A Commentary

Beyond the Next Order:
Why Asia's Future Lies in Weaving, Not Winning

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Response to this Call for Papers



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There exists within Zen and Bhakti traditions a traditional saying, expressed in various ways, concerning a host who arranges a splendid banquet only for it to grow cold because the guests will not begin to eat until they have been seated according to their rank; in this case, the order of seating becomes more important than the meal which it was intended to provide. A parallel situation is occurring with regard to the way we discuss Asia's global future.

If you ask most political leaders, economists, or strategists what kind of future Asia is creating, the answer will almost always take the form of a new order—a rebalanced

multipolar system—a change in who holds the positions. Kishore Mahbubani and Amitav Acharya have for a long time maintained that the West should accept a world in which its consensus is just one of several voices. The idea expressed in recent writings on "great-power coopetition" and Southeast Asia's "multipolar future" follows this line of reasoning, and foresight organisations such as UNESCAP and the World Bank describe the region's challenge as dealing with growth, disparity, and the environmental transition within that same contested framework. The fundamental question still is: *who is to set the terms next?*

The question should be examined rather than just answered. At this moment it is more important than ever, since discussions surrounding artificial intelligence, strategic autonomy, and supply-chain realignment lead people to regard 'order' as the only worthwhile unit of analysis, as if Asia's objective is merely to secure a more favourable position at a table that remains unchanged rather than considering whether the table itself should be reconsidered.

The Destiny Trap

If you examine the way Asian leaders and intellectuals have described the future, you will notice a pattern that warrants concern. Since 2012, Chinese diplomacy has advocated the idea of a "community of shared future for mankind"—an expression which has been used in President Xi Jinping's speeches more than a hundred times—and presents it as an alternative to Western hegemony.

Yet in terms of structure, it still puts forward one vision for the world which all parts should converge upon. It substitutes one centre for another; it does not get rid of the need for a centre.

We have been in this situation before. In the 1990s Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad advocated 'Asian values'—that is, communitarian priorities rather than individual liberty—as an authentic alternative to Western liberalism. Amartya Sen's response was extremely effective in that, since Asia has such great internal diversity, the assertion was not really a cultural discovery but instead a convenient means of giving legitimacy to authoritarian rule. Years earlier, Okakura Tenshin had declared that 'Asia is one', a view also expressed by Rabindranath Tagore, representing a spiritual oneness in opposition to Western materialism; yet within a generation the same unifying statement was adopted by Japanese imperial expansion.

There are three clear instances, coupled with one repeated failure: each time people ask "Asia" to speak with a single voice, that voice in the end ends up serving the person in power. The idea of a shared destiny—such as common futures, civilisational values, and pan-Asian unity—continuously collapses into yet another form of the same old problem, no matter how opposed it is to the West. The current debate on a "Global South alternative modernity", which regards China's experience of development as evidence that modernisation does not have to mean Westernisation, is also at risk of suffering the same reversal: setting up a new universal reference point precisely where an earlier one had been destroyed.

The criticism goes beyond those of authoritarian or expansionist regimes to the "Asian Century" idea when presented in its gentle, liberal-democratic form. People like Ali Wyne and John West have doubted whether "Asia" is even a coherent enough category to carry the burden of a unified geopolitical fate—highlighting the fact that most of the rise narratives eventually break down into narrower assertions regarding a single dominant economy, all wrapped up in regional terminology for the sake of diplomatic convenience. Since even analysts who are sympathetic to the view cannot agree on what "Asia's rise" means, insisting

that the region must come up with one clear answer to the order question seems less like genuine analysis and more like a category error disguised as ambition.

South Asia has its own form of this situation. India's ambition to take on a role as a civilising influence, a position sometimes referred to as Vishwaguru ("world teacher"), is based on the same pattern: an old culture being presented as suitable to lead the rest of the world. Although the details vary from capital to capital, the fundamental structure—which is that one civilisation's wisdom is offered as a solution for the whole world—stays the same.

A Different Kind of Evidence

There is another, more subdued strand of Asian thinking that does not aim to win this kind of contest, since it is not playing by the same rules. The psychologist and futurist Ashis Nandy noted that although India and China had different civilisational slogans, they had nonetheless arrived at similar urban and industrial futures because both had adopted the same model of development. His solution was not some superior Asian destiny, but rather the right to imagine futures that reject any one model.

Sulak Sivaraksa's socially engaged Buddhism, which operates via networks extending from Thailand through to Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, is based on this refusal in practice. It does not assert any grand destiny; it criticises both consumerism and rigid tradition and instead organises itself on the basis of ethical relationships rather than making civilisational claims. The terms it uses—awakening, compassion, right livelihood—refer to things that should be put into practice every day, not to a future that is to be achieved.

The true dividing line in the way the future of Asia is discussed lies not between Western and indigenous approaches—the values of Lee Kuan Yew and the idea of a shared future are both of Asian origin, even though in each case it is a claim about destiny. Rather, the dividing line is between those views which see Asia as a single voice capable of taking its place at the table of history and those which regard Asia as an ongoing, pluralistic dialogue.

It is important to clarify what this fault line does not entail. It does not assert that all state-level initiatives are corrupt or that grassroots movements are by nature pure. Bhutan's Gross National Happiness is still a real attempt by the state to measure well-being rather than economic output, even though it comes into conflict with the politics of growth. The key point is whether the language in question still needs a single voice, a single model, or a single centre in order to make sense. When this criterion is applied, most of the so-called "Asian futures" thinking in policy circles falls short, even though it makes use of a sophisticated multipolar vocabulary.

The Tapestry Already Being Woven

The destiny-language alternative is not merely a possibility; it can be found in fragments which are more closely connected than most people realise.

Since 2014, Ashish Kothari's *Vikalp Sangam* (Alternatives Confluence) in India has recorded almost 1,800 grassroots alternatives which emerge from ongoing meetings and reveal what Kothari refers to as *Eco-Swaraj* (Radical Ecological Democracy). In Sri Lanka, the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement has been carrying out transformations at the village level since 1958, combining Gandhian and Buddhist practices without regard to state growth objectives. Similarly, Malaysia and Indonesia have the concept of *Sejahtera* and Bhutan has the idea of Gross National Happiness as comparable frameworks for holistic well-being,

although in both cases there are signs that these concepts have been absorbed into state branding—this serves as a reminder that dialogue-language can be captured once it has become useful to those in power.

The connecting factor among these various initiatives is the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA), a network established in 2019 together with Kothari's movement. Since it has no central headquarters, president, or governing structure, the GTA brings together regional 'Weavers'—such as the Movement for Alternatives and Solidarity in Southeast Asia (MASSA)—via meetings that are specifically designed to promote dialogue between different worldviews, ontologies, and epistemologies.

It has been developed by grassroots movements, not by governments or academics, and in doing so it has achieved something that decades of discussion about the 'Asian Century' have not—bringing diversity together without the need for anyone to take leadership. Although intellectual approaches such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos's "ecology of knowledges" and Raimon Panikkar's "diatopical hermeneutics" offer a theoretical basis for this method, the grassroots networks have reached the same conclusions through their practical experience.

What Asia Can Actually Offer

What Asia can contribute to the international community is this: it shows that coexistence does not need a central authority, since Asia has proven its ability to integrate diverse, ecologically based alternatives into a unified whole without any one element dominating the pattern.

Realising this potential requires two shifts:

1. **Shifting from a focus on who will lead** the next global arrangement to one on how the existing grassroots initiatives might be supported and connected without becoming centralized.
2. **Moving from a focus on sustainability to one of regeneration means changing from merely** managing decline within the existing system to actively fostering the relationships, the commons, and the ethical practices needed to extend the tapestry.

For organisations used to working within funding cycles and focusing on strategic positioning, this line of reasoning calls for patience. A tapestry cannot be ordered, enlarged to meet a deadline, or turned into a franchisable development model. Instead, it demands recognition, the provision of translation support in terms of both languages and epistemologies, protection against being taken over by the state or the market, and the humility to regard networks such as the Global Tapestry of Alternatives as peers rather than as mere case studies. Whether universities, think tanks or journals that have come together to look at Asia's contributions act as weavers or as obstacles depends on whether they insist on coming up with a single answer or instead agree to keep the question open.

This situation is not romanticised; each of the fragments mentioned is fragile and susceptible to being captured. The aim is not to regard these efforts as having produced a final alternative, but rather to continue weaving them deliberately, carefully, and without letting the weave harden into a new assertion representing Asia as a whole.

If asked what kind of order Asia is helping to establish, the most honest reply might be that it is creating none, if possible. What Asia is in fact helping to create is a showing that a

common future does not demand a common destiny—only sufficient patience to keep the loom going and sufficient humility to allow others to take up a thread.

This comment is a direct reply to the invitation given by *Asian Futures*. The idea of defining "what kind of international order Asia is helping to create" implies that the answer has to be in the form of an order—an architecture, a hierarchy, or a central point. A more useful contribution, however, is to reject that kind of formulation and instead provide a method: focus on what is fragile and local, identify the discrepancy between the development models inherited and the reality of everyday life, and present what is already working as an open invitation rather than as a fixed doctrine.

This commentary is itself written from within one particular thread of that tapestry—shaped by Gandhian, Freirean, and eco-social traditions rooted in South Asian community practice—and makes no claim to speak for the whole. That limitation is not a weakness; it is the point. A genuine coexistential platform does not require any single contributor to see the entire pattern before adding a thread.