

Is America Listening to Asia?

Soedjatmoko

Increased communication between the United States and Asia today will bring about better and stronger cooperation in the future.

Following is the revised text of a speech delivered by Soedjatmoko before the Penang Conference of East Asia/Pacific Cultural Affairs Officers and Binational Commission Representatives held February 13-16, 1976.

I have been asked to address myself to four questions, each of vast breadth and depth. They are: First, is America listening enough to Asia? Second, how can Asia make itself better heard and understood in the United States? Third, what kind of exchanges between countries should we strive for? Fourth, how can modern communities foster traditional cultures instead of diminishing their diversity?

It is obvious that these questions cannot be dealt with adequately in a few thousand words. But they help to bring out one thing: It is senseless to talk about incremental improvements in programs unless we are aware of the changing setting in which these questions are posed and in which we must review the programs that have been in existence so

far: for in the final analysis, cultural relations do not operate in a vacuum; they operate in a very clear political and historical setting, and that setting has changed in a very fundamental fashion.

In fact, I believe we are experiencing some very fundamental changes, the consequences of which we are just beginning to see. They are not only political; they are also cultural. They have to do with how man confronts questions of survival and the state of the world. It is easy to list some of these process changes.

- A shift in major power configuration has led to detente and to the reestablishment of relations between the United States and China.
- There has been a shift in the relations between the industrial countries and the Third World.
- Interdependence has now become a fact of life.
- A new awareness of a potential scarcity of natural resources has developed.
- And, of course, we have undergone a recession.

These changes have had worldwide impact. At the same time—Asia and the United States have been developing in their own particular ways. Asian countries have developed, or are developing, their own perceptions of their problems and their own perceptions of the future. Simultaneously, the United States is going through a deep cultural crisis that has to do with the Americans' sense of themselves, their sense of identity. This calls for some analysis.

Shift in American Values

A very fundamental shift in values is taking place—slowly, incoherently, often inadequately articulated because of a failure of the American intelligentsia to look at their own problems in an integrated fashion rather than through the eyes of their particular disciplines. It touches, as I have noted, on the question of national identity, on the myth of the American Nation, which has guided America from its establishment by the Puritans. From the notion of the "City on the Hill"—later on vulgarized and made a little more arrogant—to Theodore Roosevelt's conception of America's manifest destiny, that myth has guided Americans.

But now the country is searching for a redefinition of the myth which can hold together, and give purpose to, a very fragmented American society. And the processes of search and redefinition have become, because of America's power and

Soedjatmoko served as Indonesian Ambassador to the United States from 1968 to 1971. He was the Vice Chairman, later Adviser, to the Indonesian Delegation to the United Nations General Assembly from 1966 to 1967. He is currently Adviser to Indonesia's National Planning Council and a member of the Ford Foundation Board of Trustees.

He is the author of Nationalism and Progress in Free Asia and co-editor of and contributor to An Introduction to Indonesian Historiography.

I suspect that in the coming decade fear may be one of the most important and dangerous companions we will have on the road toward a more viable world; therefore, the management of fear is going to become a real problem, one that in the final analysis can only be effectively addressed by programs of cultural relations and interactions.

Because new aspirations, new goals, new fears are developing everywhere, it is not only the United States that will emerge from this period of painful self-examination with a new sense of its aims and its roles. This is also happening in the Third World, and specifically in Asia, where most countries have outgrown the concepts of development and nationhood

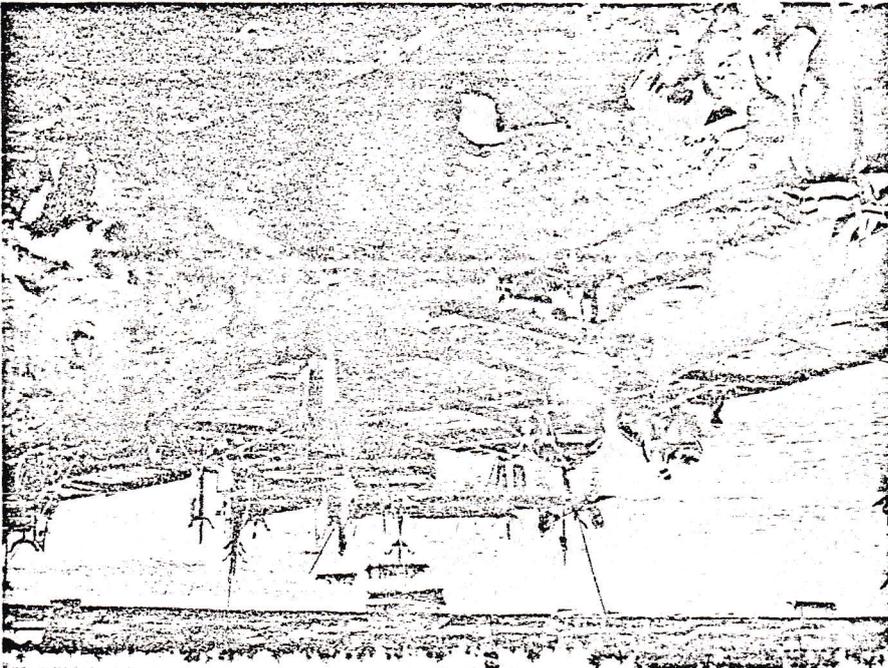
Management of Fear

an all life and international politics. at a situation like this, it is obvious national relations is of crucial importance; clearly we must break away from traditional concepts of international goodwill, of international relations, of cultural understanding. These terms have come to stand for a rather superficial type and level of contact. Thinking in terms will not enable us to come to grips with the problems we share, but on which we may have different perspectives. We must reach into deeper levels of cultural understanding and intercultural interaction.

This becomes all the more necessary because we are witnessing the end of what one might call the period of coercive diplomacy which was part of the hierarchical relationships of the cold war in both of the two major political blocs. Now we are in a situation in which no major power, and no combination of major powers, is able to give direction and shape to international events or to the search for a viable international order.

Thus, the main characteristic of our time will not be the application of power to resolve international misunderstandings, but diplomatic negotiation. This points up our need for clearer perceptions of each other's interests, and the necessity for a greater capacity to convey and articulate our own interests to those with whom we have engaged in a dialogue of interests, of aspirations—and of fears.

Workers diligently rebuild river's banks. Credit: United Nations/Wolff.



that have taken place in the world. capable of solving political problems, though they may, in the long run, generate forces that will alter the terms in which those problems are perceived and solved. So when we speak about cultural programs, we should be aware that we are speaking about things that require time, that require patience and perseverance; that we are speaking about a series of problems and programs that will always remain very politically vulnerable to our own nations.

America Looking Inward

This has been a long introduction to our first question: Is America listening enough? In a word, no. It is now listening even less than before. Why? There are good reasons for it. The almost total self-absorption of Americans in their own self-examination has, in a sense, increased the insensitivity with which the United States now looks at the world. Furthermore, there is a tendency to concentrate on stabilizing the relationships between the super powers in the hope that through manipulation of those relationships, the rest of the world can be put into place. Yet events in Portugal, in Italy, and in Angola show the very limited capacity of the super powers to control fundamental processes of change

Cultural programs by themselves are not immediate utility of cultural programs. Yet, we should be aware of the limited relations, especially in the future.

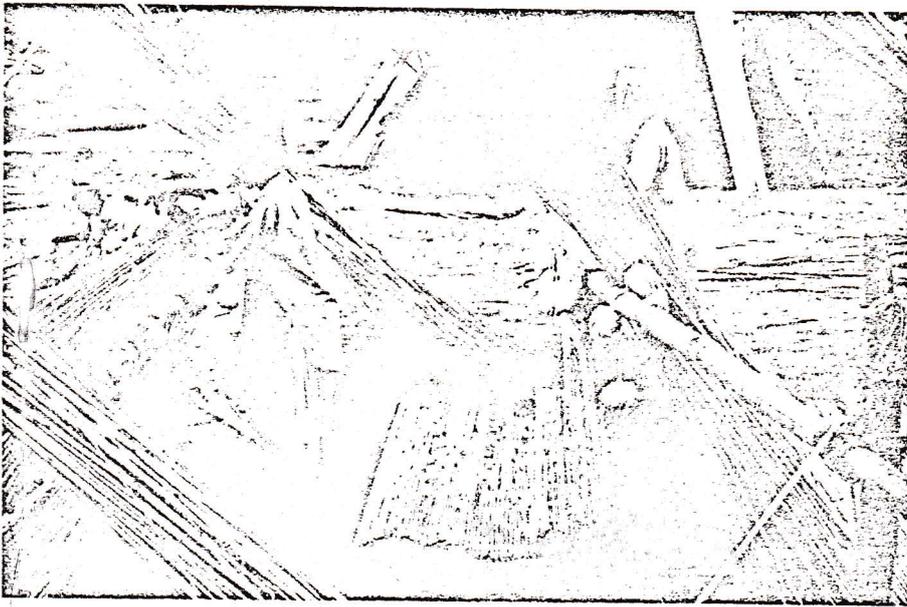
The moment one speaks of these problems, one is involved in the deepest layers of self-awareness of nations and of groups; one becomes involved in the myths that provide continuity, purpose, and motivation for individual civilizations, and in the perceived meanings and purposes of whole societies and nations. These are all arguments to illustrate the importance of cultural relations, especially in the future.

our salvation in a moral context that encompasses the whole world.

The moment one speaks of these problems, one is involved in the deepest layers of self-awareness of nations and of groups; one becomes involved in the myths that provide continuity, purpose, and motivation for individual civilizations, and in the perceived meanings and purposes of whole societies and nations. These are all arguments to illustrate the importance of cultural relations, especially in the future.

can it do so on the basis of its own values alone. We will, all of us, have to work out our salvation in a moral context that encompasses the whole world.

we all share in the problems of survival and stability. Whether we like it or not, we have a common future. There is not going to be one separate future for rich countries and another one for the poor. This suggests a new set of problems that cultural relations will have to address. For we now find ourselves in a situation where no nation, however powerful, or no nation, however weak, can work out its destiny in isolation. Nor can it do so on the basis of its own values alone. We will, all of us, have to work out our salvation in a moral context that encompasses the whole world.



Local craftsmen in Lahore, Pakistan weave reed curtains. Credit: United Nations/Wolff.

There is another reason why in the United States there is less interest in Asia, and why in Asia there is less inclination to look at the United States. Until recently, many people both in the United States and in Asia believed that all the answers were in the United States—in terms of theoretical concepts, in terms of developmental concepts or in terms of economics or technology. This belief has been a major reason for the asymmetry in communications which has existed between the United States and Asia. But now many of the ideas on economic development which were largely generated in American academia have run their course, and new notions about development are being formed within the Third World. No matter what Mr. [Daniel P.] Moynihan has said, it is a mistake to view the ideas that are now shaping the perceptions of the future of the Third World as coming from the London School of Economics. They are really coming from the wrestlings of many people in Asia with their own problems—which somehow don't conform to existing theory.

A second reason why Asians are turning less to the United States for solutions to their problems is this: People in Asia are discovering that the range of their problems is broader than the expertise the United States has to offer. For example, the whole area of public manage-

ment poses problems that are becoming increasingly important in the Third World; but very little expertise in the United States is available on them because the nature of the American economy and its political system is so different. Or again, in the area of indigenous industrialization—the development of technology from the bottom up—very little in the American experience is relevant to the problems of Asia.

So Asians see a need to shop more broadly, not just in the United States as was almost automatically the case in the past. Personally, I believe it is very important for us to “shop around” in places of greater ideological diversity because of the patent inability of American ideology to address adequately the problems of Asia.

Another understandable reason why people in the United States are listening less to Asia is their disillusionment with aid. In the first place aid was over-sold. In the second place its problems seem to be intractable. As a result a new aid philosophy has developed in the United States, which is more in line with the present shift in American ethics. The new philosophy demands patience, courage, faithfulness to a country which has been selected for aid, because many of its problems cannot be solved in one budget year—or in five budget years.

It is perhaps not sufficiently recogniz-

ed that in following the course of long term national development in a country, the United States is faced with the most unyielding problems: administrative incompetence, corruption, shifts in the structure of power, even the basic processes of structural change. The course is painful and difficult. Yet I believe it is the correct one, for if the new assistance program is not to be seen as a “cop-out” with a veneer of morality, it must give evidence of its willingness to engage in a relationship which will endure for a decade or more.

Turning to the question of the infrastructure for listening in the United States, I see a withdrawal. One sees a reduction in the operation of Asian area studies centers. One sees a tendency to treat the easy problems: the problems of technology, of agricultural development and research, of communications. The flight into technology can, of course, be very useful, but it means intellectually a lowering of the horizon of problems on which the United States is willing to interrelate with Asia. And I think that is a mistake.

East-West Center

Let me illustrate: The East-West Center¹ is now largely technical. I have a great deal of respect for what is happening there, and I am glad that one institution is going that route. But it is meaningful only if there are other institutions dealing with the whole range of problems that the East-West Center has decided not to deal with. Other institutions have other limited programs, but they address only a very minor segment of the range of developmental problems which many people still hope the United States intellectual community will help to resolve.

The situation has not been helped by the so-called radical economists who simplify the problems by posing them in terms of an attack on the incapacity of the capitalist system and of a preference for the Communist model. And in the area of political science, one encounters a sort of resignation to an historical inevitability that requires the Third World to go through a totalitarian phase. Yet, I

¹ The East-West Center is a national educational institution designed to promote better understanding among the peoples of Asia, the Pacific, and the United States.

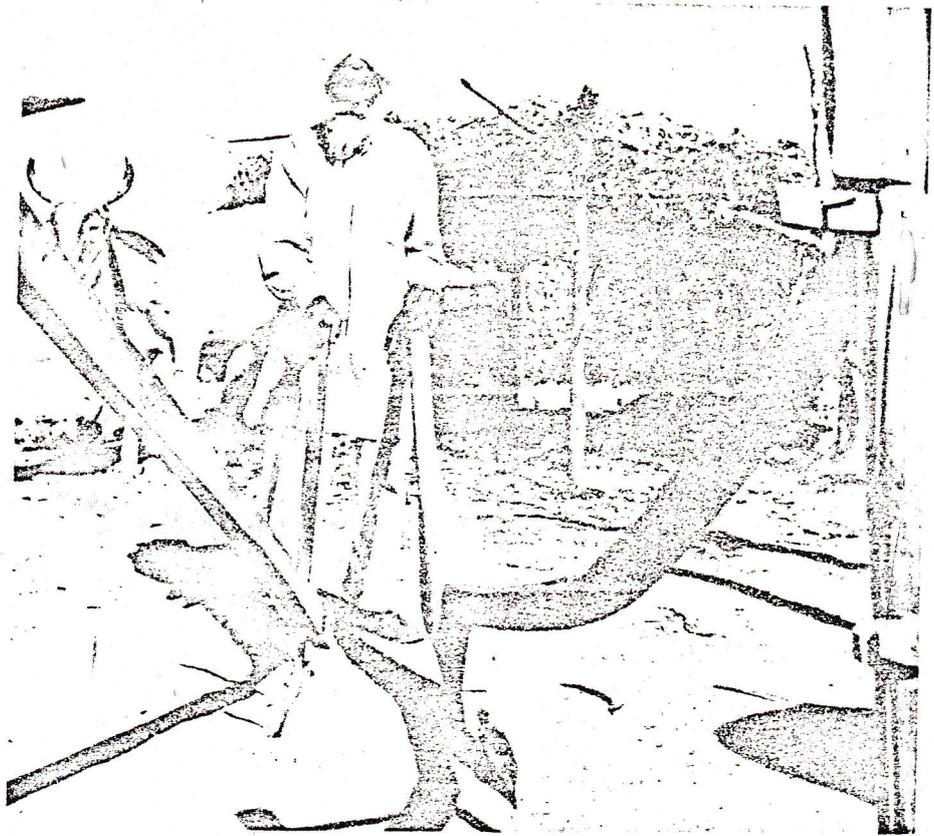
can assure you there are many in the Third World who are not willing to accept the choice between chaotic capitalist development, with its great inequities, and the Chinese model. In most cases either model is totally irrelevant and unfeasible.

One would prefer to see the radical economists in the United States attempting to help the many people in the Third World to develop the alternative solutions they are crying for. But this is not happening, in part because the radical economist really sees his purpose as attacking the capitalist system as such, using the problems of the Third World simply as a tool in this attack.

What is needed is research by the academic community into the very basic social problems of the societies of the Third World. These countries are all undergoing a tremendous crisis. The first generation of political structures has collapsed in most of them, and the development process itself has proved illusory, creating entirely different situations from those they had envisaged. They are in the grip of great historical forces that we only partially understand. Yet when one searches for centers of learning which are also engaged in studying these problems, where Asians can find support, one finds none in the United States. In my opinion, if the United States is to be engaged in Asia in the future, it must develop the capability to address these problems, because at the heart of the American repositioning in the world lies the question of how the United States relates to the processes of basic social change that are taking place everywhere.

Now let me look briefly at the second question: What can Asian countries do to make themselves better heard in the United States?

Theoretically, they can do a lot. Realistically, I don't think much can be done now. It is easy to state the need for interaction, for a dialogue that goes beyond the bargaining from fixed positions that one sees in Paris and the United States and in bilateral negotiations. That is clearly not enough. First, we have to understand each other's fears and aspirations in a new context. But in Asia there is very little awareness of the importance of knowing the United States. We have been on the receiving



Indian farmer shown with hand-made plows.

end so long that we have taken America for granted. And as long as we know a little bit—how the President is being hampered by Congress and so forth—we think that is enough to know about the United States.

Of course, much more detailed knowledge of the United States is imperative; but the imperative is not yet felt. Until it is, the assumption of Asians that Americans know enough about Asia, just as Asians know enough about the United States, is likely to remain undisturbed, and Asian countries will do little to make themselves better heard across the Pacific.

Increased Knowledge of Asia

This is unfortunate, for of course it is important for Asia to raise the level of knowledge and interest within the United States about Asia. The belief that we have done enough is an illusion, but I am sure that within a few years, Asian governments will come to realize this and will, in a modest way, help in funding programs or centers in Asia which can

help to develop experts on America. We might move gradually, not just to establish more of the binational commissions which we have, but to develop international foundations involving two or more Asian countries that are not U.S.-dominated. These could help develop Asian relationships, not exclusively with the United States, but more generally. I believe there have already been some moves in this direction.

Where does this leave us? Both in the United States and in Asia the trends are not favorable for listening better to each other. Still the need is obvious. Perhaps all that can be said is that we should simply try harder.

Now to the third question: What kind of exchanges are necessary? Exchange programs should no longer be only bilateral, but where there are bilateral programs, depth and diversity are important. There is a whole range of mutual problems which exchange programs should address. There is concern in the United States about environmental problems, about problems of the future,

about lifestyles, about conservation of energy and its implications. There are similar concerns in Asia. I am confident that if opportunities were available for a dialogue on these problems, the bilateral benefits would be great even if that were not their main purpose.

Our Common Future

As I noted earlier, we must develop a new language, new ideas and new perceptions which we can share about the future, because that future is going to be a common future. We need not perpetually have discussions or seminars about that future, but we can have seminars on a whole range of new problems. This will automatically lead to an articulation of perceptions about the future which we could gradually come to share. This is why it is important for Asians to have an opportunity to be exposed to, and to participate actively in, the frontiers of American thought and science, and the opportunities for them to do so should be created not only in the United States but also in Asia. So doing will lead to the development of an awareness of a community of interest in the future which will be sustained whatever short run political problems our countries may have. More specifically, what is needed are more area studies, but area studies of a different type. We should go beyond the comfortable, academic traditions or discipline-oriented studies of linguistics, of anthropology and so forth, and relate those disciplines to the really burning issues of the day, which are often not only political but also moral and ethical. There is very little of this being done in any university. This suggests what I also believe: that in developing cultural relations, we should not look only to academia.

Finally, because we are entering into another dimension, I think it is of the greatest importance that Asians be involved in the search that is now taking place in the United States, not only for a redefinition of itself, but also for the new lifestyles which respond to the new problems. For example, new energy-conserving lifestyles are as real a problem for the Third World as for the United States. Asians could benefit from participating in this American search, taking home ideas that would fertilize

their own awareness of their problems in their own context. In other words, we need a new, common language to deal with the new problems of the world which concern us all. Asian perceptions may be expressed less articulately, less colorfully; but it is obvious that, however inarticulate, their perceptions of the future have validity. We should, then, develop a common language so that at least our differences can be articulated and understood.

Providing Funds for Asia

In sum, it is not enough to speak about improving existing programs. It is important to examine how the infrastructure for listening to Asia in the United States can be improved. And that creates the problem of funding. Funding in the past has been very much the result of strategic considerations. That will no longer do. Other approaches will have to be developed in the United States. And that, of course, raises a political problem. There should be a restructuring in the reward system so that people within academia and research institutions will find it profitable to deal with these new problems.

I turn now to the last question: The safeguarding and nurturing of cultural pluralism. Its importance I surely do not need to prove: the "whys" everyone understands. The need for cultural diversity in the world in which we live is as great as the need for the diversity of genetic stocks to keep the world in good physical health. But there is no easy answer to the question of how this desirable cultural diversity can be achieved. Part of the problem stems from the rapid development of communications. Even in the United States you are wrestling daily with the impact of a new communications technology which will produce lifesized, three-dimensional pictures which can be linked up to, and interact with, computers. It is already becoming obvious that in the United States, the shape of politics, the way Americans govern themselves, will be determined to large extent by how communications technology develops and how it will be harnessed politically. On the one hand, the new technology will make the privacy problem very difficult to solve. On the other, cable television, the possibility of special broadcasting to

special audiences, may also revitalize to a degree isolated cultures and ways of life.

The same set of questions apply as well to the international field, though here the problems occur on a much larger scale. Who controls? Who funds? Where are the sources of development of new technology? But we are dealing with a situation in which all cultures are in turmoil: that of the United States, and those of all the Third World countries. Many cultures will die; there is nothing that can be done about it. Still, diversity of cultures must be maintained in the interests of us all. Fortunately, the resilience of cultures is remarkable. One has only to look at Ulster, or at the Basques to realize how language, religion, and the sense of collectiveness with the soil feeds the sense of separate identity. We will have to restructure our political systems to allow for these very important cravings for cultural identity.

Culture As A Strategy

At the same time culture is also a strategy, a strategy for people to help them face the future. It is a learning process, and all cultures will have to adjust to the requirements of survival. That, I think, is a better guideline for us than the desire to keep so-called backward tribes and nations as living museums. To do so is inhuman. What is more, it will solve nothing.

Thus, the problem of maintaining diversity in the cultural field is to develop the necessary instruments for multiple cultural coexistence. Here again, I see no final answers, but certain things can be said. Democratic control of the international network, decentralization of programs, respect for the privacy of nations, and understanding of the cycles of "inwardness" and "outwardness" that all nations undergo are essentials. The United States has been going through the former cycle; and I have dwelt on this general aspect of my subject because I feel there is a grave danger in emphasizing improvement of programs when the real problem lies in the characteristics, the attitudes of present-day Americans. In my opinion, the United States will not be capable of again significantly influencing the world until it succeeds in redefining its own position and relating it to a pluralistic world and the problems of interdependence which this implies. □