"On The Impacts and Implications of The Internet on East Asia's Politics and International Relations"

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Abstract:

Internet communication technology (hereon Internet) is an electronic traffic platform. It is a system of delivery based on the speedy transmission of data in various streams: audio, text or visual. The most popular metaphor used to describe the system is that of an 'Information Superhighway'. Taking this metaphor to heart, it is thus a system given to a certain amount of 'pollution' as well; hence the presence of pornography, racially inflammatory web sites and other hate groups that sprinkled through out the cyber-space. Emails, bulletin boards, internet relay chats and web-cast are all tangible manifestations of the Internet's virtual infrastructure. Taken as a whole, they constitute a sophisticated and elaborate system of communication and exchange.

Given the maze-like network of the Internet, how then can one think critically about its prospective implications and impacts on East Asia? More specifically in what manner and form can an Internet-driven knowledge-based economy (KBE), already hyped as the 'New Economy', transform the political dynamic and regional character of East Asia?

This paper is sub-divided into four parts to answer the above two questions. The first addresses the concern exhibited by some government in East Asia for the increasing popularity of the Internet. The second delves into the 'power' and influence of the Internet itself. The third seeks to understand the Internet's pacific value i.e. how it may transform the issue of war and peace in the region. Finally, the last part deals with the limitations of the Internet in the overall transformation. In conclusion, the paper will assess whether the Internet will change the character and conduct of politics in East Asia, and how the region ought to respond.

Introduction:

The Internet has often been seen in revolutionary terms. And, quietly rightly. It possesses not merely the capacity to transmit information quickly but cheaply too. In so doing, the Internet has been able to alter the very parameters in which trade and international relations are conducted. Within the context of East Asia, the region has, in principle, openly embraced the Internet. This is attested by various savvy technological and Internet-friendly master plans already adopted by countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan.

Indeed, there is also an emerging consensus, both within the public sector and without, that the region's economy and long term growth prospect would have to have be enhanced by increased digitization without which it risks falling behind the West. As it is, Singapore and Malaysia have put out "Singapore One" and "Multimedia Super
Corridor” plans respectively. ASEAN, in particular, has adopted an 'E-ASEAN initiative'—a program aimed at creating a digital network for the whole hub.

However, the growing importance of the Internet, both as a tool of commerce and exchange, is also checked by the fear of what the Internet itself may engender politically. Even relatively more developed countries such as Malaysia and Singapore have shown visible signs of being concerned with the dire ramifications of the Internet. This has led to some inconsistent practice: On one hand, while governments continue to make salutary statements about the Internet, on the other, the very same governments also try to curtail it in some form.

Internet Phobia:

In May 1999, the Information Technology Security Unit of Singapore’s Ministry of Home Affairs, for example, quietly wandered into the files of 200,000 private computers in what was later explained as an effort to trace a damaging virus (Sydney Morning Herald: June 2000). The breach was detected by a computer enthusiast, forcing the Singapore government to announce that SingNet, the Internet arm of the largely state-owned telecommunication giant, SingTel, had been "wrong" to use the state security apparatus to conduct the scan without first seeking permission from individual users.

At present, the Singapore government blocks 100 Internet sites but admits that this is only a token gesture, in an highly ineffective effort to control the technology. In a speech, George Yeo, Singapore’s Trade and Industry Minister told a recent conference in Hong Kong: "The Internet will reduce government's ability to restrain you to a set of behavior. We just symbolically block off a few sites to make a point" (Sydney Morning Herald: Ibid). Indeed, just as Singapore is at the forefront of embracing the Internet, it has shown signs of trepidation too.

Equally, while Malaysia has set aside some US$ 20 billion dollars to develop the “Multimedia Super Corridor” (MSN), the ruling government has constantly lamented that certain sites ought to be banned as they constitute a threat to 'national security'. So far, 48 sites have been identified. These sites are supposedly the handiwork of the supporters of the jailed former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim.

As Shamsul A.B. wrote:

"The Mahathir government has been pushing hard in the last five years to promote IT (information technology) to prepare Malaysians for the 'information age'. The people responded well, not in the way Mahathir would have expected because the Internet component of the successful IT campaign indeed became the most powerful tool for the thousands of Anwar supporters and those anti-Mahathir to openly express and share their feelings and opposition. There are numerous websites available on the Internet each detailing different aspects of the Anwar-Mahathir conflict. The demonstrations which began in the streets are now fought in the cybercorridor" (Shamsul 1999: 328-329).
Hence, notwithstanding the modernist outlook of Dr. Mahathir he too has spoken out against the Internet. Thus, just as Malaysia is racing ahead to adopt the Internet, the attitude of the top tier leadership has evidently been shifty.

China, too, has taken a schizophrenic stance to the Internet. While it welcomes the multiplier effect of the technology in helping the Chinese economy gain buoyancy, it despises the Internet's capacity to enlarge the range with which Chinese citizens can receive their news from abroad. At current rate, only 0.1% of China's total population has access to the Internet at all. Yet, this small number is already sufficient to worry the Chinese government. Invariably, while China has been able to block the sites put up by the "Voice of America" and "Radio Free Asia", it has failed to close down the thousands of sites set up by Chinese dissidents in the US and other parts of the world.

On the other extreme, Myanmar has reacted negatively to the Internet by banning it altogether. The government in Vietnam while receptive to any plans that can revive its moribund economy, resorts to using "firewall", a censoring program, to block off various sites.

At present, only Thailand, the Philippines, Korea and Japan are 'comfortable' with the Internet. These are the four countries that have not tried to curtail or censor the Internet directly. Regardless of the prevailing attitude of the states in East Asia, the Internet appears to be growing. According to one study presented at Rand Corporation in December 1999, the Internet took only five years to reach 10% penetration of Japanese homes, as compared to the personal computer that took 13 years for the same figure (Hideo Miyashita 1999). Indeed, judging by current trends, the states in East Asia are fighting a numbers game tilted against them. This is because while the Internet users in East Asia may remain small, they are nevertheless growing. A small sample of statistics on the number of users by 1998 may prove instructive:

Japan : 13,840,000 users (11.1% of total population);  
Taiwan: 364,000 users (12.9% of total population);  
South Korea: 196,000 users (3.9% of total population); and  
Hong Kong: 135,000 users (13.4% of total population).

[Statistics from MIMOS]

Examining The Power of Internet:

Why do states in East Asia continue to remain apprehensive of the Internet? If anything, its unparalleled economic benefits ought to be a boon; especially for a region that is determined to recover fully from the Asian financial crisis. Further, in an Internet surveys distributed by MIMOS (a Malaysian-based computer management agency) Asia-Pacific (excluding US and Canada) only has 26.97 million Internet users, while both Canada and USA together
already has 171.25 million users. The low threshold of users in East Asia implies that, if properly harnessed, the Internet usage in the region can grow exponentially to help the regional economy attain greater benefits. In other words, the fervent adoption of the Internet will help the economy gain a stronger growth trajectory. Be that as it may, most states in East Asia are not necessarily enamoured by the thought of higher growth as they are with retaining the integrity of their regimes. This is because the Internet is capable of transforming how politics is exercised on various fronts.

First, the Internet has lowered the cost and barrier of local cum foreign political participation. Before the advent of the Internet groups could communicate only by telephone, fax or mail. It was also prohibitively expensive to share information or build links between different organizations. Emails, chat groups and bulletin-boards have since changed all that, and more. By allowing disparate citizen groups or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to cheaply confer with one another, the Internet has blurred the distinction between adversaries and friends. Environmentalists and labor groups, for instance, bridged old gulfs to jeer the World Trade Organization Summit in Seattle in December 2000.

As such, the Internet can now forge rag-tag on-line coalitions, and within hours or days, turn them into well-organized street demonstrations. Framed within the context of political activism, the Internet has therefore strengthened the capacity for mass participation and protests. This lesson, once again, is not lost on some states in East Asia. Indeed, there are now more than 26,000 Non Governmental Organizations (up from 6000 in 1990) in the world that can form into various coalitions, their potential for political 'nuisance' are considerable. States in East Asia that have hitherto been accustomed to the principle of non-intervention can only dread the day when they have to confront these 'empowered' NGOs. This phenomenon—amorphous groups of NGOs, linked online, descending on a target—has been dubbed by David Ronfeldt and John Arquilla of RAND Research Center as an 'NGO swarm'.

And, such groups according to the RAND study are awful for the government to deal with. An NGO swarm, not unlike a group of frenzied bees, has no ‘central leadership or command structure; it is multi-headed, impossible to decapitate.’ It can even deliver a lethal sting too. The failure of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) in 1998 constitutes such an example when a group of consumer-rights activists and environmentalists helped to sink it.

Secondly, the Internet has undermined geography in a way similar to how steam-powered ships once destroyed the traditional notion of distance by linking Vancouver to Vladivostok. The Internet has done this both by enlarging the scope of political participation, as well as changing its meaning Local dissent or foreign ideological subversion can thus be launched from any part of the world. A look at the latter is due.

When steam-powered ships made their ways across the Pacific, for example, the first batch of Americans to arrive in 19th century China was the missionaries. The Internet has had a similar effect in this sense. Or, rather, the Internet
has been interpreted as having the effect of spreading 'seditious' materials. Instead of ferrying missionaries, each of whom was impregnated with the hope of 'converting' East Asia, the Internet has made physical travels unnecessary. Rather, through the Internet ideas now matter more than foreign messengers. Thus for national governments built on information control the challenge is immense. The Internet is also perfect for pranks and sabotage, especially the sort that can reduce the stature and authority of a government. In Communist-party controlled Laos, for example, a group of Lao dissidents in the United States had "borrowed" the newspaper's masthead and set up an opposition version of the daily news, posting it on the Web. The Vientiane Times immediately disowned the copycat with outraged announcements in its own pages.

Elsewhere, the websites of various government ministries have not been spared. Undeterred by possible penalties, savvy users have resorted to defacing the official sites as an act of mischief or political insurbodination. This has left government officials feeling all annoyed and embarrassed but often to no avail.

Can The Internet Transform Politics Completely?

Nevertheless, the power of the Internet to change East Asia politically should be tempered with realistic expectations too. Some, for example, have erroneously alluded to the fall of the Suharto regime in May 1998 to the rallying-power of the Internet and other forms of communication technology. It is argued that it was the students who harnessed the Internet's power to engineer his resignation. Yet, this view is too simplistic to be valid.

Indeed, it is often forgotten that had it not for the Asian financial crisis in the first place, clearly a more important cause, President Suharto would not have felt compelled to resign. By the same token, many political pundits have also spoken of the Internet as the ultimate political 'Viagra', that is without inserting the caveat that perhaps East Asia, in general, cannot afford the tool.

To be sure, it is often forgotten that the so called 'Information Age' is still in its infancy. To begin with, seventy-one percent of the world's phone lines are located in countries with only 15 percent of the world's population. Through out most of Asia and Africa, in particular, only about one percent of the population has access to phone lines, compared with 56 percent in the United States. The issue of income gap is salient because the wealth-gap has grown larger by the decade too. In the 1999 Human Development Report, for instance, the full statistics are listed as below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Top 20%</th>
<th>Bottom 20%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>(11)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>(30)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>(60)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
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For a continent (i.e. East Asia) where three-quarter of its population still survives on barely US$1 a day, the above question is not posed in vain: With income gap comes a digital and knowledge gap as well. Thus, the Internet can only register its due impact if one has recourse to a modem, an Internet service provider and a workable computer all at once. Otherwise, all else would be superfluous.

Be that as it may, the Internet is here to stay. It has already transformed the economy of the United States and Europe. Given time, East Asia will have to live up to the power of the Internet, as it has previously done with steam-powered gunboats, electricity and nuclear power too. In any event, in expecting the Internet to change authoritarian entities such as China, Cambodia, Laos or Myanmar, one should understand that the essence of the Internet's power is corrosive, and not coercive.

Despite the Internet's inherent power to change values, thinking and mindset, alas through a deluge of information and alternative news, it is in no position to undermine the authoritarian structure of these countries instantly. The only constant about the Internet's effect on East Asian politics is that it will change the way groups execute their political strategies and advocacy methods. The Internet, without an antecedent cause, will not topple regimes revolutionarily anymore could the Internet change people's relationship to their government overnight.

Ingrained respect to the monarchy, authority and the elected government will continue to remain important to the extent that economic livelihood of all is preserved, equitably. In understanding 'cyberpolitics', one should acknowledge that the political instinct of East Asians for change will always be tempered with economic considerations.

To the extent that the Internet can transform the latter first, that is by transforming old economy into new cybereconomy, hence increasing the living standards of all, there is hardly ground for politics to undergo any radicalization----with or without the Internet. In short, while the Internet can be an important tool in enhancing political mobilization, on its own it cannot do much.

The Pacific Value of the Internet: East Asia Will See Less Use of Military Force

If the Internet cannot change the political dynamic of East Asia instantly, how would it impact on the use of force in the region? To answer this question one has to examine both the Internet in relation to the digital economy. Obviously, the hallmark of a truly modern economy is defined by its digital sophistication. It is further identified by its elaborate and organic links to the rest of the world, thus making it an important part of the larger whole. In 1960s, for instance, airline traffic between Tokyo and Singapore were almost non-existent, according to one special report. As such, travelers have no choice but to stop in Hong Kong en-route to either city. For that decade, fewer
than 10,000 people traveled from Singapore to Tokyo and vice versa. In year 2000, however, the number of annual passenger traffic between Tokyo and Singapore has increased to more than 1 million people.

Within the context of such a complex and highly-interdependent nexus, conflict can only be had at great cost; as marked by financial disruption, loss of trade and possibly consumer boycott due to the advent of nationalism (Rosencrance 1986). And, with cost equal to, or more than the prospective gains, the decision to use force to pursue political objectives would be rationally inoperable (Brooks 1999: 646). To the extent that the above is held as valid, the use of military force, in other words, would be rendered unthinkable. East Asia would thus see a 'security community' where 'force is no longer a necessary option' in the nation's conduct of relations with one another. There are three compelling reasons why the use of force will decline in utility as East Asia accepts the Internet.

(A)
First of all, as East Asia becomes increasingly digitized, its economy will be dependent on highly trained workers. By resorting to deliberate disobedience, a hostile workforce can immediately stonewall a digital economy. Work will go undone, and all forms of electronic services would become scrambled, transforming the digital economy into a 'virtual wasteland', instantly. More over, conventional wisdom now has it that seizing gold, rubber, minerals, lumber, or other natural resources must surely be less costly than enlisting sufficient cooperation from an enslaved population to produce electronic parts, computer programs, or reliable transportation. These devices are so small and elaborate that they are vulnerable to sabotage (Scott 1985).

(B)
Secondly, to sustain the conquest of a digital economy, substantial resources have to be continuously invested in the education sector. This creates an obvious dilemma to the conqueror: By educating the conquered populace, the ruling government is in effect sowing the seed of its ultimate subversion (Stein 1991). This is because by raising the education level of the ruled, the relative power of the ruler would in turn corrode. In fact, the more educated the work force becomes, the higher the likelihood of nation-wide rebellion. Certainly, the history in East Asia is replete with such examples. As economic, technological and managerial skills of the colonialists were gradually imparted to the larger East Asian public, politically astute and aware elite would rise up to lead his or her people. These leaders would then foment one wave of dissent after the other, causing the political awareness of the populace to reach a collective crescendo. The nationalist movements led by the likes of Jose Rizal, Sun Yat Sen and Gandhi, who all received formal education from their respective colonial overlords, for example, attests to the problem availed by rising national sentiments.

(c)
Thirdly, any resort to force invariably entails a certain amount of repression too. Yet, in a digital economy that thrives on creative freedom, such authoritarian tendency would be anathema to the very character and sustenance of a digital economy itself. Unless a
conqueror can transplant an entire work force to replace those of the conquered, chances of reviving the digital economy to its previous dynamism are close to zero.

East Asia's Exposure To Cyberwarfare:

To be sure, the increasing use of the Internet will precipitate three distinct trends in the medium and long run in East Asia. First, future East Asian economy will be based on knowledge-based products and services. Secondly, the labor force will also become increasingly skilled and highly qualified; especially at computer-related jobs. Thirdly, these knowledge workers will enjoy high career mobility, making them less committed to working permanently in one place (especially one's country of birth). These three trends will be substantially advantageous to the West, however, as it is able to attract the best talents due to its lead in this field. Countries on the verge of digitization will face a labor crunch as it will not be attractive enough to absorb the best knowledge-workers yet.

As such, those countries that do not have the qualified personnel are poised to encounter various difficulties in defending themselves against 'cyberwarfare' too. Electronic jamming, the disabling of air-defense systems and the falsification of enemy data will become increasingly conceivable. As Lawrence Freedman, an expert on military technology wrote:

"The countries most at risk from information attacks may not be the advanced Western states, but those increasingly dependent upon information technology yet still behind in indigenous capabilities." (Freedman 1998: pg. 57)

In the United States, for instance, the importance of 'cyberwarfare' has already been brought home by the constant hacker attacks that the Pentagon has had to endure. In 1995, the US Pentagon reported that only 4 percent of hacker attacks are even discovered, and there were 250,000 (detected) attempts on their computers. This has led many futurists to predict that the wars of the future will no longer be fought by troops or tanks alone, but by teams of highly skilled computer experts, and the battlefield will be the virtual world of cyberspace.

Indeed, China is already showing an interest in information operations as compensation for weaknesses elsewhere in its force structure. Be that as it may, while East Asia, as with the rest of the world, will see a qualitative change in how warfare may shift from the physical battle-space to the virtual one, it is not well positioned to take advantage of it as yet. Indeed, with the advent of the Internet, the relative gains of the United States and Europe will increase further, with Japan following closely behind. East Asia still has some ways to go before it can catch up with the West in the military application of the Internet.

Conclusion:
Within the context of international relations in East Asia, the increasing use and reliance on the information technology will not necessarily negate the use of force, however. But it will have a pacifying impact on inter-state relations by virtue of the dense networks spawned by the process of digitization. These networks will make an outright use of brutal force ineffective.

What is, however, a fact is that the Internet will allow people to choose different sources of news. This in turn will make them less susceptible to one version of official news to the exclusion of all else. In that regard, the state's old relationship with the people----as mediated by televisions, official dailies and government-sanctioned radios---is about to become more tenuous than before. The entire communication apparatus of many states in East Asia may even become obsolete as people begin to afford personal computers; or if personal computers can accept web cast from all over the world thus bypassing the state's official channels. In the information-age, states will feel more vulnerable than ever before.

Allowing for structural explanation, digitization will also significantly transform the balance of power in East Asia in two ways. One, by strengthening the US-Japan alliance through the greater sharing of information technology as a form of military consolidation between the two countries. Two by extending similar sophistication to other American allies in the region; namely South Korea and Australia. The cumulative results of such an exercise would be a China that will feel increasingly insecure and encircled in East Asia. The insecurity would be due to China's relative backwardness in the field of information technology viz the United States and its allies.

And, should China interprets the regional environment as either hostile or unresponsive to its interest, it is bound to re-arm. Invariably, this would have the unfortunate effect of creating a costly arms spiral across the region to counter each other.

To be sure, China's fears spawned by digitization ought not to be taken lightly. Historically, Japan and US alliance has already gone beyond what the latest information technology can and has achieved. According to Peter Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara, two distinguished scholars who have studied Japan's security role during and after the Korean War, despite the existence of Article 9 that tries to defang Japan, 'Japan was actually much fully involved on the Korean Peninsula than was being publicly revealed at the time.'

Although no Japanese soldiers fought in Korea, between October and December 1950, 'Japan deployed forty six minesweepers manned by twelve hundred men; two boats were sunk, one was killed and eight were injured.' And, almost one third of the support ships of the Inchon amphibious landing were manned by Japanese crews. Although this involvement occurred under the Occupation (by General MacArthur's supreme allied command), it shows that even at that early stage, Japan was not averse to sending its self-defense forces abroad, given American prodding.
Indeed, even discounting the information technology component that unites Japan and the United States closer together, logistically the current Japan-US security arrangement has come close to being a full alliance. Japan, for one, is already fully integrated into the network of all American forces in the Western Pacific. American bases in Japan also provide 80 percent of oil storage facilities west of Hawaii, while American ammunition depots in Japan accounts for over 50 percent of all land based capacity in Western Pacific.

As it is, when one throws in the specter of a Japanese-American alliance, coupled with South Korea and Australia, one can understand why China is justifiably nervous about being out-maneuvred in the region. Digitization will indeed have the effect of destablizing the current and future balance of power, as some alliances, especially those involving American partnerships will be upgraded, while those that exist outside of American-security parameters will be seriously imperiled.

In a manner of speaking, it is important to keep in mind that the Cold War was resolved through information warfare too. The conflict's cessation was caused by the impact of open communications to closed societies. In the post Cold War order, East Asia has no choice but to embrace the Internet, barring which it could risk being left completely behind. The same advice goes to nation-states sensitive to the shifting balance of power, in particularly, China.
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