

Toward building a better Asia

Activities of Asian Dialogue society

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What is the Asian Dialogue Society (ADS)? Is it an organization, a movement, an idea, a process? It may be a little of all these. Perhaps it is best to describe it as a fellowship of citizens and friends of Asia. After all, in a way it represents a synthesis of all the work a small group of people in a corner of Asia has promoted over more than two decades. We have come together as friends to address issues that will affect the future course of political, economic, and social developments in Asia and the world and to promote better human values in all societies. This fellowship is dedicated to “Building a Better Asia,” a theme we have adopted because we believe every Asian and all friends of Asia will share that goal.

The common goal of building a better Asia embodies the idea of a global Asia: an Asia that is at peace, economically vibrant, free and democratic, and tolerant of diversity, and where people are economically, politically, and legally empowered; an Asia that is free from small and big wars, exploitation, disease, and rapacious states. This obviously also means we encourage an Asia that is more open, just, and egalitarian, an Asia that promotes the values of human rights, press freedom, regional integration, greater political participation, education of minorities, intellectual cooperation, and human development in general.

The origin of the ADS

The ADS concept was born in 1985, culminating in the formation of the Information & Resource Center (IRC) in Singapore as a private think tank. The work of the IRC since then has involved men and women from diverse intellectual backgrounds in Asia and the West—civil servants, political and

business leaders, academics, cultural and civil society activists, youth, media professionals—in a variety of forums dedicated to the promotion of free and humane values. The work of the IRC has also included human resource development, business promotion, and interaction among government and political leaders of the ASEAN region.

In 2002, in a demonstration of support for our Indonesian friends following the tragic terrorist bombings on Bali, the IRC held an Asian Innovation Forum there. The Bali Committee that was set up in Den Pasar became the genesis of the ADS. Following the brutal crackdown in Depayin, Myanmar, in 2003, the first official product of the ADS was the study-group report *The Quality of Partnership: Myanmar, ASEAN and the World*. In this report the ADS called for cooperation among ASEAN, India, and China to view the “Myanmar problem” as an Asian problem requiring an Asian solution.

The mission of the ADS

Our mission is to promote better understanding among peoples through dialogue. We believe in the indispensability of dialogue and debate not only in the resolution of conflicts but also in the maintenance of peace. Dialogue involves intellectual, cultural, and people-to-people exchange, which we consider essential for attaining mutually beneficial cooperation and symbiotic relationships in Asia and the world. The ADS logo expresses this aspiration graphically. The logo comprises a teacup and tea leaf, symbolizing the idea of tea as a drink of dialogue all over the world but particularly all over Asia.

The ADS believes that cultural diversity and ecological harmony must be

central to our concerns and work. These beliefs must be underpinned by the principles of coexistence, egalitarianism, and tolerance. The ADS is also committed to human security and the right of individuals and societies to live free from want and fear.

The geographical interest of the ADS covers the countries from the Bosphorus to Japan and southward to Australia. We recognize the great diversity inherent within this greater Asia. It is both a strength and liability. Modernity coexists with tradition, and large pockets of poverty remain amid growing wealth and ambition. The deep crisis, we believe, does not lie in the differences between civilizations, because Asia’s strength lies in its historical tolerance and acceptability of differences. The danger to the peace and stability of Asian communities lies in the intolerance within civilizations and in the poverty and absence of freedoms of peoples and communities. This is the danger that sectarianism and poverty pose and that global terrorism and corrupt regimes exploit.

The ADS believes that a rising Asia has the mission to contribute to the peace and stability of the world. In order to play this role Asians should come together to contribute to finding solutions to the problems of Asia and the world. In the next phase of its work the ADS seeks collaborative and strategic partnerships with governments, businesses, civil society, and intellectual communities to link ASEAN, East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia as well as ASEAN’s dialogue partners outside Asia.

Flagship projects

At present the ADS is undertaking a number of key projects to promote the

idea of building a better Asia. Below is an overview of four flagship projects.

● *Alternatives ASEAN Charter Initiative*

This project is a vision to build a firm foundation for Southeast Asia and a global Asia with a set of humane institutions that will define the rights and obligations of its citizens and their states. Asia also needs to come together with a framework for engagement and not muddle through into the future. A charter is necessary to provide a parallel and dialectical process that involves the citizens and voices of Southeast Asians and other Asians. ASEAN governments do not necessarily represent the interests of the people. The project's first two meetings were held in Bangkok in November 2006 and April 2007, and the third was held in Kuala Lumpur in July 2007. Dialogues are being planned in China and India as well as in Central Asia later this year.

● *Initiative towards Shared Integration: Its Implications for Northeast India*

This three-year project, started in this fiscal year with the support of SPF, is a study to address development issues in general and issues related to human security in particular. Governance and human security must be broadened and refined and must go beyond good politics or even good economic management. Human security must lead to broad-based economic growth and social development as a means to greater human development. The first meeting of the project was held in Kolkata in May 2007. The objective of the first stage is to develop a database of information on the northeastern region of India. The workshop brought together advisors to the project and social scientists and media professionals in that region.

● *Building a Better Asia: Future Leader's Dialogue*

The objectives of this project are to give young Asians an opportunity to interact with Asian leaders from the political, business, and intellectual communities, to provide opportunities for the participants to deepen their under-

standing of emerging issues that relate to Asia in particular and those that are of concern to humankind in general, and to enable retreat participants to get to know one another better so that they can forge long-lasting relationships based on mutual trust and understanding.

The first retreat was hosted by Peking University at its campus in Beijing in September 2007. The second will be hosted by the International Centre, Goa, India, at its premises in February 2008. Both have been made possible by The Nippon Foundation. The ADS is thinking of promoting a third retreat in one of the Central Asian states.

● *The Goa Dialogues: Promoting Freedoms in Asia*

This joint project of the International Centre, Goa, and the ADS is a new initiative to promote and strengthen peace, stability, freedom, independence, and sustainable development in Asia and the world through dialogue, interaction, and cooperation among civilizations. The initiative will be a transmitter of ideas and activities that will contribute to building a resurgent Goa, a progressive India, a better Asia, and a safer world. The Goa Dialogues stand firmly on the four pillars of culture and civilization, sustainable development and globalization, Asian security, and a global Asia.

Besides these four flagship projects, which the ADS manages directly, there are others that we encourage or promote under the broad umbrella of "ADS Initiatives." These include a *madrrasah* project in southern Thailand, the School for Leaders project in Malaysia, and a prospective "Asian Cultural Village" project in China promoted by ADS-China. The ADS has also proposed a "Best Practice Academy" for northeastern India, southwestern China, and Myanmar, and is developing the idea of a Global Asia Forum.

The office of the ADS is in



A *madrrasah* seminar in Nakhon Si Thammarat, southern Thailand, organized as an ADS Initiative

Bangkok. We have not sought to set up offices outside Thailand because it is beyond the capability of a small fellowship. But chapters of the ADS have sprung up because of the interest of friends. We now have chapters with offices in the three biggest Asian nations: China (Ningbo), India (Mumbai), and Indonesia (Bali). Interest has been expressed in establishing chapters in Japan and Central Asia, as well.

The ADS invites other citizens and friends to join in a strategic partnership to construct an Asia based on the foundations of human freedoms and economic and social empowerment of its peoples, where governments and civil society will forge a healthy relationship that can bring about a strong Asia contributing to a better world order. The ADS will spread the idea of fellowship among the citizens and friends of Asia as crucial to building a better Asia.

M. Rajaretnam was born in Singapore. After obtaining a B.A. from the University of Singapore and an M.A. from the University of Michigan, he was a research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies from 1971 to 1980. He established the Information & Resource Center (IRC), a private think tank, in 1985. He has also served as executive director of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (1993-95), coordinator of the Singapore Institute of Pacific Economic Cooperation (1993-95), and secretary of Singapore-SCAP (Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific; 1994-96). Through the IRC and its offshoot, the Asian Dialogue Society, he has worked with a number of well-known foundations, including SPF.