

February 21, 2007

State of East Asian Community Concept and ASEAN Integration

By ITO Kenichi

[Concept of an East Asian Community]

The concept of an East Asian Community has now emerged as a shared future goal in East Asia. It is a common topic of discussions in various occasions where government officials, businessmen, academia, and think-tanks meet. The concept has been floated since the first ASEAN + 3 Summit meeting was convened in 1997 in Kuala Lumpur. But what had a meaning then was the fact itself that they could finally meet because a gathering of the same members proposed by Prime Minister Mahatir of Malaysia in 1990 in the name of the East Asia Economic Caucus(EAEC) could not have been materialized. To hear an explicit voice for an East Asian Community we had to wait until 1999 when the third ASEAN + 3 Summit meeting held in Manila adopted the Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation, which stressed the importance to promote regional cooperation in wide-ranging issues at various levels.

[Network of East Asian Think-Tanks(NEAT)]

This voice was heard in a stronger and clearer tone when in 2001 a report was submitted to the ASEAN + 3 leaders by the East Asia Vision Group(EAVG), which envisioned an East Asian Community and suggested ideas toward Community building. The voice was heard in an even more concrete and practical terms when in 2002 the East Asia Study Group(EASG) submitted to the ASEAN + 3 Summit meeting a final report which recommended the 17 short-term measures and the 9 middle- and long-term measures to achieve a future goal of Community building. The concept of an East Asian Community has since been refined and enriched through discussions in various ASEAN + 3 meetings, including the Network of East Asian Think-Tanks(NEAT) and other international forums, securing a wider participation of academia, think-tanks, government officials, and businessmen.

[East Asia Summit]

It was in 2006 in Kuala Lumpur that along with the eighth ASEAN + 3 Summit meeting, which declared to "continue to be the main vehicle in achieving the goal" of realizing an East Asian Community, the first East Asia Summit, where Australia, India and New Zealand were also invited in addition to the ASEAN + 3 countries, met and declared that it "could play a significant role in community building in the region." It is not completely clear which Summit

will lead the move toward building of a community in the region. However, one thing is clear here. While the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the eighth ASEAN + 3 Summit says, its “process will continue to be the main vehicle in achieving that goal, with ASEAN as the driving force,” the same Declaration on the first East Asia Summit also says, “we strive to strengthen global norms and universally recognized values with ASEAN as the driving force.”

[With ASEAN as the Driving Force]

I would like to call your attention to the fact that the Declarations of both the ASEAN + 3 and the East Asia Summits concurred in authorizing ASEAN as the driving force of community building in the region. It must be admitted that ASEAN has always played a leading role in regional cooperation in East Asia. This is not only a very unique but also a very important element of regionalism in East Asia as compared with those in Western Europe and North America. ASEAN has hosted a number of key forums of regional cooperation, including ASEAN + 1s, ASEAN + 3, PMC, and ARF, etc. Those forums have nurtured the basis of community building in East Asia. In sharp contrast with EU, where the driving force was a Franco-German axis, the driving force was ASEAN in East Asia.

[ASEAN Integration]

It is also noteworthy that ASEAN has at the same time taken major initiatives in promoting integration among themselves, such as the initiative to create the “ASEAN Free Trade Area” by 2010, and the proposal to establish the “ASEAN Security Community,” the “ASEAN Economic Community” and the “ASEAN Socio-cultural Community” under the “Declaration of ASEAN Concord ” issued in Bali in 2003. These initiatives taken by ASEAN can play the role of not only a catalyst but a model for the community building in the region as a whole. I pay a special attention to this fact because this fact gives us a hope that a community building may well be possible in East Asia in spite of another fact that this region is so diverse in culture, religion, political system, economic level, etc. in sharp contrast with EU where they share many things in common among themselves.

[ASEAN, an Epitome of East Asia]

If we are obsessed with the idea that EU is the only model of regional integration and that we are so handicapped that it is unrealistic to think of building a community in East Asia, we will make a mistake. An Asian way of building a community must be not so much a process of learning how to imitate what has happened in Europe as a process of creating what has not happened anywhere before. The final form and substance of a community may and should differ between EU and an East Asian Community. As a matter of fact, Europe and East Asia are following a different path to a regional integration; the former through a government-driven institutional approach and the latter through a market-oriented functional approach. This difference in approach is very natural and nothing deplorable. In my opinion, not Europe but ASEAN is a model of a regional integration in East Asia. ASEAN itself is an epitome of East Asia, full of diversity among its member nations, yet it has so successfully achieved a high level

of integration already.

[ASEAN Way and Peer Pressure]

However, of course, ASEAN is not perfect yet as a model of a regional integration. There are many things which we wish to see improved. One of the most important points in question, I am sure many of you will concur, is the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs of each other. I admit that this has been one of the most sacred principles of international community since the community was formulated in 1648 in Westphalia. I also admit that this principle is at the core of what is called an “ASEAN Way.” It is also true that Northeast Asian countries are even more rigorous in pursuing this principle. Even in EU they stick to this principle when an issue in question touches their sensitivity. Therefore, of course, I am not asking ASEAN to abandon this principle of non-intervention. However, I wonder if ASEAN could further develop and strengthen their practice of peer pressure as a model of East Asian integration.

[Catalyst and Model for Community Building]

On the occasion of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting in Kuala Lumpur in July this year, a series of Foreign Ministers meetings were held as well for East Asia Summit, ASEAN Plus Three, PMC and ARF. This indicates how intricately ASEAN facilitates the process of a community building in East Asia. Without it, the process could not have moved a step forward. During those Foreign Ministers meetings, not only such current issues as the North Korean missile issue, the Lebanese crisis and the Myanmar’s democratization, but the issue of a second Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation on the tenth anniversary of the ASEAN Plus Three process in 2007 was also discussed. Japan welcomes and highly appreciates those efforts and achievements of ASEAN in the process of a community building both among ASEAN nations and in East Asia as a whole. These initiatives taken by ASEAN indicate that ASEAN plays the role of both a catalyst and a model for the community building in the region as a whole.