

PACIFIC NEIGHBORHOOD CONSORTIUM

FIRST ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING¹

Keynote Address

Dr. Charas Suwanwela
President, Chulalongkorn University
Bangkok, Thailand

It is indeed a great pleasure and privilege for me to be asked to give this keynote address. In my opinion, this is certainly a crucial moment in the development of academic linkage in the Pacific Rim. There has been a lot of talk regarding academic cooperation among institutions of higher learning in the region. A number of bilateral agreements and activities have been established. Even some multilateral ones have been initiated such University Mobility in Asia Programme. However, the Pacific Neighborhood Project represents, to my knowledge, the first time that a multilateral cooperative action has been launched in a substantive and solid way. The initiative is indeed laudable.

My talk today will be arranged around three sets of basic questions on why, what and how. The first question regards why the Pacific Rim should become a neighborhood. There is a subset of questions that will be addressed, namely, the need for such a program, and the special contribution that this program can make. The second set of questions centers around the concept of Pacific Neighborhood Project or Pacific Neighborhood Consortium as I see it. Under this set of questions, we can also explore what we intend to do , what the expected outcome of the Program is, what each member institution can expect to gain, and what the Pacific Rim academic circle as a whole will get. The third set concerns how to develop and manage the initiative. What are the hurdles ahead and what are the issues to be tackled at the outset as well as their priority?

It is unusual, if not revolutionary, to see the Pacific as a single identity. Classically we see the world map with the Atlantic Ocean or Europe at the center, and the Americas and East Asia at the two sides. The Pacific Ocean is divided into two halves at the International Date Line and each half constitutes the end of the globe. In my office, I have a map which is unique in that the Pacific Ocean is in the middle and two halves of the Atlantic are at the right and left

¹ Presented at Pacific Neighborhood Consortium Meeting, Honolulu, Hawaii, January 14, 1993.

extremes. Although we are trying to create a new world view., there are, of course, many factors that have led to the classical way of thinking.

200 million years ago, at our geological beginning, the American continents adjoined the European and African continents. The Pacific was the major ocean. Separation of the American continent from the European and African continents created the Atlantic which was much younger than the Pacific.

Five hundred years ago this year Christopher Columbus, an Italian from Genoa set sail under the Spanish flag, a major sea power then, to across the sea and discover the Americas. He even colonized the American continent ritually. This represented the beginning of the expansion of Europe and its culture to rule the American continents. Culturally, therefore, the American continents are an extension of the European civilization. In fact, the whole world is at present under the influence of European civilization.

Focusing on Asia, we see that several thousand years ago, Asia was the cradle of civilization --- in China, India, Persia and extending a little beyond the present Asia to Egypt. These civilizations either disappeared or became dormant for at least two thousand years, while European civilizations experienced a Renaissance. Scientific methods, discoveries, and inventions ushered Europe into the industrial revolution. The resulting technological, economic and military might led to a period of the colonisation and domination of the whole world by European civilization. Most countries in South and Southeast Asia became colonies of European countries. Even after the Second World War and the independence of the former colonies, these countries and in fact the whole world remain under the spell of European civilization economically and culturally. The way of thinking of the people, especially "educated" and town people, to a large extent follows the pattern originating from the so-called Western countries. Even Japan which has become an industrialized and developed country, can be seen in many ways as a Western country. The world has become a single village with the European and North American continents as well as the Atlantic Ocean in the center. Asia and Africa, perhaps Latin America as well, are at the periphery. To overcome this mentality, which has evolved over a long time, and to gain a new view of the Pacific requires serious focusing.

Over the past few decades, we have seen a drastic change in the world's political economy. During the "cold war" and ideological confrontation, the world was bipolar, or in some aspects, tripolar. It was, however, in a fairly steady or balanced state despite the omnipresent threat of mankind's annihilation. Since the end of the cold war, the balanced state has disappeared, and we are in a transitional or transformational state facing a crisis of directional

uncertainty. Compared to a chemical reaction, the prevailing unbalanced state could simmer down into a balanced one or could explode. This is certainly a cause for anxiety and concern. There are many signs and symptoms of this tension. Ethnic and racial conflicts as well as wars appear at unlikely places. Regionalisation and regionalism are strong trends. The world is indeed trying to find a new order. The picture does not seem to be very bright. Tariff preference and barrier resulting from the formation of trade blocks are enlarging the gaps in the world and worsening the social condition of the global village. Exploitation and selfishness, under the name of self-protection, become an ethical and acceptable way of managing international relations. The principle of co-existence, living in harmony with each other and loving one's neighbor, is overtaken by so-called market economy.

One can try to look at the situation more optimistically, using Pacific or literally peacefulness as the guiding principle. Japan has become the richest country and accumulated a major share of the world's wealth, overtaking even Germany and other European countries. Southeast Asia and East Asia have shown an unusual development surge and become the world's growth pole, at least on the economic front. With a population of more than one thousand million in China and many more in the rest of Asia, the region can emerge as a major consumer market and can exploit its potential for further growth from reserved manpower. Attempts have been made to enhance cooperation among nations in the region. I would not bother you with a long list. Even the abbreviated acronyms are difficult to remember, for example, ECO, SAARC, ASEAN, PECC, APEC, EAEG, EAEC and NANECA. There have been many cries of concern regarding trade blocks, trade wars and inward-looking regionalism. We see also attempts to create another meaning of regionalisation, with more positive global connotation.

Academics are also drawn into the economic war. Science becomes commercialized and technology produces financial returns. Intellectual properties are safeguarded and exploited. Education itself has been seen as commodity for sale and as a source of income. These natural trends are justified so long as they do not lead to selfish exploitation of the weak.

In the Pacific region, there have been a number of attempts to create dialogue and cooperation among academic institutions. The Pacific Rim Public University Presidents Conference has had three meetings in the past 4 years. Mutual understanding and exchanges have led to bilateral agreements and activities. The Pacific Neighborhood Project is one of the few concrete and substantive actions. Thanks to the initiative of Chancellor Chang Lin Tien and Director Hardyck, whose effort is without doubt laudable.

I must confess that at the beginning I was puzzled by the word "neighborhood". The answer

that I got was very intriguing. Neighborhood means that people living in the proximity talk to each other. People may help each other to create a common goal or perform an action for the community or the “neighborhood”. This reminds me of the situation I have observed in Bangkok. After heavy rains, the city is flooded. In some housing areas, each house has barriers around itself and water is pumped out onto the street. Although the homes remain dry, everybody in the locality suffers when they try to leave the house through the flooded street. In contrast, some housing areas have arranged a village committee to help each other. A water barrier is built outside the complex, and each house tries to share the burden of water. Excess water is pumped out from the complex. This, to me, represents the true spirit of neighborhood.

Considering the Pacific, we have a large expanse of sea and great geographical distance. With the development of information and communication technologies, distance can be overcome. The number of kilometers across the Pacific can be made meaningless. A Pacific neighborhood is thus possible at present in the geographic sense.

However, geographical distance is not the only barrier. Diversity in the region with regard to languages, cultures as well as stages of economic and social development is great. Differences among European countries, for instance, the UK, France and Germany appear small, when compared to the Pacific Rim countries. China, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Australia, Canada and the United States, all have deep-rooted traditions from divergent origins. Can we overcome the diversities and thus transform our weakness to become into strength?

Diversity can itself be a strength, with the richness that we have yet to harvest. Western civilization has developed to its fullest extent while we lag behind because of such overwhelming problems as social injustice, exploitation, starvation and poor quality of life for the poor, depletion of natural resources, and deterioration of the environments, as well as conflicts and wars. A new paradigm must be sought. A revival of the Asian way of thinking or an Asian renaissance may hopefully provide us with the needed wisdom. Perhaps a combination of Eastern and Western ways of thinking may lead to new solutions. In the real world, Hawaii appears to be the place where the two divergent cultures come together in harmony. Many cosmopolitan cities on the West coast of the North American continent have become the melting pot of people from West, East and other regions. How to live together in harmony and how to take the better part of each culture is the case at point, and their answers may throw some light on future of the world.

The neighborhood concept when applied to the Pacific can therefore connote a more

far-reaching perception than mere physical neighborhood. Goodwill among men of so divergent backgrounds can teach us something. The whole process can be approached academically. How academics can work together is also a moot matter. In my opinion we are embarking on something really worthwhile, i.e., how to get academic institutions and peoples across the Pacific, in spite of their differences, to cooperate with each other.

The concept of Pacific neighborhood is, therefore, very attractive, with great potentials for ensuring the survival of the relevant nations as well as for the benefit of the world at large.

Now let me come to the second set of questions. What is expected from this program? What would be the possibilities? What activities would have the best chance of success and what are the priorities?

The Pacific Rim Public University Presidents Conference and other groupings of higher educational institutions across the Pacific or Asia Pacific region have come up with one common idea. We in the region need to become acquainted with each other. One of the objectives of the Pacific Neighborhood Project is thus to encourage dialogue and communication among academics in the region. Friendship would dispel fear and mistrust. I believe that friendship among us, academics is, by nature, easier to foster than among traders and businessmen. APEC or Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation can perhaps be spearheaded by academic cooperation.

To go up another level of the ladder for mutual understanding, we can try to learn more about each other. Access to information across the Pacific and to the views and ideas of other academics in the neighborhood would enhance the friendship. Technologically, such access is possible with practically no time lapse. One can imagine a day when an academic at a university can, at his working table, have instant access to information in the library, data bases, and files throughout the Pacific village.

In many developed countries, data bases have been built over the years and can be made available right away. In most countries on the Western coast of the Pacific, however, such information is not available or not accessible. Language is certainly a large barrier. Many data bases are not machine readable and are beyond reach. In order to accomplish the goal of the neighborhood, we must develop suitable data bases. Many institutions in developing countries will need help and strengthening in this regard. Many articles and publications in the region are in local journals and most are in local languages. We have developed a data base of published articles from 42 Thai medical journals and bulletins at the Faculty of Medicine, Chulalongkorn University. Annotated bibliographies in English of each articles in

all journals published in the past ten years have been put on CD-ROM for ready access. Another data base of publications in the field of education is ongoing. Many data in developing countries are in so-called gray publications which appear in many forms such as reports, proceedings and hand-outs. Some are of questionable validity, but many are very useful. To make such data into a machine readable and accessible form would require a lot of time and effort, but it is undoubtedly worthwhile. I have also observed that many research projects have gathered valuable primary data which could be useful to other researchers. They are kept on shelves and wasted. To me, one expected outcome of the Pacific Neighborhood Project is the transfer of technology in the development of data bases of various forms. It is relatively easy regarding hardwares. Softwares and peoplowares certainly require definitive planning, actions and support.

Database development needs both information technologists and content experts. We must, therefore, foster cooperation, collaboration and exchanges among academics in various fields. It may be easy to see the need for exchanges of information on cultural and national differences through area studies. In Thailand, we are encouraging studies covering culture and political economy of other countries in the Pacific region. We have Indochinese, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Australian, American, and Canadian study programs, assisted by and collaborated with institutions in the respective countries. In exchange, we are asked to cooperate in Thai and Southeast Asian studies, programs developed at other universities. The cooperation should, however, not be limited to area studies. Other social science, natural science and technological areas are also attractive and cooperation is needed. We must learn about laws in other countries, when our trade, investment and tourism increase with that country. Success in businesses does not solely depend on products or services. They must be suitable and compatible with local background and culture. We have found that courses on doing business in Thailand and Southeast Asia are attractive to foreign MBA students. Technological application also has local cultural connotation. Collaboration should, therefore, not be limited to certain field. The possibility of collaboration depends a lot on the availability of experts and expertise at the institution, and perhaps even more importantly on the personalities of those responsible as well as their willingness to cooperate. Management of the data bases must also be considered. One must, therefore, assess the possibility and be selective as well as tactful.

Eventually one can hope for collaboration in research, teaching and learning. We would then be able to proudly say that we have a "Pacific Neighborhood".

In summary, the expected outcome of Pacific Neighborhood Project would include the followings:

- 1) Dialogue and communication among academics in the region,
- 2) Access to information and data bases in the region,
- 3) Technology transfer and assistance in the development of data bases, especially at lesser developed institutions to make them available and accessible, as well as their proper management, and
- 4) Collaboration and cooperation in various academic fields of mutual interest, in particular, area studies.

Now we can come to the last set of questions. How to develop and manage the Pacific Neighborhood Project? What are the hurdles ahead and what issues are to be tackled at the outset as well as their priority?

We should all be very grateful to Chancellor Chang Lin Tien of the University of California at Berkeley for taking this initiative, also to Director Curtis Hardyck for being the architect of this daring venture. At least, we can say that it has been started in a good way, and we can expect it to grow and be successful.

As mentioned earlier, we have the great diversity to overcome and many barriers to tackle. Language differences pose a formidable task. We can settle for English as a common international language. But even with this, we have all sorts of English – Thai English, Singaporean English, Chinese English, Australian English, American English and even English English. We must train our ears and mind for this "common language".

If one looks at Chinese characters, one may think that the Chinese system, being pictorial, is a cumbersome system to learn and to use. Many difficulties are encountered when it is adapted to printing and typing. On a closer look, however, one has to imagine that China is a huge country where people speak many different languages. Inventors of Chinese characters as a written language more than 5000 years ago must have been very clever to have developed a system where people who spoke different languages could read written Chinese with different sounds but the same meaning. It is even more intriguing for abstract meanings. How clever it was to combine the sign of the sun and the moon to mean brightness. Just so can Chinese people with different spoken languages communicate and become one. The closest system we have to-day is the international road sign system.

As we with great difficulty try to adopt English as a global language, we may need to find some wisdom from the ancient Chinese. In this age of computer interpretation, would it be possible to develop a system to cope with this language problem, or at least to make it easier?

For example, can a program be developed so that a catalog in different languages can be crossed by machine, and data be accessible without the necessity of having it in the English language? The session on multi-lingual system should be interesting.

Beyond language, standardization of the data bases is needed to a level that they can be accessible through the network. Compatibility of the hardwares may be the easiest to tackle, but they are costly. How can we adapt the existing equipment and systems so that they are usable for this purpose? Equipment and systems for Pacific Neighborhood Project can not be planned in isolation. They must be considered within the frame of the larger computer system in the institutions, because we are not starting from zero status.

Software and information systems are more difficult. I hope that we shall have some suitable solutions from this Conference. The session and discussion on standards will be very timely and important.

Policy and strategy planning is, in my opinion, very important for the development of this initiative at this stage. We may need a variety of strategies to cope with the different stages of development and diverse needs. The plan must be acceptable to all of our members and of mutual benefit.

Cost of the project is an important issue for consideration. How do we share cost in a neighborhood that consists of people who have different degrees of wealth? It is more complicated when the various types of costs are considered, namely, development costs, operating costs and costs for coordination.

Credit sharing can be as important as cost sharing in the academic world. Ethical and acceptable practice cannot be taken for granted. In different countries, one may see a different set of value in this regard, and this can be a source of conflict. In Eastern countries, academic culture is imported from the West, and may not have developed to the level that can guide actions. This is particularly true at universities which have concentrated on teaching, not on research. One must, therefore, be prepared, and be sensitive to this difference.

Since at this very beginning, we must concentrate on development of the system, on know-how and human resources for the networking as well as in the creation of data bases; the transfer of technology constitutes an essential element of the Project. The responsibilities of participating institutions must match with a centrally planned program of works. The Pacific Neighborhood Consortium Steering Committee must take this into consideration.

In the management of this network which is a new venture, idiosyncrasy and taboo may be encountered. For the people involved to broaden their perception and extend their vision beyond their own institution and country borders is a giant step. The issue of intellectual property, information security, and national security may be raised. Strategies to create the will to cooperate and the sense of reassurance must be formulated. The network system should provide rooms for such resistance and regulatory constraints.

I may conclude here that the Pacific Neighborhood Project is conceptually sound and timely, if not overdue. It can be expected to lead to the benefit of each participating institution, to the solidarity of the Pacific academic community as a whole, and perhaps to the harmonization of the global village. The Project is, to a large extent, developmental in nature, from the development of networking system, to the creation and development of accessible data bases, as well as to the real academic collaboration in the region. Even though the Project has been created and a management structure initiated in the form of Pacific Neighborhood Consortium, there is a long way to go yet. We must overcome many hurdles and learn how to harvest strength from our diversity. The outcome of our success would be far reaching. It, therefore, remains for those of us who gathered here, to determine whether we have the wisdom and courage to meet the challenges posed. I would end here with best wishes to all of you.