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## Considering the Japanese Regional Concept of East Asia

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Amid ongoing globalization of the world economy, the regional groupings have also progressed such as the European Union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In "East Asia" as well, the ideas of creating an "East Asian Economic Zone" or an "East Asian community" have recently gotten a lot more attention both in the academic field and in the practical level. Although a considerable number of studies have been conducted on regional cooperation in "East Asia" in the postwar period, it has only recently been seriously considered that East Asian countries, centering on ASEAN members plus three (Japan, China, and South Korea), cooperate in the implementation of establishing a regional framework. Japan has sometimes been said to be reluctant to make such a regional grouping because of the different levels of economic development, the close relationship with the U. S. that Japan has and its negative legacy of history in Asia. However, in Japan various visions on regional cooperation have been proposed since early on the post-war era. In the practical level as well, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi first proposed the idea of creating an "East Asian community" in a speech in Singapore in January 2002, and the idea of "East Asia Community" was incorporated in a Tokyo declaration adopted at the Japan-ASEAN summit in Tokyo from Dec. 11 to 12, 2003. The Tokyo declaration calls for closer and more wide-ranging ties in politics, economy, and regional security as well as development, and culture in this area. Thus, the region, "East Asia", has started to be seen as an economic or even political unit. It is a distinctive trend in current discussions that the regional unit is "East Asia," not "Asia-Pacific." However, the recent discussions have been preoccupied with points such as the economic effect on the Free Trade Agreement, and less attention has seemed to be given to such questions as what are the unifying fundamentals of the regional unit "East Asia"? The region referred to as "East Asia" commonly includes Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan and the countries of Southeast Asia. However, as described later, its contents vary depending on the criteria one chooses. How to divide the region has always been controversial. For example, how the existence of Taiwan should be treated? Does the region include Australia and New Zealand? Regarding this topic, much discussion on what the region is has been

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accumulated in the U. S., especially in 1940s and in 1950s, in the beginnings of the area studies,<sup>1)</sup> but in Japan, it has not been discussed sufficiently on how they perceive the region, “East Asia.” Therefore this paper sorts out the points of such discussions in Japan and presents my views.

Considering a “region”, one might imagine a geographical connection such as islands, rivers, climate zones or agricultural zones. However, virtually this definition of a region would have little meaning in such a regional concept as “East Asia” because known to all, Asia is geographically too diversified. Some people might think that a region is an aggregate of units with common characteristics in their cultures. Or others might say that regions are areas in which trade and investment are active. Regarding the Japanese studies trying to discuss regional frameworks in Asia, there have been various approaches, and they can be classified into four main groups ; the ethnic approach, cultural approach, the economic approach, and the political approach.<sup>2)</sup>

Firstly, a “region” can be ethnically or ecologically homogeneous aggregates. Traditionally, Japanese intellectuals had considered Japan as an Oriental nation and they had developed their ideas by comparing Japan to the West. Tadao Umesao, however, denied this Orient-Occident dichotomy and advocated the ecological historical viewpoint.<sup>3)</sup> He emphasized that there is a principle ruled by the ecological structure, and based on the ecological features, he split the so called Old World - that is, Asia, Europe and the northern half of Africa - into two clear types. One is the “First Region” and the other is the “Second Region.” Japan and the countries of Western Europe are included in the First Region. These two areas are physically very far apart, but in terms of the form of their present culture, and the dynamics which they have controlled their history, have many similar characteristics and therefore can be viewed as being in the same category. All the other Old World areas not placed in the First Region are included in the Second Region, and the Second Region is divided into four parts, Chinese, Indian, Islamic and Russian areas, according to ecological characteristics. This is the thought that there are originally some common grounds in the region. He tries to view Asian regions outside of Japan from his unique viewpoint. It is a revolutionary theory that can explain Asia’s diversity, but it does not cover connection within Asia.

Secondly, the religious or cultural approach also tries to discover commonalities in this area. There have been several theories giving explanation of the high performance of East Asian economies in terms of local culture. One of the representative examples is the theory of the “Confucian Cultural Zone.” Since around

the middle of 1980s when the countries including Japan and South Korea attained success of industrial and economic progress, the role of Confucian ethics was spotlighted as a contributing factor of this success.<sup>4)</sup> In this theory, cultural features in East Asia, especially family-oriented values and group mentality is compared with individualistic ethics in the West, and these values were considered as important factors of their success. Kim Il-gon, an expert in this theory, said that East Asia is formed with a core of nations which are strongly influenced by Confucianism such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore.<sup>5)</sup> It would be a significant viewpoint to consider the regional ties not only from the aspects of economic phenomenon, but also from the religious and cultural phases. However, by the time that this "Confucian" theory had become well established, the fast developing area extended to Southeast Asian countries including Thailand, which is a Buddhist country. Yet, he explained that there is influence of Confucianism on the nations of Southeast Asia. Japan, Korea, China and Taiwan also have much Buddhist influence in their culture, and there is the undeniable sense that it is not a realistic explanation to say that East Asia region countries are linked mainly by Confucian ethics.

The third, the economical approach, would be presently the most familiar method to perceive a region. In the post-Cold War era, many countries joined the free market economy, and they continue to exchange with each other beyond national borders, and various ideas of regional cooperation have been envisaged. For example, the "South China Economic Zone," formed by Southeast provinces of China, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, and the "Yellow Sea Rim Economic Zone," consisting mainly of coastline cities of China, South Korea, and Japan. Among such regional initiatives, the best known economic zone would be the "Japan Sea Rim Economic Sphere," composed by three Northeast provinces of China, the Eastern coasts of both Koreas, Siberia, and the Northern coastlines of Japan. This has been proposed in some local governments and academic societies in Japan since the latter half of 1980s.<sup>6)</sup> The advocators of this plan emphasize that each country in this region has different advantages in natural resources and labor forces, capital and technology. Russia, for instance, has abundant natural resources, including petroleum, minerals, forests, and fisheries. China and North Korea have strong labor forces. South Korea and Japan have rich capital and superior technology. Therefore, they believe that there are potentials to attain their shared interests in economic development. Based on a detailed survey of the industrial structure and enterprise trends in the region, they propose various policies that can be implemented by the local governments and enterprises. Although this can be considered as one of the Asian sub regional cooperative zones, this discussion seems to be losing momentum

at present because of the opaque situation in the Korean Peninsula including the nuclear development issue. Instead, "the East Asian Economic Zone" including ASEAN plus 3 has been getting more public attention. Thus, the economical approach focuses on mainly a trade area of varying dimensions. They try to prove that actual economic spheres are already formed, or try to identify the existence of common regional interests and economic foundations originally rooted in the region.

The fourth is the approach from the political perspective. With the political approach, they consider that a regional system has politically and artificially been planned and realized. In other words, a regional concept itself is never fixed. Even a same name of a region can point to different boundaries. For example, Europe has never had the same contents. The concepts of "Asia" and "East Asia" were originally introduced from the West where they believed progressing history and civilization is normal and superior.<sup>7)</sup> Compared with the European world which considers itself a civilized society, such regional concepts as the "Orient" and "Asia" came to be used as the representation of a uncivilized society. Thus, the Orient and Asian regions were not formed by themselves, and their boundaries were always influenced by the European viewpoint. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japan tried to extend its area of influence by making a wider regional concept such as "Manchuria," "Mansen" (the area including Manchuria and Korea), "Greater East Asia" and so on.<sup>8)</sup> With this approach, the regional concept could be easily utilized by administrators. They could succeed in making regions where there is actually little commonality.

To sum up the Japanese concepts of the East Asian region, the ethnic approach, the cultural approach and the economic approach respectively try to find the common backgrounds which originally exist in the region. On the contrary, the political approach tries to find some intentions and arbitrariness to make boundaries of regions where the members have actually little in common. What are the unifying fundamentals of the regional unit "East Asia?" There is, of course, no simple answer to this question. Probably, the efforts of accumulating discussions from various perspectives could help people have some shared understandings about the region where they live. Still and all, historically considered, clarifying the political factors which affected the formation of the present regional boundaries, would be one of the most useful approaches, especially in the case of East Asia. After the Second World War, Japan re-opened its exchange with Asian countries through war reparation payments and this then shifted to the latter economic cooperation including Japanese yen loans. It is true that there were some stormy anti-Japanese movements particularly in the 1970s, but this aid had a great influence towards the construction of postwar Asian countries. However, it should not be overlooked that this economic

cooperation included a certain strategy of Japan itself on each occasion. Because of the negative historical experiences, residual feeling of enmity and distrust have long hindered regional cooperation in East Asia. Moreover, the U. S. has had a considerable impact over this region. Amid this situation, one of the most important pillars of the Japanese foreign policy toward Asia was bilateral economic cooperation. In order to know the Japanese regional concepts better, it would be necessary to analyze regional concepts which domestic policymakers assumed, because different policymakers had different regional concepts in various contexts. For example, the leading policymakers of postwar Japanese economic cooperation included the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI, the present Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry), and their regional perceptions were not the same. MOFA, which had closer relations with the U. S., expressed no real enthusiasm for establishing any regional framework without the U. S., even in the Tokyo Declaration in 2003 the member countries were not specified. On the other hand, MITI tended to pursue broader regional framework for its economic purpose on behalf of the Japanese economy and Japanese business world. Thus, there is a deviation in the recognition of the "East Asia," and depending on what policymakers had leadership, the regional concepts in Japanese foreign policy has changed. The common point of any regional initiatives is that it is being used so that the plan may justify policymaker's strategy of some sort. Therefore, the region should not be considered as the given concept, but it can be considered as the one which is formed in relation with Japanese policymakers' regional strategy. It can be said that Asian countries had similar circumstances and this calls for further investigation of the relationship between regional concepts and foreign policies. To clarify what kind of policy has been chosen in what kind of environment would show one of the clues about the regional unifying fundamentals unique to this region.

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[Notes]

- 1) For example, Steward, Julian H., *AREA RESEARCH Theory and Practice*, Social Science Research Council Bulletin 63, 1950. PP. 7-11.
- 2) Besides these, there are other complex regional concepts such as the energy cooperation region, which covers a wide range of sectors from politics, economy to security.
- 3) Umesao, Tadao, *Bunmei no Seitashikan* (An Introduction to the Eco-Historical Perspective on Civilization), Chuo Koronsha, 1974.
- 4) Mizoguchi, Yuzo, Mineo Nakajima, ed. *Jukyo Renaissance o Kangaeru* (Considering the Confucian Renaissance), Taishukan Shoten, 1991.
- 5) Kim Il-gon, *Higashi Asia no Keizaihatten to Jukyobunka*, (Economic Development in East Asia and

- Confucianism), Taishukan Shoten, 1992.
- 6) Kazuo Ogawa, *Kan Nihonkai Keizaiken - Hokuto Asia/Siberia Jidai no Makuake-*, (The Japan Sea Rim Economic Sphere), Nihon keizai Shimbunsha, 1991.
  - 7) Yamamuro, Shinichi, *Kukan Asia o meguru ninshiki no kakucho to henyō*, *Asia Shinseiki 1. Kukan* (Asia's New Century, 1. Space). Et al. Aoki, Tamotsu, Iwanami Shoten, 2002. P. 32.
  - 8) Nakami, Tatsuo, *Chiiki gainen no seijisei*, Mizoguchi, Yuzo, et al., *Asia kara Kangaeru 1. Kosaku suru Asia* (Considering from Asia, 1. Complicated Asia), University of Tokyo Press, 1993. PP. 292-293.