East-West meeting space

Singapore’s Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong delivered the keynote speech at the November 2005 East-West Dialogue in Barcelona*. After Amman: Uniting to Defeat Terrorism saw Goh address what he considers to be the greatest threat to humankind today.

One of the main feeding grounds for terrorism is racial and religious tension. Following the 1960s racial riots in Singapore, the government of the multi-religious, multi-racial society adopted an ‘overlapping circles’ – a concept related to a ‘melting-pot’ – approach to foster racial and religious harmony, where each community can be seen as a circle with its own values, beliefs and culture. Where the circles overlap is the common space where we intersect freely. We try to expand and maximize this space.

The space which does not overlap is the community’s own space where they are free to speak their own language, practice their own religion and have their own way of life. This way, each community retains its separate identity and yet is bonded to each other through common national values.

Against the backdrop of the recent riots in France, Goh’s words have become more pertinent in the context of East-West dialogue. After all, it was the same Goh Chok Tong who more than ten years ago as prime minister of Singapore developed the idea of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) to improve dialogue between Asia and Europe, at a low ebb since decolonization. He pleaded for cultural rapprochement, for which he delineated three stages.

In the first, networking phase, gaps in knowledge of each other’s cultures need to be filled. Although this is a never-ending process, the past decade has witnessed a deepening in our knowledge of each other’s cultures. We are now passing through the second phase, that of constructive dialogue, where common concerns take center stage in discussions on issues like terrorism, racial tensions, natural disasters, SARS, AIDS and avian flu – phenomena that underline our ever-growing interdependence. Focusing on common concerns help ease xenophobic notions of each other’s cultures, so counter-productive to shaping our common future.

We as Asian scholars can facilitate this process by further strengthening academic cooperation between Europe and Asia in the form of joint research projects and student exchanges. These pave the way for the third or consensus-building phase where shared values develop – which, in the long run, will enlarge our ‘common space’ within the East-West encounter.

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*The second East-West Dialogue was organized by Casa Asia, the Asia Europe Foundation, the Club of Madrid, UNESCO, and the Forum Foundation, and held in Barcelona, 16–17 November 2005.