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Learning to Love NGOs: The Growing Role of Civil Society in Asian Security

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James Gannon, Executive Director of the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE/USA), explains that “a new Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) study suggests that governments and regional institutions in Asia are failing to take full advantage of the potential of NGOs.”

Nearly two decades ago, Professor Lester Salamon wrote about the “associational revolution” that he saw unfolding after the Cold War as people around the globe banded together to form nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other voluntary groups to advance interests not being met by governments. It should come as no surprise that this associational revolution has been slow to come to East Asia—one of the world’s most state-centric regions. However, even there it has quietly been making its mark. Today, NGOs in Asia are playing crucial roles in a range of fields, even becoming important players in the region’s most sensitive area—the field of security. Yet, a new Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) study suggests that governments and regional institutions in Asia are failing to take full advantage of the potential of NGOs.

The growing role of NGOs in Asia is particularly noticeable regarding nontraditional security issues that have come to the fore as globalization has advanced and national borders have become more porous. For example, much of the data that law enforcement agencies in Asia rely upon to understand human trafficking networks comes from NGOs that actually work with victims who have few incentives to trust police or other government authorities. Similarly, NGOs have begun playing a greater role in combating communicable diseases. In China, almost one-quarter of all patients taking anti-retroviral drugs currently receive them through a single NGO—AIDS Care China.

The field of disaster relief is another area where the role of NGOs has become especially important. Nearly 40 percent of all overseas aid provided in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was channeled through NGOs. Moreover, after Japan’s 2011 tsunami, NGOs provided more overseas funding for relief and recovery efforts than all foreign governments and UN agencies combined.

NGOs are even playing an unheralded role in shaping the region’s response to more traditional security challenges, topics that have typically been perceived as being solely the responsibility of militaries and government officials. For instance, the most important security dialogues for regional government officials are the products of NGO efforts. The ASEAN Regional Forum grew out of a proposal by the ASEAN-ISIS consortium of think tanks, and the Shangri-La Dialogue is hosted by a private think tank, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

The field of piracy offers another fascinating example of the impact of NGOs. Think tanks and nonprofit business associations like the International Maritime Bureau have helped drive the regional debate about piracy, pressuring Asian governments to give it greater priority in their security policies. In addition, NGOs play important roles in implementing the types of community-based development programs that offer the only long-term solution to the poverty that fuels piracy and other maritime crime. In the face

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of globalization, increasingly porous borders, and the complexity of many of the new security challenges facing the region, it has become clear that NGOs are a necessary part of the solution to many of the region’s security challenges.

Nevertheless, the sad truth is that NGOs in much of Asia face a particularly imposing set of challenges that limit their efficacy and hamper their capacity to scale up responses. This suggests that the time has come for governments and regional organizations to move beyond the baby steps that have characterized their efforts to engage with NGOs to date, and to focus more on reaping the benefits of the associational revolution.

One of the most constructive steps that Asian governments and regional institutions can take is to create an environment that is more supportive of the nonprofit sector. As a case in point, even though the Chinese government has repeatedly lauded NGOs for their contributions to the healthcare field and disaster relief, nine out of ten Chinese civil society organizations are not able to obtain official nonprofit status and all the benefits that status confers. Even in less restrictive Asian countries such as Japan, NGOs struggle to operate with only limited societal support and overbearing governmental regulation. It is no panacea, but measures to liberalize the nonprofit sector through lower thresholds for nonprofit registration, less governmental regulation, and expanded tax benefits would better equip NGOs to work with regional governments and institutions in responding to Asia’s multifaceted challenges.

In addition, there is much that governments and regional institutions can do to advance concrete coordination with NGOs. Some government agencies, such as Japan’s foreign ministry, deserve praise for creating coordination mechanisms to periodically share information with NGOs, while regional institutions such as ASEAN have codified processes for NGOs to be classified as affiliates. However, in far too many cases, the actual interactions that take place between bureaucrats and NGO representatives tend to be superficial and patronizing in nature, essentially operating as a one-way street in which bureaucrats collect information on NGO activities and give lip service to their concerns, resulting in little true collaboration. More robust coordination mechanisms that go beyond treating NGO representatives as well-intentioned amateurs and encouraging them to operate on a more equal level with officials from governments and regional institutions could better leverage NGOs’ specialized expertise and foster a climate in which governmental and NGO programs complement each other.

Another step that governments and regional institutions could take to empower NGOs to help themselves is to support the establishment of regional and sub-regional NGO networks in specific fields. For example, as NGOs play an ever increasing role in responding to humanitarian crises and disasters it is increasingly important for them to coordinate amongst themselves to limit overlap and inefficiencies, thus avoiding overtaxing local authorities and ensuring the most effective provision of supplies and services. In the United States, InterAction, an NGO coalition, plays a key role in facilitating information-sharing when US-based NGOs respond to disasters overseas, and CONCORD (European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development) helps coordinate European NGOs and EU agencies in the provision of humanitarian assistance. Although neither of these models can be neatly transplanted to Asia, similar efforts to nurture network-building in the region would go far in enabling NGOs to develop the familiarity and trust that is needed for them to work together more effectively.

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Some still see NGOs as a Western phenomenon, but the reality is that they are playing a growing—and increasingly necessary—role in Asian regional security. By starting to take them seriously and investing in expanding their capacity, governments and regional institutions can advance their own aims of improving regional security. Truly embracing the associational revolution may be one of the most important measures that the region’s governments can take to help ensure a stable and secure future for Asia.

James Gannon is Executive Director of the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE/USA). This article draws on a new JCIE book he co-edited with Rizal Sukma: *A Growing Force: Civil Society’s Role in Asian Regional Security*. He can be contacted via email at jgannon@jcie.org.