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Challenges for Asian Political and International Studies**

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## **Identity Without Exceptionalism: Challenges for Asian Political and International Studies<sup>1</sup>**

**Amitav Acharya**

The area studies tradition is a double-edged sword. In a society notoriously devoted to exceptionalism, and to endless preoccupation with “America”, this tradition has been a tiny refuge for the serious study of foreign languages, alternative worldviews, and large-scale perspectives on sociocultural change outside Europe and the United States. Bedeviled by a certain tendency toward philology (in the narrow, lexical sense) and a certain overidentification with the regions of its specialization, area studies has nonetheless been one of the few serious counterweights to the tireless tendency to marginalize huge parts of the world in the American academy and American society more generally. Yet the area-studies tradition has probably grown too comfortable with its own maps of the world, too secure in its own expert practices, and too insensitive to transnational processes both today and in the past. So criticism and reform are certainly in order, but how can area studies help to improve the way that world pictures are generated in the United States? (Arjun Appadurai, 1996, p.17)

It is a great honour for me to have been invited to deliver the keynote address to the inaugural workshop of the Asian Political and International Studies Association. It’s also an immense challenge which I approach with humility and a certain amount of trepidation. As a scholar trained largely in the discipline of political science and more specifically international relations of Southeast Asia, I am not sure I am qualified to reflect on “Asian political and international studies.”

Moreover, the task the organisers of this meeting have set for themselves is ambitious and difficult. There is no history of political science and international studies scholars organizing themselves on an Asia-wide basis. Asia has a growing number of policy networks, the so-called “epistemic communities”, on regional economic and security issues. One could point to the Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference, Council for Security Cooperation in Asia Pacific, ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies, etc., etc. Moreover, the civil society in the region is increasingly regionalized. But the academic community on politics and international

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studies has yet to come together for regular and systematic exchanges. This is in marked contrast to the situation in Europe, which has developed its own academic networks on politics and international studies. In Asia, academic networks wherever they exist, have developed on a national, rather than regional, or even sub-regional basis. Asian political scientists today are more involved in North American, European and Australian political science and area studies associations than in developing any similar pan-Asian forum.

At the outset, let me pose two questions that have bothered me since I was approached to speak at this conference and which ought to engage the full attention of all of us present here. The first is whether or to what extent an Asian Political and International Studies Association (APISA) should promote the “Asianization” of Asian political and international studies. This is a familiar if rhetorical concern for anyone seeking to set up regional associations of this nature anywhere. My own answer to this question will depend on what we mean by Asianization. If by Asianization we mean securing greater participation by indigenous scholars in research, teaching and debates in various related fields, then we ought to embrace it strongly. Similarly, we must use APISA as a platform for greater Asianization of funding of political and international studies. This is imperative because social science research and networking in Asia today receives more support from foundations and government agencies from the West than from Asian foundations and donors, who seem far more eager to endow chairs at prestigious Western academic institutions than contributing to their local counterparts in Asia. But if Asianization becomes an excuse for narrowly delimiting the field, or to discourage the participation of non-Asian scholars and discussion of non-Asian (Western) ideas, then we must reject it firmly.

Such Asianization, in my view, is neither feasible nor desirable. While the primary goal of APISA may well be to encourage scholars and promote institutional conditions for research and teaching within Asia, it should not exclusively be an association to benefit Asian, or Asia-based scholars. While securing greater Asian participation in seminars, conferences, and language studies, and generating more resources for Asian scholars are worthy goals of APISA, one should also guard against parochialism, exceptionalism and reverse ethnocentrism that the creation of a regional association of this nature might encourage, however inadvertently. Asianization narrowly conceived can also breed inferior quality research. For example, we should encourage more journals and monographs on politics and international studies which are published and edited in Asia, but this must not discourage Asian scholars from publishing in the West. We should not turn Asian journals into being mere outlets for work that could not be published in the West.

A second question that must be raised at the outset is whether the proposed APISA should concentrate on the political and international studies *of* Asia, without also encouraging the study of politics and international studies *in* Asia? I note from the Programme that the organisers clearly have the latter in mind. But one should pay some attention to this question, because the vast majority of political scientists and international relations scholars living and working in Asia happen to be specialists on the region.

It will be unfortunate if APISA is to neglect those, however small in number, who study the outside world from their vantage points in Asia. APISA should be as much an association of Asia-based scholars who specialise on politics and international studies in general, as of those (whether Asia- or outside-based) who are specialists on the politics and international relations of the region.

Having made the case for a broad-based association, I now turn to the main intellectual and institutional challenges facing political and international studies scholars of, and in, Asia.

My goal here is not to offer any solutions to these challenges. Rather I hope to begin a debate that could be important to progress toward such an association.

### **The challenge of diversity: does Asia exist?**

First, can we make meaningful associations of academic minds working on the politics and international relations of Asia in the face of its obvious and immense diversity? Doubts about an Asian identity might have played its part in discouraging the development of an Asian political and international studies association in the past.

Writing in 1962 about *Asia in the Balance*, Michael Edwardes (1962:14), a British commentator, asserted: “Asia does *not* exist, except in atlases and in the simple minds of strategic planners.” More recently, French scholar Francois Godemont (1997:4) in his *The New Asian Renaissance*, pointed out that “The words ‘Asia’ and ‘the East’ are loaded terms from a fantasy seemingly woven from a Baudelaire poem, a melody by Ravel, a short story by Somerset Maugham and a James Ivory film.” The concept of Asia has been attacked because it was a mere Western invention, and because unlike Europe, Asia has no cultural and civilizational coherence and unity. It is also attacked on political grounds, as in the case of the debate over “Asian Values”, which critics saw, with some justification, as a pretext for authoritarianism. (In another time, in another context, claims about an Asian identity would have been construed as liberating; it was part of the anti-colonial lore of Asian nationalists such as Nehru, the convener of the Asian Relations Conference in 1947, and no “tinpot” dictator himself.)

Not all scholars see Asia’s diversity as an intractable barrier to meaningful academic discourse. The modern concept of Asia might have been a product of the “Vasco da Gama Age”, ushered by the agents of the Portuguese maritime empire who “touched upon the many diverse peoples from Indians at Goa, Sinhalese at Colombo, Malays at Malacca right round to the Chinese at Macao”, and “tended to see them all as ‘Asians’” (Fitzerald, 1969: 410). But it is easy to forget that claims about an Asian identity once held considerable appeal among the region’s nationalist elite. In 1959, for example, Guy Wint wrote that “Today, the literate people of nearly all Asian countries feel, along with many other sentiments, a sense of belonging to the Asian continent, and therefore of having some kind of interest common to one another.” (Cited Edwardes, 1962:12) The political concept of Asia might have faded since, replaced by more economic and strategic notion of Pacific Rim or Asia-Pacific. But Muthiah Alagappa, no simple-minded strategic planner and analyst, defends the use of the concept of “Asia” in academic analysis. In his view, the lack of agreement over its meaning notwithstanding, the term Asia has become “entrenched both in the West and in Asia” and has ‘acquired an indigenous quality in Asia.’ (Alagappa, 1998: 3).

The notion of Asia should be a justifiable concept for an academic organization, but not for sentimental reasons. It is justifiable, instead, because of the existence of broad patterns of political, economic and strategic developments and interactions (both inter-state and transnational) across Asia, which an association could reflect and build upon. Historical examples of Asia-wide interactions include the pre-colonial Asian trading system extending from India to China, and the continuous flow of religious, cultural and political ideas between India, Southeast Asia and China. Nationalism and decolonization in the 1940s and 50s were an Asia-wide pattern as was the breakdown of postcolonial experiments in democracy in the 1960s and 70s (although the causes might have varied from sub-region to sub-region, or country to country).

Regionalist movements in the 1950s and 60s were pan-Asian in aspiration. Today, a pan-Asian network operates at the level of civil society, even as the governments of the region cooperate on more exclusionary sub-regional basis. A quick look at NGO offices in Bangkok reveals the participation of all three sub-regions. APISA should see itself as a part of this transnational civil society in Asia.

An association that brings together specialists on Asia's three main sub-regions can thrive by exploiting their abundant commonalities and complementarities. For example, collaborative research between scholars from South and Southeast Asia could be valuable for the study of Islam. Institutional linkages between the three sub-regions could be especially beneficial for foreign language teaching. Indeed, some of the most exciting and innovative research projects in Asian political and international studies in recent years have been undertaken on an Asia-wide basis. Examples include Alagappa's edited volumes on civil-military relations and security practice (Alagappa, 1998; Alagappa 2001), and a Ford Foundation supported project on "Non-Traditional Security in Asia" that brought together academic institutions from South Asia, Southeast Asia (IDSS) and Northeast Asia.

### **Area studies versus the discipline**

Even if we agree that APISA should not be an association exclusively of specialists on Asia, the fact remains that vast majority of scholars who will be its members are likely to be Asian specialists on Asia. Hence, the debate between what David Ludden (1998:1) of the University of Pennsylvania has called "universal disciplinary knowledge" and "area-specific, inter-disciplinary knowledge", is relevant to efforts to chart the course for the association. It is not my purpose to replicate this quintessentially *American* debate in Asia. But as Winichakul (AAS, 1997:7), points out, the debate has implications beyond the US and is a helpful starting point for identifying some of the challenges facing an Asian Political and International Studies Association.

Area studies is distinguished by multi-disciplinarity, emphasis on field research, and, above all, life-long devotion to studying a nation or region. A disciplinary approach, by contrast, seeks to identify "lawful regularities, which, by definition, must not be context bound" (Bates, 1997:166). Discipline-based scholars aspire to be social scientists, who "do not seek to master the literature on a region, but rather to master the literature of a discipline" (Bates, 1997:166).

In the US, area studies was conceived in the post-World War II period as a way of identifying America's "next" enemies. It evolved more as a response to the "Sputnik" than to sentimental curiosities about Balinese dance. The end of the Cold War thus deprived area studies of its strategic rationale. Taking full advantage of this situation are the proponents of formal theory (especially rational choice) in American academia. Formal theorists see the primary function of area studies to be the provision of raw data for theory testing. Area specialists have been attacked by discipline-based scholars for being little more than "real estate agents' with a stake in a plot of land rather than an intellectual theory". Their work has been described variously as "a-theoretical", "journalistic", and "mushy". They are faulted for not knowing statistics, for "offering resistance to rigorous methods for evaluating arguments", for not generating "scientific knowledge" and for being "cameras", rather than "thinkers". (Shea, 1997:A12-A13). In contrast, disciplinary social science was seen, in the words of the former President of the Social Science Research Council David Featherman, as being more "universally applicable and globally useful" (Cited in Ludden, 1998:2).

There are many reasons why one must reject the criticism of area studies by discipline-oriented scholars (See AAS, 1997). Especially pertinent is James Scott's warning that purely disciplinary approaches centered on formal theory would fail to illuminate "real societies and the conduct of historically situated human agents". (AAS, 1997:2) On the other hand, one cannot ignore the "a-theoretical" nature of traditional area studies. Asia has been noticeably inhospitable to any theory, not just the rational choice variety. Among students of comparative politics in Asia, attempts to develop and engage even the so-called mid-range theories popular with their Western counterparts have been sparse. In international relations, theoretical work has been dreaded and despised. Across Asia, the mere mention of the word "theory" is sure to induce panic attacks in the classrooms.

A chief reason for this, in my view, is the persisting ethnocentrism or Americanocentrism of Western domestic or international political theory. The irony here is that while "area" in the US has traditionally meant areas besides the US, "theory" in the US has meant the distinctive experiences of Euro-North Atlantic countries. (Acharya, 2000; Alagappa, 1998: 9) Ethnocentrism, whether deliberate or inadvertent, can lead to alienation; defined as feeling estranged or lacking a sense of belonging. Aversion to, or rejection of theory, is commonplace in Asia because scholars often "find the great debates and theoretical breakthroughs...[of their discipline] taking place with complete disregard for the totality of world culture – especially of their own. (Acharya, 2000:1)

A second reason for the lack of interest in theory is what Ben Anderson (1984:43-44) has called the "proximity to power" enjoyed by academics in the region. While Anderson referred to indigenous Southeast Asian scholars then, this can be applied to the whole of Asia now. Today, this proximity to power is reflected in the abundance of policy-oriented and policy-relevant (the two are different) research, which in turn inhibits the need for, and interest in, theoretical work.

How do we address this situation? Or should we address it? Increasingly many scholars in Asia recognize the need to move beyond a traditional area studies approach, although I doubt that very many of them are seduced by the rational choice bandwagon in the US. A shift is useful and essential for coping with the national and sub-regional diversity of Asia and because of the challenges posed by globalization, a subject I will discuss later.

How to go about theorising Asian political and international studies? Alagappa (1998: 9) suggests one path when he points out that: "Asia is fertile ground to debate, test, and develop many of these [Western] concepts and competing theories, and to counteract the ethnocentric bias." While I agree with this observation, I also see this as a partial response to the challenge we face. The problem of ethnocentrism will not disappear by using the Asian empirical record primarily to "test" available North Atlantic theories. This will merely reinforce the image of area studies as little more than provider of "raw data" to American theory, whether rationalist or post-rationalist.

Scholars in Asia, especially younger scholars, if and when they see the need for theoretical construct, often turn instinctively to American theoretical debates first. When there is a misfit between their empirical observations and American theory, we see some revision or modification of that particular theory. But the terms of the modification are already decided by American debates and modeling. This inhibits independent and creative analysis of Asian patterns and trends. It also leads to questionable generalizations, such as the image of Asia as a "dangerous place", or the claim that the Asian world-view and the Asian pattern of international relations are quintessentially realist. This has perhaps less to do with reality than to the state of theoretical play in America from which Asian writers, as most other writers about Asia, derive

their assumptions and models. Such dependence also means that patterns of interactions in Asia which lie outside of the theoretical debates in the USA or North Atlantic, are seldom recognised or analysed.

Creative theoretical work requires that these patterns must be highlighted and generalized from, on their own terms, whether or not they fit a particular American model. Moreover, Asian scholars could derive original theoretical insights from the work of Asian political thinkers, both classical and modern. We should look into the minds of Kautilya and Confucius and not just Machiavelli and Marx. Similarly, we ought to seek theoretical insights from Nehru or Sukarno just as Western theorizing has drawn from Woodrow Wilson and Henry Kissinger.

Theoretical work based on Asian dynamics and Asian thought might give APISA a rationale and an identity, but it should be done without exceptionalism and parochialism, the twin dangers present in any efforts at collective identity-building.

### **Exceptionalism and parochialism: are Asians that much different?**

When confronted with the ethnocentrism of Western disciplinary concepts, Asian studies scholars have often responded with exceptionalism and parochialism. Exceptionalism is the tendency among scholars to reify and essentialize shared characteristics and relationships to counter and exclude outsiders' perspectives. Exceptionalism is a poor and sometimes dangerous basis for scholars to organize themselves. Claims of exceptionalism, whether individual or collective, national or regional, often do not stand up to rigorous scholarly scrutiny. They shut the door to genuine ideational intercourse between the global and the regional, or between regions. Even more importantly, academic exceptionalism is vulnerable to governmental abuse. This is a point made by the critics of the "Asian Values" concept, which they see as an ideology of authoritarianism in Asia. Asian governments have used an exceptionalist framework, the "ASEAN Way", to slow down progress towards more institutionalized multilateral political and security cooperation in the region. Exceptionalism can be a powerful tool to resist change, whether it is a call for freedom over repression or cooperation over realpolitik.

Asian scholars of Asian studies, along with their counterparts in the West, are also responsible for a parochialism which is manifested in their reluctance to recognise the importance of scholarly studies of regional trends or patterns undertaken from a discipline-based theoretical perspective. Asian studies associations and conventions in US, Canada, Australia are thoroughly dominated by scholars from the humanities such as history, geography, and anthropology. These scholars often dismiss works on Asian international relations and security issues that engages the literature of the discipline, rather than just the literature of the region only. While area specialists in America justifiably complain of discrimination in the hands of discipline-based scholars, they also routinely look down upon writings on regions undertaken by the latter.

The debate over area studies in the US has ended in stalemate and compromise rather than the outright defeat of area studies, as some had initially expected or even hoped for. Advocates of area studies were sufficiently persuasive for even the pro-discipline Social Science Research Council to accept the need for combining the universality of social science with the area specificity of the humanities, in a framework that came to be called "context-sensitive social science" (Ludden, 1998:4). Even one of the hardest opponents of area studies, Harvard's Robert Bates (1997), has called for developing "analytic narratives" that marries "local knowledge" with

rational choice theory. Bates proposes that formal models, such as rational choice approaches, could be applied to study cultural distinctions which lie at the core of area studies. On the opposite end, scholars have called for the use of “local knowledge”, such as cultural variables, to illuminate the sources of “rational” state interests and preferences. This has been a key claim of constructivism in the study of foreign policy and international relations, which, under the hegemony of neorealism and neoliberalism, assumed, rather than investigated state preferences.

APISA members should strive for their own compromise without mimicking American debates or turning Asia into a mere test-bed of American theory. At least some of them should attempt the opposite, developing general insights and constructs from the Asian experience to explain events and phenomena in the outside world. After all, if European and North Atlantic regional politics could be turned into international relations theory, why not Asian regional politics? Ben Anderson’s work on nationalism and James Scott’s work on resistance offers important examples of how “local knowledge” can be turned into definitive frameworks for analyzing global processes. One could also think of similar contributions from other disciplines, such as anthropologist Edmund Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, (1954) which is now used to underscore fluid notions of ethnic identity. There are many other aspects of Asian politics and international relations that offer opportunities for similar efforts. For example, studies of Asian regional institution-building, which has received increasing attention lately, is a rich source of generalizations about the process dynamics of regional and international cooperation (Acharya, 2001).

It is possible to make important contributions to the study of global phenomena from a regional vantage point without being unduly exceptionalist. European international relations scholarship offers a good example of how this can be done. In international relations, we have the “English School” (on international society) and the “Copenhagen School” (on security-identity nexus). Asia can claim no distinctive perspective on politics and international relations. We do not have a New Delhi, or a Tokyo or a Bangkok School. A partial exception might be the “Singapore School” once associated with the “Asian Values” concept, but its distinctiveness was more in the policy arena than as a contribution to a theory of politics. Many of the European schools are important counters to dominant US perspectives, the English School against American rationalist-realist scholarship, the Copenhagen school against American realism and American constructivism. They have challenged Americanocentrism without falling into the trap of exceptionalism. The development of similar perspectives in Asia is an important challenge to the proposed association.

Broadening the area studies approach is important not just because of the dangers of parochialism and exceptionalism, but also because of the need to respond to another powerful challenge to academia in general, the challenge of globalization.

### **The challenge of globalization: from “subordinate systems” to regional worlds”**

What is the rationale for a regional academic network when the idea of “region” is under attack from the myriad forces of globalization? Globalization is too unspecific and contested a concept to serve as a definitive benchmark for setting the agenda for academic discourse and organization. We need to adopt a more specific notion of globalization, focusing, for example, on capital, labour or cultural flows, to meaningfully consider its impact on regionness and regional identity. While we can disagree about the meaning of globalization and debate whether it is undermining



the nation-state, there is less doubt as to its impact in rendering the region less distinctive. In a powerful summary of the challenge posed by globalization, Willa Tanabe (Undated, 3-4) writes:

Area study scholars perhaps failed to recognize the importance of global forces because they misconstrued the geography of cultural areas. The geography of the Philippines is no longer bounded by oceans surrounding the Philippine islands; rather, we can map Filipino culture as a flow chart that includes Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, N. Marianas and Los Angeles. We must recognize that communities and areas can be mapped in very different ways. The Thai bar girl in Tokyo and the Filipino bar girl in Palau must be examined in terms of what they have in common as part of the community of foreign workers as well as how they differ because of the local responses to foreign workers. If we see that our notion of area can no longer be a bounded system of social, national or cultural categories and that the most critical issues today are those that cross borders, then we face the question of how to recognize and reconceive the ways we do scholarship. Area studies must cross borders to remain relevant.

Globalization threatens the importance of some of the more salient traditional concerns and orientations of political and international studies of Asia. One issue is the emphasis on language studies. Even without globalization, there was a serious dearth of learning facilities for Asian languages at Asian academic institutions. It is far easier today to study Mandarin in the USA than in Thailand, to learn Bahasa Indonesia in Australia than in Singapore. Now, English has unquestionably emerged as the language of globalization. This was most powerfully demonstrated when Chinese President Jiang Zemin conducted the entire proceedings of the APEC summit in Shanghai in October 2001 in English, rather than in Mandarin. The unfortunate consequence would be less emphasis on study of Asian languages, something APISA must resist through its own initiatives and programs.

But instead of being discouraged by globalization, the movement to set up an Asian Political and International Studies Association should draw strength from it. Globalization could help liberate politics and international studies in Asia from the remaining vestiges of Orientalism. As Don Emmerson (2001:19) points out, globalization is especially beneficial to Southeast Asian Studies which has been noticeably anti-Orientalist in recent decades. To this end, James Scott credits globalization for promoting greater indigenous scholarship in Southeast Asia. As he puts it: "There was a time not long ago when many Southeast Asianists in Europe and North America lived in an intellectual world confined largely to their own nation or metropolitan language. Now, however, virtually every nation in Southeast Asia has a vibrant, creative scholarly community which, if anything, is producing the bulk of path-breaking work." (AAS, 1997:1)

Globalization will not spell the end of area studies. But it will induce changes in the way political science and international studies in and of Asia is defined and developed. APISA members can respond to the challenge of globalization by doing comparative research across countries and regions and by interacting more with scholars who are specialists in the theme or issue in which they themselves specialise, but who may not be specialists on the same country or region. There is increasing demand for teaching and research programmes that focus on transnational and transregional issues and challenges. Institutions in the West have responded to globalization in this vein. Some, such as the Centre for the Study of Globalization and Regionalization at the University of Warwick, have focused on studying the causes and

dynamics of globalization, especially in the political economy arena. Others, such as the gender studies centre at the University of Chicago, have studied the impact of globalization on specific social groups. But in either case, the response has been to combine the resources of *both area and disciplinary scholars* in order to develop new lines of enquiry. This should be instructive to Asian political scientists and international relations scholars as they come under increasing pressure to look beyond strictly Asian issues.

Just as globalization has not rendered the nation-state irrelevant, it has not dampened discourses about regional identity. But it warrants going beyond the traditional conception of regions as relatively self-contained politico-cultural units. During the Cold War, political scientists used the term “subordinate systems” to link regional dynamics with dominant global structures. A more appropriate way of looking at “region” today would be to view them as “regional worlds”, coined by a University of Chicago project which encourages regional thinking about global forces without assuming the automatic dominance of the latter. As Arjun Appadurai notes: “all world areas now produce their own pictures of the world and not just of themselves.” The challenge for Asian scholars should thus be to “recognize that areas are not just places, but are also locations for the production of other world-pictures, which also need to be part of our sense of these other worlds.” (AAS, 1997:6). In responding to the challenge of globalization, APISA members should offer regional perspectives on wider world issues, and not just concentrate on explaining Asian dynamics.

## Conclusion

I do not envisage APISA as a tightly-knit body dedicated to promoting a rigid conception of Asia as a region or a specific agenda of political science and international studies as distinctive disciplines. It is far more likely to be a loose umbrella sheltering and promoting academic exchanges across a variety of disciplines, countries and sub-regions.

Asian political and international studies scholars must simultaneously deepen their mutual bonds and widen their intellectual horizons. An association can help foster a common identity through interactions such as holding annual conventions, sponsoring panels at meetings of ISA, APSA, BISA, etc., organizing language training, publishing new journals (or sponsoring existing ones) and monographs and undertaking projects to promote greater understanding of cultures and processes across national and sub-regional boundaries within Asia.

At the same time, APISA members should strive to widen the intellectual horizons of “Asia” and “Asian Studies” in order to cope with the challenge of globalization and discipline-based approaches. To the extent that APISA is based in Asia, and the vast majority of its members are likely to be Asians specializing in Asian issues, it is imperative that we do not turn it into an inward-looking forum. While an area studies approach remains and will continue to be important (witness the demand for Middle East and Islamic Studies specialists in the wake of the 11 September terror attacks), it also need to change its traditional colours and overcome its own parochialism and exceptionalism. Widening involves attracting increasing number of non-specialists on the region to attend the future meetings of APISA. It calls for abandoning the mind-set that conflates Asian political and international studies with the politics and international relations of (or within) Asia. APISA should not be an association of Asian specialists on Asian studies, but should extend a welcoming hand to Asian specialists on non-Asian politics and area studies, and non-Asian specialists on Asian studies.

Meeting this challenge of building identity without exceptionalism, ladies and gentlemen, should be a worthy goal of an Asian political and international studies association.

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