

Insights from the 7th Asia Future Conference ‘Revitalization and Reconnection’

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The 7th Asia Future Conference (AFC) at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, was organized by the Atsumi International Foundation Sekiguchi Global Research Association and co-hosted by the Japanese Section of the Faculty of Arts of Chulalongkorn University. Over two days (August 10-11, 2024), more than 340 registered attendees from 21 countries participated in keynote speeches, open forums, roundtables, and thematic sessions on a range of research topics related to post-pandemic revitalization of Asia.

The COVID-19 pandemic sent shock waves through the world, halting labour flows and tourism, impairing supply chains and trade, worsening health and food security, and threatening the achievements of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As Asia emerges from the challenges brought on by the pandemic, this crucial recovery period offers an opportunity to improve regional infrastructure and connectivity and to develop cross-border solutions to shared challenges. Under the ‘Revitalization and Reconnection’ theme, the 7th Asia Future Conference brought together scholars, policymakers, and entrepreneurs from across Asia to discuss what a full recovery entails and how to build a more inclusive and resilient post-pandemic societies.

On the first day of the conference, eight concurrent roundtable sessions organized by the fellows of the Atsumi International Foundation were held, with themes ranging from modern approaches in humanities (national histories [国史] of East Asia, the current state of Japanese Studies in Thailand),



scientific explorations (the impact of Generative AI on research, the wildlife release in Asia), to geopolitical ‘hot topics’ (the North Korean factor in East Asian regional cooperation, the centrality of ASEAN). Given the area of her expertise (Chinese Foreign Policy), the author of this report attended Roundtable Session 6 - ‘ASEAN Centrality in Turbulent East Asia.’

Moderated by Dr. Ferdinand Maquito from the University of the Philippines Los Banos, the roundtable session devoted to the ‘ASEAN centrality’ concept included two presenters and four discussants. In his presentation entitled ‘ASEAN Centrality from a Southeast Asian Perspective,’ Dr. Maquito offered an in-depth analysis of the concept, arguing that ‘ASEAN centrality’ (further subdivided

Atsumi International Foundation. Conference Poster.

into 'geo-economic centrality' and 'geopolitical centrality') refers to the idea that ASEAN has (or should have) a central role in forming the political and economic institutional architecture of the East Asian region. Furthermore, Dr. Maquito contended that while ASEAN has been the driving force behind regional economic integration (e.g., the 2020 conclusion of the RCEP deal), it has shied away from displaying its geopolitical centrality - ASEAN's deafening silence about China-Philippines territorial disputes in the South China Sea as a case in point.

The second presenter, Professor Hitoshi Hirakawa from Nagoya University, approached the concept of 'ASEAN centrality' from the Japanese perspective. Professor Hirakawa noted that, historically speaking, during WWII Japan perceived Southeast Asia as part of the 'Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere' and as a mineral resource supply area. In the 1980s-1990s, on the other hand, Southeast Asia became the main destination for Japanese business expansion. At the beginning of the 2000s, ASEAN started advocating its centrality. Given the rise of China in the region, the Japanese government expressed its support for the principle of ASEAN centrality by establishing the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) and strengthening security ties with ASEAN member countries. As a result, Japan's significance to the region expanded beyond the economic sphere, and the deepening of horizontal relationships (the growing ASEAN workers flow into Japan and mutual tourist flows) has contributed to a more balanced and reciprocal partnership.

Moving on to roundtable discussants, Dr. Jakfar Idrus from Kokushikan University noted that faced with the reality of the U.S. and China's attempts to modify the rules-based international order, ASEAN needs to adopt a neutral position and seek to establish mini-lateral and inter-regional forums to address topical issues. Dr. Khin Maung Htwe highlighted China's involvement in Myanmar's ongoing civil war and warned that the ASEAN's non-interference principle has hampered its role in conflict resolution, which in turn has undermined ASEAN centrality in the region. Dr. Mandar Kulkarni from GITAM University noted that India fully supports ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific region. He also referenced India's RCEP dilemma - joining the RCEP could exacerbate already substantial trade deficit with China, but also boost the economy by facilitating India's integration into advanced regional production networks. By opting out of the RCEP, he concluded, India inadvertently strengthened China's position within the bloc vis-a-vis ASEAN. The last commentator, Mr. Luxmiwattana Motoki from Waseda University, focused on ASEAN's domestic legitimacy, observing that ASEAN countries' reluctance to interfere in each other's domestic affairs has rendered the organization a 'paper tiger.'

The ensuing Q&A session revolved around China's increasingly assertive activities in the South China Sea and ASEAN's efforts to preserve regional stability amid the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry. The discussants also agreed that more has to be done to maintain conversations with mainland China scholars and explore realistic scenarios for U.S.-China coexistence in the region.

The opening ceremony took place at the Crown Plaza Hotel, Bangkok, on the afternoon of the first day and the keynote speech entitled 'The Future of Bangkok' was delivered by Mr. Sanon Wangsrangboon, the Deputy Governor of Bangkok. The Governor presented the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority's smart city action plan, which consists of five pillars: the citizen-centric approach, large-scale project integration, technological efficiency, transparency, and collaboration with local communities. He also referenced the significance of administrative modernization through digitalization and open-access solutions, emphasizing the need for the inclusive advancement of Bangkok.

The open forum on challenges faced by Asia's megacities followed the keynote speech. Moderated by Professor Supreedee Rittironk from Thammasat University, the forum featured four experts in urban planning and urban engineering. Professor Weijun Gao from the University of Kitakyushu offered an overview of megacities in Asia, focusing on the need to balance growth, demographics, and sustainability. Dr. Pawinee Iamtrakul from Thammasat University referenced Bangkok's efforts to address traffic congestion, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-economic disparities by employing sustainable indicators to enable the municipal government to make informed decisions concerning both short-term interventions and long-term planning initiatives. Professor Michael Tomeldan from the University of the Philippines discussed the challenges faced by Metro Manila, including limited land for future expansion, disaster and climate risk management, overburdened infrastructure, shortage of housing, and lack of parks and open spaces. The last presenter, Dr. Mochamad Koerniawan from Bandung Institute of Technology, referenced the Makassar City's 'Garden Alley' project. The ongoing project aims to reduce carbon emissions through the implementation of renewable energies so that the city's liveability increases and the communities can thrive while living more sustainably. The presenters agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic brought urban governance in Asia to a critical juncture. The recent crisis highlighted the need for holistic urban planning that prioritizes compact and mixed-use development, effective response to the climate emergency, inclusive urban digitalization, and the urgency to safeguard urban



finances by expanding and diversifying municipal revenue.

Fifty-three thematic sessions designed around specific topics of interest (Area Studies, Culture, Education, Environment, Health, Innovation, Mobility, Peace, and Social Development) were held on the conference's second day. The author of this report was a presenter at Session 3-06

Atsumi International Foundation. *The 7th AFC Conference*. Photograph. August 10, 2024.

devoted to the environmental dimension of the SDGs. Co-moderated by Dr. Sonja Dale from Hitotsubashi University and Dr. Jeawoo Lee from the GS Group, the session featured four SDGs-environment nexus-related presentations, spanning the macro- (the green shift in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank's (AIIB) lending practises), mezo- (the regional sustainable development in China's Guizhou Province), and micro- (the resilience to earthquake-induced liquefaction and the innovation in radiant heating systems) level of analysis.

In her presentation entitled, 'Achieving the SDGs in Post-pandemic Asia: The Case of the AIIB,' the author of this report presented an in-depth analysis of the AIIB's efforts to align its statutory goals with the SDGs and greening its lending portfolio, with a particular focus on the Bank's evolving lending policy, the green shift in the AIIB's energy and transport sector strategies, the expansion of the Bank's lending portfolio into smart city, water, and digital infrastructure sectors, and the implementation of COVID-19 Crisis Recovery Facility (CRF).¹

Two significant findings emerged from this study. First, The AIIB's strategic adjustments closely mirror the ongoing evolution of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from a risk-accumulating transport and energy infrastructure mega-projects formula (→ the AIIB's energy and transport sector strategies), through the Green and Sustainable Silk Road (→ the green targets of the AIIB's Corporate Strategy), to the BRI 2.0 envisaged as an amalgam of renewable energy and green transport projects, comprehensive cooperation on green finance, the Digital Silk Road, the Health Silk Road, and overseas economic and trade cooperation zones (→ the AIIB's investments in private equity green funds and climate bonds, its expansion of digital sector projects and cross-border connectivity projects, and the CRF). Second, through co-financing arrangements, coordinated response to the COVID-19 crisis, and scaling up lending capacity (e.g., the AIIB-IBRD guarantee facility), the AIIB developed a close collaboration with and learnt from the established peer multilateral development banks (MDBs) to emerge from the pandemic strongly refocused on the Sustainable Development Goals.

The ensuing discussion revolved around the MDBs' efforts to adjust their financial and operational model to provide traditional development finance to client governments while scaling up financing for global public goods, such as climate mitigation, pandemic response, and disaster preparedness. It also emphasized the urgent need for the MDBs to function as a coherent system so that the client governments could prioritize their specific sustainable growth models instead of juggling multiple development indicators and outcome requirements. Lastly, the discussants agreed that the ongoing deterioration in the bilateral relations between the U.S. and China and the likely U.S. withdrawal from

¹ The paper was the recipient of the 7th AFC Best Paper Award and will be published in the forthcoming *Toward the Future of Asia: My Proposal*, Vol.7.

the Paris Agreement under the second Trump administration threatens to undermine the global governance of development finance.²

After the completion of her thematic session, the author of this report attended Session 4-03, which was dedicated to China-related research. Co-moderated by Professor Kijeong Nam from Seoul National University and Dr. Chuan-tiong Lim from the University of Tokyo, the session featured four presentations, with topics ranging from literature (Sinophone studies in Japan), economic history (Shanghai and Hankou's energy supply in the age of coal; 1840-1930), to contemporary international relations (the narrative of 'New Cold War' and the evolution of China's approach to global governance in the 21st century).

Professor Minhao Yu's presentation on a shift in China's approach to global governance from a passive observer to an active participant was especially noteworthy since it placed the AIIB's recent strategic adjustments in the broader context of the U.S.-China strategic competition. There is no denying that, as concluded by Professor Yu, China's embrace of global governance is part of Beijing's hedging strategy towards the U.S.³ It is equally important, however, to understand that over the last two decades China has been pursuing a multipronged strategy towards global governance. To begin with, China supports international institutions and agreements aligned with its foreign policy goals - the Paris Agreement on climate change is a case in point. Next, China seeks to weaken the hold of the Western powers on global governance architecture by developing alternative institutions, such as the AIIB and the New Development Bank (NDB). Lastly, China attempts to shape global governance norms in its image - China's norm promotion in cybersecurity illustrates the point well.

In conclusion, the 7th Asia Future Conference provided several key insights into the current state of post-pandemic recovery across Asia. It also highlighted the critical role of cross-disciplinary collaboration in tackling complex challenges such as climate change, energy transition, megacity management, and health disparities. While the advancements presented at the conference explored multiple pathways to a resilient post-pandemic recovery, the US-China strategic rivalry and the long-term rollback of interdependence between the two powers remained a recurring theme, pointing to the fragility of post-pandemic recovery in Asia and widespread concern among Asian communities about becoming a pawn in the intensifying great power rivalry.

² On January 20, 2025, President Trump signed an executive order directing the U.S. to withdraw from the Paris Agreement on climate change.

³ The concept of 'hedging' is understood here as a diplomatic practice of second-tier states seeking to improve its position relative to the system leader without directly challenging it.



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