

Toward peace and prosperity in Asia-Pacific: A youth vision

Asia-Pacific has more than half the world's population and, by far, is the most dynamic region. The IMF projects the region to continue to be the world leader in economic growth, reaching 5.5 percent in 2017 and 5.4 percent in 2018.

Asia-Pacific sea lanes play vital roles in global trade. Nearly half of the world's seaborne trade transits these lanes annually and 8 out of 10 of the busiest ports in the world are situated in the region.

Strong domestic demand and relatively resilient financial markets, especially in the more advanced economies in Asia, have enabled us to navigate the global turbulences in recent times.

Despite the overall positive tones, the mid to long-term outlook remains shrouded in uncertainty and risks. Some of these challenges include structural economic reforms to support growth, trade and investment; demographic factors such as effective management of urbanization as well as aging populations; and geopolitical factors.

For the past several decades, the Asia-Pacific region has enjoyed a period of relative peace, or the absence of major war between states. However, there remain inherent tensions.

Asia-Pacific today is home to four nuclear-weapon states (NWS), namely China, India, Pakistan and North Korea. We have seen growing tension in the Korean Peninsula, where Pyongyang has conducted nearly a dozen missile tests this year alone.

The United States is responding with the deployment of its carrier strike groups, joint military exercises and installation of an advanced anti-missile system in South Korea. The situation poses real military escalation risks.

This adds to a host of other issues in Asia-Pacific, most nota-



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bly among which are competing territorial claims in the South China Sea. Such developments not only concern the direct parties involved but certainly all countries in the region.

These are all complex challenges that younger generations in Asia-Pacific will have to face today and tomorrow.

There are three recommendations for the future of Asia-Pacific to lay the groundwork for us to work toward peace and security.

First, revitalize and expand the framework of multilateral approach.

In a world where ultra-nationalism and narrow populism seem to be on the rise, we need a constant reminder that cooperation among countries is important – more so in the context of globalized and interconnected economies. Digitalization has brought dramatic changes in the ways people interact with friends and families across time zones and far-flung places; the ways government is expected to deliver its public services and receive feedback from the people; and also the way nations interact with one another.

Among the existing organizations in Asia-Pacific, ASEAN has proven to be one of the most successful thus far. ASEAN regularly hosts dialogues, initiatives and forums involving not only its 10 member states but also dialogue partners within and outside the region, which later formed up the East Asia Summit.

Although multilateralism in itself may not directly result in regional order, a framework such as ASEAN has consistently promoted the habit of dialogue,

cooperation and compromise among countries in an informal, pragmatic and consultative manner.

Second, urge all countries in the region to work together toward a peaceful dispute resolution mechanism.

While border and territorial disputes in the region remain unresolved, military confrontation is the least desirable path. This goes for everyone in the region. Not even China, whose rise in terms of both economic and military might has been nothing short of phenomenal, will disagree on this point.

The costs of war are simply too high. We need a mechanism to discuss and negotiate strategic issues without having to resort to a regional arms race, which will only lead to higher escalation risks.

In this case, multilateral framework such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) can lay a foundation for sustainable rule-based interaction among states, not only in Southeast Asia but also with its dialogue partners including the US, China, Japan and Russia.

ASEAN's notion of "cooperative security" helps address the unequal power distribution among participating parties. It binds stronger states with the same rules of the game as the weaker states, while giving everyone the legitimacy as a responsible international stakeholder.

The main challenge with respect to the China question is how to accommodate China, as well as other major powers (the US, Russia and Japan in particular), within a stable regional security architecture. This is not just to prevent war between them, but also to protect the orderly functioning of international affairs along agreed rules and norms.

The ARF, with its principle of

inclusivity, is uniquely placed to allow continuing efforts toward a new dynamic equilibrium. Peace must mean stability in the region maintained through shared responsibilities.

Finally, look ahead for common opportunities among countries in Asia-Pacific and how we can all maximize the future for peace and prosperity.

Many have argued that, in order to strengthen constructive engagement in the region, we need to turn to expanding trade and mutual economic interests between states in Asia-Pacific. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has now lost its momentum with the US pull-out. And with its absence, it will be difficult for us to ignore the gravitational pull of China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative.

It connects China to Central Asia and Europe by land and to Africa through Southeast by sea routes. It involves US\$900 billion in infrastructure investments across 65 countries. The lingering concern is whether the initiative might be employed as political leverage. The implication of China's long-term intention remains to be seen.

OBOR notwithstanding, the Asia-Pacific region will continue to have plenty of opportunities for cooperation by virtues of its market size, the enormous natural resources contained within, as well as massive potentials through trade and interconnectivity with the rest of the world.

All these will allow the region to grow and prosper. However, the emphasis should be on achieving sustainable economic growth with equity; one that takes into account our environment for future generations and one that is shared by all countries.

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