

IS AMERICA LISTENING ENOUGH TO ASIA?

by

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The following remarks were delivered by Dr. Soedjatmoko, former Ambassador from Indonesia to the United States, during a conference held in Penang February 13 to 16, 1976, of Cultural Affairs Officers from American Embassies and representatives from Binational Educational Exchange Commissions in the East Asian and Pacific areas.

Four questions have been put to me, each of them opening up a vast area of problems of great magnitude and depth.

Let me state the questions: First, is America listening enough to Asia? And it is pointed out how asymmetric the communications flow is between Asia and the United States. Second, how can Asia make itself better heard and understood in the United States. Third, what kind of exchanges between countries should be striven for? And 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 twenty minutes, 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 have to 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 within a very clear political and historical setting, and that setting has now in a very fundamental fashion changed. I believe we are witnessing and experiencing the beginning of some very fundamental changes, not only political, but also cultural changes. They have to do with how man positions himself towards questions of survival and the state of the world. The consequences of these changes we are only barely beginning

to see, and the process is still going on. Now its very easy to tick off some of these changes: there has been a shift in the major power configuration that has led to detente and to 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; there is also a new awareness of resource scarcities and of course, the recession. But also, Asian countries now have developed and are developing their own perceptions of their problems and their own perceptions of the future. And at the same time, and here I am deviating a little bit from the points John Richardson has just made, the United States is going through a deep cultural crisis that has to do with the Americans' sense of themselves, their sense of identity. There is a very fundamental shift in values taking place--slowly, incoherently, often not sufficiently 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 scholarly discipline. It touches on problems of identity, on the myths of the American nation that have 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, and now there is a search for redefinition of the myth that now can and should hold together--and give renewed purpose to--a very fragmented American society.

Need Clearer Perceptions of Each Other's Interests

These processes of search and redefinition through which the United States now is going, have become, because of America's power, because of its predominant positions, a major fact of global life and international politics. Now in a situation like that, it is obvious that the cultural dimension of international relations is of very crucial importance. It is becoming increasingly clear that we have to break out of the traditional concepts of international goodwill, of international relations, of the study of international relations, and of cultural understanding. These terms on the whole have come to stand for rather superficial types and levels of contact; and these simply won't be adequate to enable us together to come to grips with some of the problems that we now share, but on which we may have different perspectives. We therefore will have to reach into deeper levels of cultural understanding and intercultural interaction. It becomes all the more necessary because we are witnessing now the end of what one might call the period of coercive diplomacy, or if one wants to be more friendly, of hierarchical diplomacy that was part and parcel of the hierarchical relationships within both of the two blocs during the cold war. 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. And so for all the little wars that may happen and are already happening--this

period is going to be characterized diplomatically not by the application of power, but by negotiations, by bargaining. This points up the need for clearer perceptions of each other's interests, the need also for a greater capacity to convey and articulate one's own interests to those with whom one is engaged in dialogue--a dialogue on interests, on aspirations, on the perceptions of threat, and on fears. I think that in the coming decade fear may be one of the most important and dangerous companions that we will have on the road towards a more viable world. And 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.

But it is not only through the thorough analysis of the traditional elements in international politics that we can gain a perspective on the problems that will face us in the coming 10 or 20 years because new aspirations are developing, new goals and new fears. It is not only the United States which will emerge from its period of painful self-examination with a new sense of its goals and its role; it is also happening in the Third World; it is also happening in Asia where most countries have outgrown the original concepts of development and nationhood that have guided them through the 50's and 60's. There are now new perceptions. And so our problem is very much going to be how to develop an understanding of the commonness, of the commonality that

we share in the problems of survival and stability; because we have a common future, whether we like it or not. There is not going to be one separate future for rich countries and another one for the poor. This suggests in part a new set of problems that cultural relations will have to address, because now we are really in a situation that no nation, however powerful, no country however weak, can work out its destiny, its survival and its salvation, in isolation. Nor can it do so on the basis of its own values alone, because we will, all of us, have to work out our salvation in terms that encompass the whole world in a global, moral context. The moment one speaks about these problems one is involved in the deepest layers of self-awareness of nations and of group-identity. One gets involved in the myths of civilizations that provide their continuity, purpose and motivation and in the perceived meanings and purpose of whole societies and nations. These are all arguments to show the importance of cultural relations, especially in the light of the future.

At the same time, we should be aware of the limited immediate utility of cultural programs. Cultural programs by themselves are not capable of solving political problems. They may, in the long run however, generate forces that will change the shape of political problems and that may change 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 which will always remain very politically vulnerable in our own nations.

Now this is too long an introduction to the first question. The answer to this first question, is America listening enough, is no. It is now listening even less than before. Why? There are good reasons for this. The almost total self-absorption that now occurs as a result of the self-examination in the United States, has in a sense, increased the U.S. insensitivity to the world. There is a tendency to concentrate on stabilizing the relationships between the super powers and between the major powers in general, with the hope that through manipulation of those relationships, the rest of the world can be put into place. Portugal, Italy and Angola now show the very limited capacity of the super powers to control fundamental processes of change that have taken and are taking place in the world today. There is another reason why in the United States there is less interest--and why in Asia there is a reduced inclination to look at the United States. Until recently, it seemed that both in the United States and Asia, many people believed that all the answers were to be found in the United States. Either in terms of theoretical or developmental concepts, or in terms of financing or of technology. This has been--apart from some other reasons--a major source of

the asymmetry in communications to which reference was made in one of the questions that were put to me. Now it is no longer the case. Many of the ideas which were largely generated in American academia on economic development have now run their course. And new notions about development are developing within the Third World. For whatever Daniel Moynihan has said, I think it is a mistake to view the ideas that are now shaping the perceptions of the future in the Third World as coming from the London School of Economics. They really stem from the wrestling of many people in Asia with their own problems which somehow didn't fit existing theory. Also, people in Asia are discovering that the range of their problems is broader than the experience and expertise the United States has to offer. For example, the whole area of management of the public sector is one set of problems that is becoming increasingly important in the Third World; but there is very little expertise in the United States available because of the nature of its economy and its political system. In the area of indigenous industrialization--the development of technology from the bottom up--there is very little in the American experience that is relevant to these problems in Asia. And so one sees a need to go shopping more broadly, not just in the United States as was almost automatically the case in the past. I think it is very important for Third World countries to shop around to places of greater ideological diversity because of the patent inadequacies

so to speak, of American ideology, in addressing many problems in Asia.

The Shift in U.S. Foreign Aid Policies

Another understandable reason why people are listening less in the United States is because of the disillusionment with foreign aid because it was so over sold and because the problems of foreign aid seemed to be so intractable. There is now a new foreign aid philosophy in the United States which is apparently more acceptable, more in line with the present shift in American ethics. But what is not sufficiently recognized, I think, is that once you take that route--which is a good one--you are face to face with the most untractable problems of development: structural change, administrative incompetence, corruption and the need for shifts in the structure of power. This new foreign aid philosophy must be coupled with and sustained by a new element: by patience, by the courage of the long breath, by faithfulness in sticking with a country once one has chosen to help it, because many of these problems can not be solved in a single budget year or in five budget years. We are involved with some very basic structural processes of change in these countries, very painful and very difficult ones. One really is engaged in a relationship that one has to have the willingness to carry through for at least a decade if this new foreign aid program is not going to be a "cop-out" with a moral varnish.

Turning now to the "infrastructure for listening" in the United States: there is a withdrawal; one sees American universities falling back, with a reduction in the operation of Asian area studies centers. One sees a falling back on the easy problems, the problems of technology, the problems of agricultural development and research, the problems of communications. So there is a flight into the technological fix, which can of course be very useful. But it means intellectually a narrowing of the horizon of problems with which the United States is willing to inter-relate with Asia. And I think it is a mistake. The East-West Center is now almost entirely technical. I have a great deal of respect for what is happening there, and I am glad in a way that one institution is going that route; but it is meaningful only if there are other institutions dealing with the other problems, so that the whole range is covered, including those that the East-West Center has decided not to deal with. There is Boston University which has a program on development theory and in training of civil servants of developing countries; and there are of course the agricultural schools. But all that is only a very minor part of the range of developmental problems for which many people still hope that the United States intellectual community will be able to help in finding solutions.

Need Deeper Understanding of Historical Changes

The problem has not been helped by the so-called radical economists, who - understandable though they are as a phenomenon within the American setting - in talking about developmental problems, pose the problems in very simplified terms of an attack on the incapacity of the capitalist system and of an ideological preference for communist models. In the area of political science, one encounters a sort of resignation to what seems to be the historical inevitability that the third world simply has to go through totalitarianism economic development. I can assure you that there are many in the Third World who are not willing to accept as their only choice that between chaotic capitalist development with its great inequities and the Chinese model. In most cases either model is totally irrelevant and not feasible. One would like to see a willingness on the part of the radical economists in the United States to help as many people in the Third World to develop the options, alternative solutions that we are all crying for. But this is not taking place, in part because the aim of the radical economist is really to attack the capitalist system as such, using the problems of the Third World only as a tool in this attack. That too I see as part of the withdrawal, of the total self-absorption in the United States. What is really needed are studies by centers in the academic community that deal with the very.

basic macro-social problems of the societies of the Third World. These countries are all going through a tremendous crisis after the collapse in most of them of the first generation of political structures, after their illusions about the development process itself had created situations entirely different from those they first had envisaged. They are in the grip of great historical forces that are only partially understood, and this holds for the whole world in general as well. When one looks around in the U.S., or elsewhere, for centers of learning that are also engaged in these problems, we once could find intellectual support, but today one does not find any. Still, if the United States is going 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 will relate to the processes of basic social change that are taking place everywhere. There is therefore a need for an understanding of the deeper historical processes of change that are going on over and beyond immediate policy needs. They involve great social issues, and we should know more about them and have a better understanding of their political implications.

This leads us to the third question: What kind of programs are necessary? What is needed are more area studies, but area studies of a different type, area studies

that go far beyond the traditional discipline-oriented type, if we are to come to grips in a transdisciplinary fashion with the basic problems of the various regions in the world. We all need studies which recognize and bring out the great diversity that exists both in the North and in the South. And that is not happening. We should go beyond the comfortable, academic traditions in disciplined-oriented studies of Asia on linguistics, on anthropology and so forth, and try to relate those disciplines to the really burning issues that these nations face, and which are often not only political but also moral and ethical. But there is very little of that in any university in the United States, Great Britain, or Holland. Early in the discussion a question was raised about the Fulbright program. I do agree that in developing cultural relations we should not look at only what happens in academia. 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 the redefinition of their national self, but also in the search for new lifestyles in response to the problems of energy, and so forth. New energy-conserving lifestyles are also a real problem for the Third World. Asians might benefit a great deal from participating in this American search, taking home ideas that would fertilize their own awareness of their problems in their own context. It is therefore not enough to speak about improving existing

programs. I think it is important to examine how in the United States the "infrastructure for listening" to Asia could be improved. And this raises the problem of funding. Funding in the past has been very much the result of strategic considerations. That won't be enough. Other approaches will have to be developed in the United States. And of course that is a political problem. There should be a restructuring in the reward system so that people within academia and the research institutions will find it profitable to deal with these new problems. There is a need for developing a new, common language to deal with the new problems of the world in which the U.S. and all of us are engaged. In Asia, too, maybe less articulately and less colorfully. I think it's obvious that however inarticulate, there is validity as well to their perceptions of the future. And we should help develop a common language so that at least our differences can be articulated and understood.

Very briefly, the second question: what can Asian countries do to make themselves better heard in the United States? Ideally, they could do a lot. But realistically, I don't think much of that can be done now. It's easy to state the need for interaction and dialogue that goes beyond the bargaining from fixed positions that one sees in Paris, in the United Nations and in bilateral negotiations. That simply won't do, it's not enough. We have to understand

each other's fears and aspirations in a new context. However in Asia there is very little awareness of the importance of knowing the U.S. We have been on the receiving end so long that we are taking America for granted. And as long as we know a little bit -- how the President is being hampered by Congress and so forth -- people think that's enough to know about the United States. Now, much more detailed knowledge of the United States is imperative, but the imperative is not felt yet. It is important for instance, for Asia to help maintain a level of knowledgeability and interest about Asia within the United States. That is however for the moment an illusion, but one that's important to keep in mind, because I am sure that within a few years, Asian governments will come to realize this and maybe, in a modest way, they will help in funding programs and centers in the U.S. that could help sustain American expertise and knowledgeability. We might want to move gradually not just to more of the binational commissions that we have, but to develop international foundations that are not U.S.-dominated, which involve more than two countries, that are Asia-based, that could help develop these relationships, not exclusively with the United States, but more generally. I think there are some moves in that direction already. So where

does that leave us? Both in the United States and in Asia the trends are not favorable for better listening to each other. Still the need is there, and maybe we should simply try harder and not give up.

A Community of Interest in Spite of Short-Term Problems

Now about exchange programs: exchange programs should no longer be only bilateral. In the bilateral programs, depth and diversity is important. But there is a whole range of mutual problems to which exchange programs should latch on, because there is where the real intellectual interest lies. There is a search in the United States about environmental problems, about problems of the future, about lifestyles, energy-conserving lifestyles, about their implications and so forth. There is such a search in Asia too. I think if opportunities were open for a dialogue on those problems, the bilateral benefits could be very great without these being their main purpose. As I said, we have to develop a new language, new ideas and new perceptions that we could share about the future, because that future is going to be a common future. And we need not everytime have discussions or seminars about that future as such. But we could have seminars about the whole range of new problems that deal with survival in its various forms, that will automatically bring in or lead to an articulation

of perceptions about the future that we could gradually come to share. And that 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 to create such opportunities not only in the United States but also in Asia. I think it is possible to do that. And this will lead to a growing awareness of a community of interest in the future that will be capable of maintaining itself whatever short-run political problems our countries may have with each other.

Concerning the last question of safeguarding and nurturing cultural pluralism: the importance I don't have to discuss, the whys everyone understands. The need for cultural diversity in the world into which we will grow is like the genetic stocks that we must keep in the world in order to maintain diversity and hence stability and good health. The same holds true for our cultures. But there are no easy answers here, in part because the communications field is developing so rapidly. Even in the United States, you are wrestling daily with what might be the social impact of the new communications technology that will make lifesize, three-dimensional pictures which can be linked up and interact with computers. I think it is already becoming obvious that

within the United States, the shape of politics, the ways Americans will govern themselves will be determined to a large extent by how communications technology is going to be developed and how it is going to be harnessed politically. The same set of questions really apply on the international field as well. Here the problems of course are on a much larger scale. Who controls, who provides the funds, where are the sources of new technology, and so forth. But we are dealing in a situation in which all cultures are in turmoil, the United States and all the Third World countries. Many cultures will die, there's nothing that can be done about it. Still, diversity has to be maintained. It is in the interest of all. We should also not underestimate the resilience of cultures. One has only to look at the extreme cases in Ulster and at the Basques to realize how language, religion and the sense of connection with the soil feeds the sense of separate identity. We may in the end have to restructure our political systems, to allow for these very important cravings for cultural authenticity. At the same time culture is also a strategy, a strategy of people to face the future. It is a learning process. And all cultures will have to adjust to the requirements of survival. And that I think is a better guideline for us than the desire to keep so-called backward tribes and nations as

living museums. That is inhuman and I don't think will solve any problem. So the problem in the cultural field, in maintaining diversity, is to develop the necessary instruments for multiple co-existence culturally. Here again, no final answers, although 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 have, and that the United States is now going through until it has sorted itself out turning once again towards the world. The new technology on the one hand will make the privacy problem a very difficult one to solve; at the same time, cable TV, with the future possibility of narrow casting to special audiences, may on the other hand give encouragement and induce a degree of revitalization to isolated cultures and ways of life, especially because everywhere there is this search for alternative lifestyles, for other modes of being.

I have inflicted myself on you so long because I feel there is a danger in speaking solely about the improvement of programs, about increasing their efficiency without looking into the problems or into the characteristics

of the present situation of an America that is less capable of influencing the outside world, of an America that is very much searching for its own redefinition in a pluralistic world, with new problems of interdependence and a common future.

Thank you.
