Világgazdaság of Hungary, which will become a member state of the enlarged EU, said, "(In comparison to other regions such as Eastern Europe,) it is an advantage (that Asia) has a history of cooperation through ASEAN".

Guest speaker Dr. Hazel Smith of the United Nations University emphasized that "the process of achieving regional integration itself leads to stability in the region". Although in terms of security, the Asian nations always tend to focus on relations with the US, if they could build up a sense of identification with each other in their efforts to achieve a framework for integration or cooperation, it might be possible to seek regional stability and prosperity with relation to both "Asia-US" and "Asia-EU" axes.

Photo caption: The "EU-Japan-Asia Journalists Conference" brought together approximately participants (mainly journalists) from twenty-one countries.

EU-Japan-Asia Journalists Conference Organised by the Delegation of the European Commission in Japan and the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). Held alternatively each year in Europe and Japan. This year's 17th Conference, included for the first time participation by journalists from nine Asian countries. Approximately forty participants, including academics, from a total of twenty-one countries met for four days starting on 6 April and held extensive discussions.

