

## WHAT MAKES A TRULY PROSPEROUS SOCIETY? COEXISTENCE & COOPERATION FOR THE FUTURE OF ASIA & OCEANIA

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### **Abstract**

This short essay was submitted as part of the application for the 2006 JAL Scholarship Program, organised by Japan Airlines International Co. Ltd. In this short essay, the writer shares his ideas on the necessary elements for achieving a truly prosperous society and how he may contribute towards achieving this goal of a truly prosperous society.

### **Abstrak**

Esei ini merupakan sebahagian daripada pemenuhan syarat permohonan untuk Program Biasiswa JAL 2006, yang dianjurkan oleh Syarikat Penerbangan Antarabangsa Jepun. Dalam esei pendek ini, penulis berkongsi idea mengenai elemen-elemen penting ke arah mencapai masyarakat yang benar-benar maju dan terkehadapan, serta bagaimana penulis dapat menyumbang kepada usaha tersebut.

How does one measure the prosperity of a country? What is a reliable indicator of prosperity? If it were economic prosperity we are talking about, there must be some way to gauge the wealth of the country and its people. Do we measure Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita? Or is prosperity defined in terms of general well-being and welfare of the people? In that case, we would need to measure how happy people are with their lives. So what does one look at then? Is it the life expectancy? How about crime rates? Or maybe even the Body Mass Index (BMI) as bulkier and heavier people are seen as being more “prosperous”? And would the literacy rate be a correlating factor?

How about society as a whole? How is the prosperity of humanity? In this case, how are Asia and Oceania performing?

There is definitely no simple answer to that. Although most countries might claim that they do enjoy some certain degree of prosperity, we are still far away from a society that is truly prosperous. To describe a society of being truly prosperous, society must prosper in terms of peace and happiness, and have the economic and financial well-being

to pursue each individual's freedoms and liberties. In other words, true prosperity consists of economic prosperity and social prosperity. Both require coexistence and cooperation of peoples, nations and regions.

The "levels" of prosperity vary glaringly across countries within Asia and Oceania. There are countries that enjoy affluence such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Australia, there are rapidly developing countries such as China and India, and there are countries battling poverty such as Bangladesh. It can be summarized that only Australia and New Zealand in the Oceanic region enjoy first-world prosperity, the rest of the Oceanic countries come no where near the two. True prosperity may sometimes seem like a utopian ideal, but I believe that it is a realistic goal. The key is by working together starting from the smallest unit, expanding into small communities, then into towns and cities, growing into nations then into regions, ultimately being a global endeavor. To cooperate and compliment each other's efforts in pursuing optimal outcomes for the future, countries must first learn to coexist. Starting off by coexisting with neighboring countries, Asian countries then move on to coexist on a larger scale with the Oceanic countries, covering all countries West of the Pacific Ocean. This will be a regional relationship that will grow into a global relationship as coexistence expands.

Although the general plan to coexist might seem simple, it is unquestionably a challenging attempt. People from different regions share different values and different ideals, all the product of cultural conditioning. Subsequently, trying to get people with varying perspectives to cooperate and even agree on worldwide issues is not as easy as it seems. Sure, all is well when the world is at peace. It seems that the majority of nations coexist peacefully except the like of the Israelis and Palestinians or the warring countries in Africa. But when something unpredictable surfaces, some countries that boast the best diplomatic and business relationships show their ugly faces. The bonds that were meticulously built over time across countries by the previous leaders suddenly come under fire.

A perfect example would be the recent case of an arrested Australian drug trafficker by the government of Singapore. Nguyen Tuong Van, 25, was hanged at Changi prison despite repeated pleas for clemency from the Australian government. Australian Prime Minister John Howard said the execution would harm links between the people of Australia and Singapore while Australian Attorney-General Philip Ruddock condemned the execution as "barbaric". The authorities in Singapore on the other hand

argued that they had an obligation to protect those whose lives could have been ruined by the heroin that was smuggled – the amount of heroin involved would have been enough for 26,000 individual doses. Singapore has some of the strictest drug trafficking laws in the world, and anyone found with 15g of heroin faces a mandatory death penalty. The Singaporean (along with similar Malaysian and Thai) laws simply illustrate the significance and urgency of the matter. Controversial as it may to human rights activists, it has had positive repercussions in lowering the drug trafficking rate throughout South East Asia.

Eventually, Singapore remained fixed on their stand and denied clemency. Even so, Mr. Howard has rejected calls for trade and military boycotts against Singapore, one of Australia's strongest allies in Asia. In my opinion, both countries, in an effort to avoid misunderstandings, handled the situation tactfully. But undoubtedly, there was still a strain in the relationship between an Asian and Oceanic country. Bilateral relationship that took years to build was ready to go up in shreds if diplomatic action were taken against each other. Things could have easily gone the other way: if countries were to establish sanctions and embargos towards each other, it would just be the loss of everyone. Coexistence is also tough considering differing views on various issues such as abortion, euthanasia, gender roles, sexual identity, which range from the extremely conservative to the overly liberal.

With the rise of immigration, countries also become less homogenous. The lack of education and exposure could result in people making assumptions and stereotypes about nationalities and race. To coexist, there has to be active effort to promote understanding and tolerance and not just rely on passive assimilation. People should also be proactive and open in learning about other cultures. There is no excuse for ethnocentrism. On a personal level, I am intrigued by foreign cultures and love to travel. At the same time, I am educated about my culture and its practices. This has allowed me to share my unique experiences with foreign people that I meet. In my University, I have many friends that are foreign nationals. I enjoy exchanging experiences and learning from them. Once, I even got to know a Japanese girl who was a temporary exchange student to Malaysia. By speaking to her, I have heard about a lot of things from Japan that has attracted me to the country. I found out that there has only been one ruling dynasty from the past till now, far different than the hundreds of dynasties in China. Hoping to visit Japan someday, I am currently taking a Japanese language course.

Only when Asia and Oceania coexist peacefully will the next step of cooperation be effortlessly amplified. Although countries of Asia and Oceania are relatively near to each other, there are extreme disparities across nations. Life expectancy varies from 58 years of Bangladesh to 80 years of Australia and Japan. The same can be observed for wealth, as GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita varies across nations. Economic prosperity of society requires all countries through business cooperation. Cooperation comes in many forms: international trade, technology, human capital and so on.

As both Asia and Oceania strive towards achieving economic prosperity, there is no doubt that international trade is vital. In terms of resources, it is definitely true that each country has certain comparative advantages to producing goods. Countries such as Japan, South Korean, Taiwan, Singapore and Australia have a superior level of technology that allows greater productivity while countries such as China and India contain huge supplies of cheap labor that also increases productivity.

International trade and finance is potentially important to people in developing countries such as China and India for an array of reasons. Trade enables them to obtain high technology goods that they are not producing themselves. Time is only spent on producing the goods that a country is best at producing. Thus, it enables them to obtain some goods at better prices than they could have gotten from poor quality producers at home. To illustrate my point, when Indonesia ventured into the aerospace industry by establishing the IPTN to domestically produce airplanes in 1976, it never did succeed. There were far too many barriers to be overcome; the technology still was not sufficient to make such breakthroughs. Aircraft manufacture is a source of employment for skilled workers, scientists, engineers, and technicians despite the unreasonable investment required. No other industry, forced by technological necessity, is so fraught with risk, competition, and requirement of the market stimulate technological and product advances that contribute to conditions of the industry. Instead of producing what they are best at and gradually introducing industries that they have less expertise in on a later date, Indonesia tried its hand at making something that it was bad at producing.

By increasing trade between Asia and Oceania, technology can also be transferred at the same time. Investments made in local industries allow technology in the manufacturing process is introduced. However, even when people use exactly the same machinery, productivity varies enormously. Some societies seem simply to have arranged themselves in a way that they are more productive than other societies. Management as

much as engineering technology counts. This is where the exchange in technology and ideas is absolutely vital for the continued growth and prosperity of Asia and Oceania.

There are several reasons why a society may not be inventive. A society may be very poor and have no time to do anything but grow food and fix hoes and ploughs: in this case there will be little innovation and development. Secondly, in other societies, the biggest rewards may go to military adventurism, or to rent seeking, rather than to innovation, business or technology. In the Indian caste system, the top two castes were religious and military; business was frowned upon, as was invention. Thirdly, in some societies, the legal system may not be very good at rewarding the inventors: unless there is some protection of ideas (the patent system), people may not bother to invest energy in technology development. Copyright and anti-piracy laws can be introduced to countries where piracy is widespread such as China, Thailand and Malaysia. Some societies have a culture that promotes and likes new ideas. Japan, South Korean, Taiwan, Singapore and Australia are clearly one of these societies.

Trade enables countries to have larger markets for things they are good at producing, and allows economies of scale without needing buoyant domestic markets. Countries such as Malaysia produce petroleum that is marketable universally for a lucrative price; the factors of production need not depend on the domestic utilization and demand. If that were the case (without international trade), low domestic demand would increase mining costs and reduce oil prices as there simply is an abundance for locals. Another example would be the smaller Oceanic countries that mainly rely on fishing as their national income. If the output of fishing were to depend on the domestic consumption, it is certain that it would not be enough to support the country. At the end of the day, smaller countries will benefit from trade as demand is multiplied. And with the high demand, economics of scale can be the solution, resulting in lower prices per item produced and increased productivity.

Along with economic cooperation, there can also be educational exchange among Asian and Oceanic countries. Australia and New Zealand have always been a popular choice for Asian students as a destination for tertiary education because it is relatively cheaper in cost compared to the UK or US, but at the same time still offering highly comparable quality. In the recent years, Singapore has also gained popularity as a destination to further one's education. Countries that have a better education system will have to assist other countries as a means of achieving true prosperity together. Education

may also be inversely correlated with an array of factors such as the crime rate and life expectancy. A higher education can set-off a string of positive repercussions: people are more educated about health, child mortalities are decreased while life expectancy is extended because of better medical technology, living standards increase because people hold better paying jobs, there is less crime because of the general well-being of society etc.

Very often have I seeked opportunities in educational exchange as a means for me to expand my knowledge and gain a fresh perspective. Since I am trained in the field of urban planning and development, my potential visit to Japan under the 2006 JAL Scholarship Program will prove as an eye opening experience for me to observe the structure of the cities and the placement of infrastructure. There is definitely room for improvement in Malaysia in terms of public transportation. Being in Japan will also allow me to observe how public transportation is run there and how logistic woes are solved. Moreover, I will serve as a cultural ambassador for Malaysia, sharing my experiences growing up in this multi-ethnic country. I can share with my peers the passion I feel for Malaysia and how Malaysia can learn from other Asian and Oceanic countries to better itself at the same time, sharing what Malaysia has done or others to learn from.

By coexisting and cooperating together among Asian and Oceanic countries, true prosperity is within reach. Countries consist of individuals, and it is up to the individuals to take the necessary steps in achieving prosperity. Starting with optimal coexistence/symbiosis, countries will sway from unnecessary conflict. When coexistence is without obstruction, cooperation can be engaged completely in trade, educational and technological exchange. Countries will then reap the benefits of true prosperity. And being truly prosperous, the people would enjoy affluence to live comfortably in peace. War, hunger, poverty and malnutrition will be a thing of the past.

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