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Asian Economic Development and Global Environmental Sustainability

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During the last twenty years or so, growth economies of Asia collectively became the largest importer of resources (particularly of energy resources) in the world, as not only resource-poor countries like Japan but counties like Indonesia and China, which used to be resource exporters, turned to net importers. Meanwhile, East Asia historically pursued a path of economic development, different from that of capital- and resource-intensive industrialization developed in the West, by fostering relatively labour-intensive and resource-saving technology. The energy intensity (energy consumption per GDP) has been kept low in many Asian countries, and Japan's energy-saving technology still leads the world in a number of respects. Thus, growth economies of Asia (now including most of South and Southeast Asia) are major players in the global market of resources, influencing both demand and supply.

Needless to say, monsoon Asia creates the world's largest circulation of water and heat energy around the Himalayas (and the Tibetan Plateau), and about a half of world population live in this environment. It has formed a uniquely coherent civilization and economy, such as densely populated society based on rice farming, transcending the geospheric and biospheric boundaries between the tropics and temperate zones. Today, this region is going through comprehensive industrialization and urbanization, and the resource and energy use there is beginning to affect the health of the entire world economy.

In what ways has Asian economic development been affecting global environmental sustainability? If Asia has long fostered a path of economic development under the unique environmental outfit of monsoon Asia, how would it influence the region's ability to address global environmental issues? This presentation offers a review of recent history literature on these questions, with comments on its utility for the understanding of the future of global sustainability.

I am currently serving for the Future Earth Committee at the Science Council of Japan, to promote humanities and social science research for this global initiative. I hope to have an opportunity to exchange ideas with members of this Union, and to explore possibilities of interdisciplinary research, specifically designed for the activities of Future Earth.

Keywords: Asia, economic development, global environmental sustainability, path dependency