

The Asian dimension

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ASIAN values emerged as a political issue in the 1980s, when former Singapore Premier Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysian Premier Mahathir Bin Mohamad challenged the West, juxtaposing Asian success against what they saw as the West's hegemony oriented thinking, and its claims of universal standards of democracy and human rights. One scholar writes: 'In Malaysia, after a crackdown on opposition in the late 1980s led to Western criticism of the government's human rights record, Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad defended "Asian" notions of governance and accused the West of "ramming an arbitrary version of democracy" down the country's throat.'¹ The critics of Asian values argued back that Singapore and Malaysia resented western criticism of their brand of authoritarianism, and were indulging in misguided criticism of liberal democracy.

Francis Fukuyama claimed that Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad

were pursuing 'a relatively narrow agenda' in advancing their argument on Asian values, but he conceded that the idea of a distinct Asian cultural and political identity 'had a larger resonance as well...it reflected genuine pride felt by many people in the region at the stunning success of their economies...(and) served the interests of states eager to shield themselves from Western criticism of their human rights practices and from pressure to open their protected markets to imports and foreign investments.'² Fukuyama felt that Asian values offered 'an apparently principled defence of their reluctance to broaden political participation', for countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and China.

This debate is not the entire story of Asian values. Behind the political hype, there exists behaviour similarity and value systems reflecting Asian characteristics. Let us first consider the issue of global values, and then the distinctive Asian cultural traits, before turning to an Asian diplomatic style.

Throughout history, dominant powers have treated their own culture as the universal model. *La mission civilisatrice* was a pillar of the Euro-

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1. Mark R Thompson, 'Whatever Happened to "Asian Values"?' *Far East Economic Review*, 20 August 1992. (http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_democracy/v012/12.4thompson.html)

2. Francis Fukuyama, 'Asian Values and the Asian Crisis', *Commentary* 105(2), February 1998, p. 23.

pean colonial systems that ruled much of the world for several centuries. With the demise of the Soviet Union that mainly ended the West's contestation with communism, the thesis of universal values is louder than before; claims of Asian values are partly a reaction.

The 'transformational diplomacy' that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice proclaimed in January 2006, justifies robust intervention that pushes others to conform to universal values. She said: [The US is pursuing] a diplomacy that not only reports about the world as it is, but seeks to change the world itself... the United States is working with our many partners, particularly our partners who share our values in Europe and in Asia and in other parts of the world to build a true form of global stability, a balance of power that favours freedom... Since its creation more than 350 years ago, the modern state system has rested on the concept of sovereignty... the greatest threats now emerge more within states than between them. The fundamental character of regimes now matters more than the international distribution of power. In this world it is impossible to draw neat, clear lines between our security interests, our development efforts and our democratic ideals. American diplomacy must integrate and advance all of these goals together.

A study of six European foreign ministries published in 2005 declares: 'Since the end of Cold War, which ensured the predominance of Western values, "value promotion" or the attempt to transfer nationally held values on to the world at large has assumed a more prominent role in foreign affairs.'³

3. Jorgen G. Christensen, and Nikolaj Petersen, *Managing Foreign Affairs: A Comparative Perspective*, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, 2005, p. 13.

Such debate provides a backdrop as we turn to Asia and examine two intertwined strands, first, the extent to which Asian countries share a value system; second, Asia's reaction to the notion of a universal value system. That in turn leads to the question of how Asian cultural values affect the diplomacy of the five states covered in this study.

Confucius said: 'All people are the same: it is only their habits which are so different.' Does an Asian diplomatic style exist? Do geography and shared heritage connections produce cultural similarity, or is this inquiry a chimera?

As we move eastwards from India, to SE Asia, China and Japan, we encounter a history of religious-cultural inter-flows, leavened with value systems rooted in local heterogeneity. When we look to the social mores and language in different countries, we observe that notwithstanding commonalities, each national culture is unique. Within each country sub-cultures exist—the minorities, linguistic groups and ethnicities differentiated from the dominant culture. Thus, a close examination produces a mosaic of bewildering variety, but that same scene of detail offers unifying themes as well when viewed from a different perspective.

What is the cultural unity of this area? A renowned Japanese scholar, Hajime Nakamura, in his definitive work first published in 1964 says: '...there exists no single "Eastern" feature but rather that there exist several diverse ways of thinking in East Asia, characteristic of certain peoples but not the whole of Asia.'⁴ Nakamura adds, looking to the people of China, India and Japan (and

4. Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet, Japan*, Kegan Paul, London, 1964; revised English edition, 1997, p. 21.

he includes South-East Asia), '...there is a *certain logical and human connection* among these characteristics' (emphasis in the original).⁵ Obviously, these countries do not conform to one template, but exhibit related cultural features.

Two kinds of objections come up when we speak of common Asian cultural traits. The first is their considerable diversity, even within cultural Asia. The second: no culture trait is unique to Asia; if we look around the world, the same characteristics exist in other cultures and regions. Filial piety, the work ethic and family values, for instance, are no one's monopoly. As one Asian scholar suggests, 'it may not be totally misguided to speak of *tendencies* and *dispositions*. Although it may be the case that many cultural traits and values manifested in Asia can also be found in the West, there may be differences in degree and emphasis. For example, it may be said that more people in Asia than in the West are culturally inclined or disposed to treasure close family relationships.'⁶

We can apply the tools of comparative cultural analysis to see where each country is placed. Geert Hofstede, a pioneer in this field, provides five yardsticks in the shape of dichotomies: the Power Distance Index, Individualism, Masculinity, an Uncertainty Avoidance Index, and Long-Term Orientation.⁷ He developed these on the basis of a global study carried out on behalf of IBM in the 1960s, refining them in subsequent research. How do

5. Ibid., p. 38.

6. Joseph Chan, 'Asian Values and Human Rights: An Alternative View', in Larry Diamond, and Mark F Plattner (eds.) *Democracy in East Asia*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998, p. 35.

7. Geert H Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1997.

the five Asian countries stack up when viewed through this prism?

Power distance index: This ‘focuses on the degree of equality, or inequality, between people in the country’s society.’⁸ In high index countries, subordinates have little authority, depending completely on their bosses; in the opposite situation, a process of consensus, consultation and interdependence operates.⁹ Each of the five countries, and their foreign ministries, demonstrate relatively high power distance. Hofstede’s index covers 50 countries and three regions; the numbers range from 104 to 11 (with Malaysia at the top, and Austria at the bottom); the figures for four of our five countries are: India 77; Singapore 74; Thailand 64; Japan 54. Alas, China was not covered in that survey, but other studies place China above India.¹⁰ The author’s *estimation* of the diplomatic systems of the five Asian countries is a little different from the Hofstede analysis (Table 1).

Individualism: This ‘focuses on the degree the society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships.’ In individualist countries everyone is expected to look after himself, while in collectivist society people are integrated into cohesive groups, with mutual obligations and loyalties. In Hofstede’s global ‘individualism index’ which ranges from 91 to 6 (with the US at the top, and Guatemala at the bottom), the numbers for the four Asian countries

are: India 48; Japan 46; Singapore 20; Thailand 20. The author’s estimate is given in Table 1.

Masculinity: This ‘focuses on the degree the society reinforces, or does not reinforce, the traditional masculine work role model of male achievement, control, and power.’ The defining characteristics are not just the treatment of women, but also other qualities, including the way social roles are handled, like the place of work in a person’s life, or the industries at which the societies excel. On Hofstede’s global ‘masculinity index’, ranging from 95 to 5, (Japan at the top, and Sweden at the bottom) the four Asians are: Japan 95; India 56; Singapore 48; and Thailand 34. The author concurs.

Uncertainty avoidance index: This ‘focuses on the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity within the society – i.e. unstructured situations.’ Hofstede titles this chapter: ‘What is different, is dangerous’.¹¹ He clarifies that uncertainty avoidance is not the same as risk aversion; those who seek to minimize uncertainty try and reduce ambiguity. On Hofstede’s global ‘uncertainty avoidance index’ ranging from 112 to 8 (with Greece at the very top and Singapore at the bottom), the figures are: Japan 92; Thailand 64; India 40; Singapore 8.

Long-term orientation: This ‘focuses on the degree the society embraces, or does long-term devotion to traditional, forward thinking values.’ The focus is on the work orientation, and habits such as saving for the future, making sacrifices for the education of children and the like. This yardstick was not part of the original Hofstede survey; Michael Bond, a Canadian, conducted a ‘Chinese Value Survey’ in 1971 in an effort to

overcome a perceived western bias in the original IBM survey by Hofstede, and Bond eventually covered 22 other countries; Hofstede summarizes the results of that survey.¹² All the five Asian countries have a high long-term orientation, in general. Hofstede cites global ‘long term orientation’ scores from 118 for China to zero for Pakistan. The values for Asian countries: Japan 80; India 61; Thailand 56; Singapore 48.

Thus, applying the Hofstede formula, we find a good degree of similarity among the five Asian countries, which can be plotted on a table. On three of the five indicators, these countries are clustered fairly close together. On the other two, China, India and Thailand show strong affinity, while Japan is placed at the opposite end of the scale; Thailand lies halfway, seemingly closer to Japan than the others.

Richard L. Lewis proposes a different set of cultural value clusters, calling these linear active, multi-active and reactive traits.¹³ Societies exhibit these traits in different degrees – for instance Germany and Austria are archetypes of the linear actives; Italy and India are among the extreme examples of the multi-active; Japan is the prime example of the reactive.

Lewis provides an insight that is especially relevant to our purpose. He posits that the linear active societies govern themselves strictly by a system of rules, where rule application is dispassionate and uniform. In contrast, the multi-active and the reactive/autonomous cultures prioritize relations with people, over the enforcement of regulations. Using the Lewis method, the five Asian countries are –

8. This and the other definitions come from a website on the Hofstede cultural markers: <http://www.geert-hofstede.com/>

9. Hofstede notes that there is generally some co-relation between the high power distance and corruption, though the causation is not clear.

10. Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1998.

11. Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations*, op.cit., pp. 109-38.

12. Hofstede, *ibid.*, pp. 159-74.

13. Richard L. Lewis, *When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures*, Nicholas Brealey, Boston, 2005.

China: a blend of the multi-active (as the dominant trait) and the autonomous. *India*: an archetype of the multi-active. *Japan*: an archetype of the autonomous. *Singapore*: an even blend of the multi-active and the linear active. *Thailand*: a blend of the autonomous (as the dominant trait) and the multi-active.

Raymond Cohen provides a different perspective; looking at the cultural dimension of negotiation, he posits two negotiation styles:¹⁴

Low-context cultures predominantly use a verbal, explicit style that is the norm for individualist societies; their notions of time are monochronic. During negotiations they work for results.

High-context cultures depend on non-verbal and implicit communication that is typical of interdependent societies; their notions of time are polychromatic. In negotiations, looking beyond results, they emphasize relationships.

This method is relevant to the ways countries negotiate, and to their diplomatic systems. All the five Asian countries are home to high-context cultures, though the individualism/

collectivist tendencies vary. But if we posit 'interdependence' as the pole placed at the other end of individualism, in lieu of 'collectivism', we see that while Indian and Chinese societies are individualist, they also show considerable interdependence.

Cohen says: 'A high context culture communicates allusively rather than directly.'¹⁵ Empirical evidence indicates this to be true of China, Japan, Singapore and Thailand, but less so in the case of India.¹⁶ One difficulty that Indian negotiators face in East and South East Asia is their frequent inability to pick up the allusive, non-verbal signals emanating from the other side. India is also the exception in relationship building; for instance, its core problem in dealing with a neighbour such as Nepal has been its preoccupation with gaining immediate advantage, neglecting the long-term relationship. The result: not a single hydro-project has moved forward in 50 years of intermittent negotiations, though the power-generation potential of the India-Nepal rivers is in excess of 80,000 megawatt (MW); one reason Nepal remains bitter over the unequal

Kosi and Gandak river projects of the early 1950s, signed when its technical negotiation capacity was low.¹⁷

Octavio Paz suggests another way of distinguishing religions and cultures.¹⁸ He differentiates between religions of the book (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), and those religions that do not have a single authoritative doctrinal text (Hinduism, Buddhism). The latter sets of cultures do not lay down absolute standards, or social interdictions, but see the world in relative, contextual terms. This is similar to the notion of high and low context cultures, but with more pointed attention to relativity and differentiation.

Among the values that Hofstede, Lewis and Cohen examine, one quality that does not figure is tolerance, i.e. a willingness to consider value systems besides one's own, which also have their place in the sun. In Paz's approach, tolerance is an outgrowth of relativism, the antithesis to absolute, universal standards. This quality is found in all Asian cultures, the realization that different value systems have their own validity. This is surely a quality that is of enormous importance in the contemporary world.

So what does culture theory offer us in understanding Asian values? First, the cultures of Asian coun-

TABLE I
The Hofstede Characteristics

(Ranked on the basis of the author's estimate; the Hofstede index figures are in brackets)

<i>High power distance</i>	<i>Individualist</i>	<i>Masculine</i>	<i>Low uncertainty avoidance</i>	<i>Long-term orientation</i>
China, India (77)	India (48)	Japan (95)	Japan (92)	Japan (80)
Thailand (64)	China	China, India (56)	Thailand (64)	India (62)
Singapore (74)	Singapore (20)	Singapore (48)		Thailand (56)
Japan (54)		Thailand (34)		Singapore (48)
	Thailand (20)		Singapore (8)	
			China, India (40)	
<i>Low power distance</i>	<i>Collectivist</i>	<i>Feminine</i>	<i>High uncertainty avoidance</i>	<i>Short-term orientation</i>

Explanation: 1. The Hofstede index does not cover China (except in relation to long-term orientation). 2. On the power distance scale, the author estimates Singapore at a lower level than does Hofstede. 3. On the individualism scale the Hofstede figures and the author's estimates are in sharp divergence; on other characteristic there are small variations.

14. Raymond Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures: International Communication in an Interdependent World*, US Institute of Peace, Washington DC, 1991, 1997, revised edition, pp. 9-43.

15. Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures*, p. 31.

16. See Stephen Cohen, *India: Emerging Power*, Brookings, Washington DC, 2002.

17. Jagat S. Mehta, 'Oral History', *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 1(3). July 2006, pp. 119-27.

18. Octavio Paz served as Mexico's ambassador in India in the 1960s and resigned from the diplomatic service after that assignment, and this book recounts his impressions of India; *In Light of India*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1997.

tries show similarity, some of it sub-surface, as well as differences. Close analysis is needed for each country we may wish to examine. Second, the culture traits that look similar are guideposts for initial understanding. But even in the midst of congruence, subtle differences persist, signalling a need for caution if we transpose experiences of one to another, or apply this generalized knowledge to negotiations. Third, within these caveats, some similarities in diplomatic style exist, as we see at the end of this essay.

The 'Asian values debate: For a measured assertion of the protagonists' viewpoint in the debate on Asian values, consider Singapore Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng's statement to the June 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights: 'Development and good governance require a balance between the rights of the individual and those of the community... Each country must find its own way... Singapore's political and social arrangements have irked some foreign critics because they are not in accordance with their theories of how societies should properly organize themselves. We have intervened to change individual social behaviour in ways other countries consider intrusive... Singaporeans are responsible for Singapore's future. We justify ourselves to our people, not by abstract theories or to the approbation of foreigners, but by the more rigorous test of practical success.'¹⁹

After the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis the world has heard less about Asian values. But the thesis has never gone away, and revolves around two questions. Are western liberal democracy, market-based capitalism

and the principles of individual and human rights, universal values to be enforced throughout the world? Do they represent an addition to international law, establishing new standards that constrain the sovereignty of nation states, as an expression of global governance?

Take democracy. It is possible to distinguish between the principle of democratic accountability and the method under which this accountability is achieved.²⁰ China is not a representative democracy, but the regime in power enjoys a measure of what the Chinese have historically called 'heaven's mandate', i.e. acceptance by the general populace. In its way, the regime considers itself accountable to its people. Singapore is more authoritarian than what some may consider healthy, but it remains a functioning democracy. To put it another way, where is the democracy standard set, and by whom?

India is a practising representative democracy, with a sixty-year tradition of free polls, held across a continental landmass by the world's largest electorate in a developing country with a low living standard. Why then is New Delhi cool to the universal thesis of democracy? India was one of six co-conveners of the 'Community of Democracies' ministerial-level conference attended by 106 countries that met in Warsaw on 25-26 June 2000 (other co-conveners: Chile, the Czech Republic, Mali, South Korea and the US).²¹ This Community subsequently met in Seoul in

November 2002 and in Santiago in April 2005.

India has urged its neighbours to practice democracy, be it Pakistan, Nepal or Myanmar; it also holds that it is the people of each country that decide on the system that suits them. During his March 2006 visit President George W. Bush hailed India as a key member of the democracy brigade; a leading newspaper wrote: 'Bush's words had the unique effect of simultaneously gratifying and discomforting the assembled audience... It's the prospect of aggressive peddling of democracy in various parts of the world that makes India uncomfortable.'²²

Japan is another reluctant votary of globalized democracy. China is of course highly critical of the West on this point. Consider also that Asia produced the concept of *Panchshila*, the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence', proclaimed jointly by China and India, first in the 1954 Agreement on Tibet, and then at the 1955 Bandung Conference.²³ These are built on the core value of non-interference in other states; they also represent near-universal Asian values, part of the self-image of each state.

The economic logic of globalization is very clear. But does it mean that market capitalism is a universal model? Deconstructing globalization in the economic sphere clarifies the issues. That it produces *interdependence* is crystal clear, undeniable. Inter-

cies' (www.ccd21.org), but no fresh global initiatives at an inter-governmental level, other than two more conferences in 2002 and 2005. A 'law' of multilateral diplomacy is that a conference, like a perpetual motion device, generally leads to more conferences, plus new institutions to carry forward the aims of that initial conference.

22. Front page article in *The Times of India*, 4 March 2006.

23 For India these Five Principles hark back to Emperor Ashoka, of the 5th century BC.

19. Singapore Foreign Minister's statement at the World Conference on Human Rights, 16 June 1993, pp. 1-15.

20. See the essay by Bilahari Kausikan, 'The "Asian Values" Debate: A View From Singapore', in Larry Diamond, and Mark F. Plattner (eds.) *Democracy in East Asia*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998, pp. 17-27.

21. The 2000 Warsaw Conference led to the setting up of an NGO in Washington DC, 'The Council for a Community of Democra-

dependence leads to *integration*, and that too seems supported by data, though we see that countries often place their own limits on the degree of integration that they are willing to accept.

For several years China resisted demands for the devaluation of its currency; in June 2005 it shifted to a managed currency float. The EU and Japan resist elimination of agriculture subsidies in protracted WTO negotiations, accepting only a graduated movement that falls far short of integration of global trade in agricultural commodities. When we apply the more advanced notion of *convergence* in the national economic policy of different countries, we find that despite similarity, the differences are no less profound, as always. The 'end of history', even in economic policy, is an illusion.

There is simply no universal model of economic policy beyond a general accord that open markets and liberalized policy are conducive to economic growth. Countries enforce these concepts to suit their own ethos and needs, especially when it comes to the role of the state. In each East and South East Asian country, the governments have pursued *dirigiste* policies to manage their economies, going much beyond the tenets of the simplistic globalization doctrine – most observe and believe that their success is based precisely on such economic management. Universal global capitalism is also an illusion if we look at Europe.

Most countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America now accept that human rights are a universal value. Disagreement resides in two areas, the use of the human rights standard as an instrument of assertive diplomacy, and the balance that should be struck between individual and collective

rights, outside a narrow construct of human rights.

Virtually no country in Asia is in complete accord with the manner in which human rights issues are used as an international affairs instrument. For one, these rights are a relatively recent discovery. The countries that profited enormously from colonialism and imperialism in the recent past, either thorough their colonies or hegemonies in different regions of the world, do not carry much credibility in the eyes of their former victims, who had suffered gross human rights abuse of every kind. Asia and others of the global South also observe that the demand for the application of principles of human and other rights is highly selective; and those perceived as allies or special friends receive indulgent treatment.

A Singapore official-scholar has argued that the 1989 Tiananmen upsurge in China and other Asian popular manifestations have been less about human rights and more about '...good government: effective, efficient and honest administrations able to provide security and basic needs with good opportunities for an improved standard of living.'²⁴ He also contrasts the 'starkly individualist ethos' of the West with an Asia in which 'distinctions between the individual, society and the state are less clear-cut, or at least less adversarial.'²⁵ Worse, the West discriminates between its own citizens and foreigners when it comes to humane treatment of prisoners, the appeal procedures for foreign political asylum seekers, or even the practices for visa applicants from foreign countries. Such issues are in the penumbra of western attention.

24. Bilahari Kausikan, 'Asia's Different Standard', *Foreign Policy* 92, Fall 1993, p. 36.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Cultural characteristics, universal value systems of democracy and human rights and Asian exceptionalism take us far from this study. The more pertinent question is: how much of 'Asian-ness' can be identified in the five countries that have been studied? Do they exhibit shared or similar characteristics in their diplomatic systems that are of practical relevance?

In 1966 the Japanese Ambassador in New Delhi invited Indian Foreign Secretary C.S. Jha, and his entire team of External Affairs Ministry officials, including the desk officers of the division, to an elaborate Japanese dinner. He seized a quiet moment at the dinner table to tell the head of the Indian diplomatic service that he faced a peculiar problem each time he went to meet K.R. Narayanan, heading the 'China Division'. Since the Gaimusho would not understand why he frequently met the head of a unit bearing the name of a country that Japan did not recognize, he told a small lie, always referring to Mr. Narayanan in internal communications as Director of the 'Japan Division'.²⁶ The envoy's message, quintessentially Asian, was gentle but telling; a couple of weeks later the name was changed to the 'East Asia Division', even as it continued to cover the same set of countries as before – China, Japan, the two Koreas and Mongolia.

Analysis of cultural values prompts us to try and understand behaviour. For instance, one can ask if Japan's concept of dependency relationships (*amae*) leads to mentorism in its bureaucracy? Japanese public service officials tend to form their own loyalty cluster groups around a pow-

26. K.R. Narayanan, in the course of a distinguished career, went on to become the President of India (2000-2004). The author attended that dinner as a young desk officer in the China/East Asia Division.

erful figure who becomes the mentor. Within the Japanese diplomatic establishment, this takes the form of 'departmentalism' where officials belonging to a particular department perceive a loyalty to this sub-group.

The same phenomenon has existed in the Chinese Foreign Ministry. In the Indian MEA institutional sub-groups do not exist, but it is normal for strong senior officials to build around themselves groups of acolytes, 'in-groups' owing loyalty among themselves.²⁷ How else can one explain the recent conduct of a new envoy at a major post who obtained the replacement of a competent deputy chief of mission (DCM), who had spent barely a few months at that post, because he preferred someone with whom he had worked earlier?

Applying culture analysis and an empirical study of behaviour to the five Asian foreign ministries produces interesting conclusions – though the characteristics described below are not unique to Asia.

First, each of our five countries has a *high-context culture*. Their institutions, often practice non-verbal, implicit communication, Japan and Thailand perhaps the most of all, and India relatively the least among these five. When it comes to time consciousness, each has a polychromatic view, India even viewing time in cyclic terms. This has implications for the non-Asian negotiator, and for the diplomat in everyday contact; it affects the way foreign interlocutors can effectively deal with the local people, and handle everyday situations.

A practical consequence: one should understand that Asians see the

world in relative, rather than absolute terms, more as shades of grey than black and white; they are disinclined to extreme positions; they have a propensity, real or latent, to empathize with the other's viewpoint, even when they rigidly hold on to their own positions in hard negotiations.

Second, *power distance* is high in Asia, as a norm, regardless of the form of governance; we witness the same situation in democracies as well as in the authoritarian states. The western interlocutor, accustomed to egalitarian standards, should understand this and reserve value judgment. The Asian foreign ministries are strongly hierarchical. Most Asians value prestige, and are easily offended at any perceived slight to their status.²⁸ This also means that they may react favourably to flattering protocol gestures or to special treatment. For instance, in March 2006, the Bangladesh prime minister came on a bilateral visit to India after an interval of five years; newspaper accounts held that one reason for such a delayed journey, between neighbours important to each other, was a disagreement on whose turn it was to play host!

A feature of summit diplomacy in Asia is that unlike in Africa or in the Arab world, or in Europe, no pair of countries has a system of regular bilateral encounters among leaders, *except* in the context of regional meetings. This could be on account of perceived status of each, or *protocolaire* ways of thinking. None of them hold periodic encounters between their leaders, like, the quarterly meetings between the French president and the German chancellor, or the leaders of Namibia and South Africa. Arab leaders 'drop in' to meet neighbours and

friends. This invests Asia's regional forum meetings with special importance, for bilateral encounters between leaders, e.g. SAARC in South Asia.

The Asian foreign ministries hold periodic 'foreign office consultations' with western counterparts, but do not customarily hold similar regular encounters at the level of senior officials, though that is now changed in a new 'strategic dialogue' established between China and India, or India and Japan; Japan and China have recently begun holding innovative 'off the record' meetings at vice foreign minister levels.

Third, these countries are *people-oriented*, where principles, rules and issues are seen in relative terms, not as absolutes engraved in stone that cannot be compromised. This is encountered uniformly in all the five countries. For them, relationships should be cultivated over time, and do not flow just from institutional arrangements. One of Indira Gandhi's favourite expressions was: friendship is a plant needing nourishment and care.

In the craft of diplomacy such values are easy to comprehend; the agents of state have traditionally understood that they deal with individuals and the human dimension is crucial. In Asia, this applies with redoubled force. But there are paradoxes; in Japan, where personal cultivation is a fine art, some are disinclined to enter into new relationships with individuals they have just met, apprehending the additional burden of obligations that this will impose.

Fourth, *pragmatism* dominates these societies; principles are applied with flexibility. Contrast this with countries dominated by linear active thinking make a great virtue out of principles. A cynic may argue that

27. Karl Ulrich, R.S. Chaudhry and Kishan S. Rana, *Managing Corporate Culture: Leveraging Diversity to give India a Global Competitive Edge*, Macmillan India, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 47-9.

28. Raymond Cohen has written extensively on this, giving a number of concrete examples. See *Negotiating Across Cultures*, pp. 92-7.

all countries, even those professing high principles, apply these pragmatically in foreign affairs; that is true. The difference in Asia is that modification of standards is matter-of-fact, viewed by these countries as not requiring elaborate justification.

For instance, Japan, breaking rank with the West in its policy towards Kampuchea or Myanmar, goes through its consultation process with Washington DC, *ex ante* and *ex post*, simply labelling its actions as a policy of engagement. Where gut issues are at stake, the practical compromise follows the principled action. For instance, at the height of its confrontation with Jakarta in 1965, Singapore went ahead with the death sentence given to four Indonesian soldiers it found guilty of attempted armed sabotage, ignoring all pleas for mercy. But a year later, during an official visit to Indonesia, Lee Kuan Yew visited their graves, sealing the reconciliation process.

Fifth, Asian societies have a *long-term orientation*, viewing events not as discrete, finite episodes, but as scenes in a continuum. But this long-term orientation is not uniform. For instance, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs has a fine institutional

memory, particularly on major issues involving its major partners, but that does not prompt it to establish a long-term vision of the future, or invest real effort in policy planning, except during crisis, such as in the lead-up to the Bangladesh War during 1971.²⁹

Speaking at a book release event in April 2006, the Indian prime minister lamented an absence of long range thinking in the foreign affairs community, because most worked to short-term horizons.³⁰ Take the way policy planning works. China and Japan have solid mechanism, utilized efficiently; Singapore treats policy planning as a core activity for the entire foreign ministry, and is a leader in applying scenario planning. Thailand also invests considerable effort in this area.

Sixth, the *negotiation style* in these countries shows affinity; several of them work for consensus building as distinct from adversarial negotiation. This is particularly true of the ASEAN countries, whose method resembles that of Japan. In contrast, China and India rely less on consensus building, but today this figures higher than before in their evolving styles.

A convergence of values? A 2003 international conference on

‘Organizational and Professional Cultures and Diplomacy’ examined whether a uniform diplomatic culture exists, or if there is convergence towards one.³¹ The broad consensus was that in the six decades since World War II, a professional culture continues to exist, but this is a relatively weak force when viewed against the strong growth in diversity. Today, diversities are celebrated as a virtue, as a manifestation of the cultures that make up our interconnected global system. While an international demonstration effect operates, and the West provides models that others emulate, a counterforce favours cultural diversity. Globalization is not producing any significant narrowing of cultural differences.

Are the popularization of the internet and domination by the English language producing convergence? Not directly. Recall the reserve shown by China, India and Japan in shifting their confidential communication to internet-based systems. Thailand too is cautious on this; Singapore is the only one among our five that now relies on its ‘virtual private network’. Domination of the English language is accepted in these countries, and in the rest of Asia, but does not dominate cultural behaviour.

Overall, the diplomatic culture of Asia reflects limited congruence, but no reduction of differences. What we do observe is some information sharing on diplomatic practices, and mutual learning. One clear example is the introduction of corporate methods

TABLE II

The Cultural Characteristics of Foreign Ministries

(Based on the author’s estimate and data interpreted from other surveys)

<i>High context</i>	<i>High power distance</i>	<i>High people orientation</i>	<i>Long-term orientation</i>	<i>Consensual negotiation style</i>
China, India China, Thailand Singapore	India China Thailand Japan	China, India Singapore Thailand	China, Singapore Japan Thailand	Japan, Singapore Thailand
	Singapore		India	China India
<i>Low context</i>	<i>Low power distance</i>	<i>Low people orientation</i>	<i>Short-term orientation</i>	<i>Confrontational negotiation style</i>

29. See Stephen Cohen *India: Emerging Power*.

30. The author attended this book release function held on 18 April 2006.

31. The conference was held by DiploFoundation at Malta; see Hannah Slavik (ed.) *Intercultural Communication and Diplomacy*, DiploFoundation, Malta, 2005.

in the public services, especially the concepts of performance management and outcome reports, as narrated in the country chapters.

Some other work methods are also spreading outside their places of origin, copied by others with due adaptation. This is a new trend, surely a product of globalization. Foreign ministries are conservative institutions rooted in their traditions; some of their practices incorporate cherished state protocol. Looking to peers, and borrowing ideas is new. Recently the ASEAN+3 group commenced annual meetings of the deans of foreign service training institutions, but the heads of administration do not yet meet, unlike the EU that has followed this practice for a decade.³²

As noted, Singapore and China are quick learners, open to new ideas and absorbing practices from others. Thailand is also joining this trend, albeit a bit more slowly. Japan's Gaimusho has been forced to reform, and the indications are that unlike the 1993 reforms, those implemented since 2004 *could* produce deeper change, *perhaps* even a mindset of learning from others. India is slowly imple-

menting change since 2005, but a reform momentum is not yet established. Asia needs wider application of best practices.

Outside the five countries covered here, changes are afoot, with foreign ministries applying practices borrowed from elsewhere, and developing their own new methods. In August 2005 South Korea sent a leading businessman with family connections to China to push trade as the new consul general in Shanghai. Pakistan created a public diplomacy division in its foreign ministry in 2005. Malaysia is applying performance management ideas in its system and is a trend leader in combining, at its institute, training with research in international affairs. Cambodia is pursuing a project in 2006, funded in part with external assistance, for capacity building at its foreign ministry.

Countries seldom seek foreign assistance for improving diplomatic systems; no country wants to give an opening to foreign states in a sensitive sector which involves the entities and the individuals handling political relations with external partners. Multilateral sources are preferred, in the few

cases when a foreign ministry considers this.³³ Regardless of the way such delicate tasks are carried out, the foreign adviser brings in new ways of work, adding to the 'internationalization' of the country's diplomatic work culture.

An Asian scholar writes: 'An "Asian values" discourse, if framed in a less ideological manner, represents a more pragmatic approach to understanding national differences in governance and administration.'³⁴ China might echo these words, in justification of its own system of governance. Many Indians feel that the West pushes its ideas on a world that is culturally diverse, confronting hugely different stages of development, with their own societal requirements. Japan's reluctant political alignment with western human rights reveals similar thinking. 'Japan is extremely sensitive to the potential accusation of domestic interference by Asian countries in case Japan takes an accusatory stance similar to the western countries on human rights... In many contentious cases it simply abstains.'³⁵

Asians tolerate diversity; intercultural communication comes rather easily to them. The world sorely needs such qualities in the 21st millennium.

TABLE III
Foreign Ministry Work Characteristics

(The author's estimate)

<i>Teamwork style</i>	<i>High use of performance</i>	<i>High training orientation</i>	<i>Knowledge management</i>	<i>Technology application</i>
	<i>Management</i>	<i>Orientation</i>	<i>(High)</i>	<i>(High)</i>
Singapore China, Japan Thailand	Singapore Thailand, Japan		Singapore Japan, China	Singapore Japan
India	China India	Japan, China India, Thailand	Thailand, India	China Thailand India
<i>Individualist style</i>	<i>Low use of performance</i>	<i>Low Orientation</i>	<i>Knowledge (low)</i>	<i>Technology (low)</i>

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Explanation: 1. The Hofstede index does not cover China (except in relation to long-term orientation). 2. On the power distance scale, the author estimates Singapore at a lower level than does Hofstede. 3. On the individualism scale the Hofstede figures and the author's estimates are in sharp divergence; on other characteristic there are small variations.

32. In October 2005, a number of western country foreign ministries held a meeting in Ottawa of the directors of human resources, for the first time; UK hosted the next meeting at the end of 2006.

33. In 2000-01 the author worked as a Commonwealth adviser to the Namibia Foreign Ministry, learning about the challenges faced.

34. Anthony B. Cheung, 'Globalization versus Asian Values: Alternative Paradigms in Understanding Governance and Administration', *Asian Journal of Political Science* 8(2), December 2000.

35. Yasuhiro Ueki, *Japan's UN Diplomacy: Sources of Activism and Passivism*, Gerald L. Curtis (ed.) *Japanese Foreign Policy After the Cold War: Coping with Change*, Armonk, New York, 1993, p.351.