

EAST ASIAN COOPERATION AND INTEGRATION: IMPLICATIONS OF THE FIRST EAST ASIA SUMMIT

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The Republic of Korea played a critical role in the realisation of the East Asian idea. Although former Malaysian PM Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed first proposed the idea, it was President Kim Dae-jung who was the East Asian leader who pushed for the idea to be realised when the financial crisis hit East Asia in 1997-1998. Chairman of EAVG also an eminent South Korean, Prof. Han Sung Joo, from whom we heard this morning. South Korea therefore has a special responsibility for safeguarding and ensuring the success of the East Asian process.

East Asian cooperation has come a long way since it was initiated eight years ago. During these eight years a blueprint for East Asian regional cooperation was successfully drawn up by the leaders based on the Reports of the EAVG and EASG. We just heard this morning from Prof. Han Sung Joo, the Chairman of the EAVG. The blueprint called for the development of an East Asian community of cooperative “peace, prosperity and progress”. It was to be fostered through the implementation of 26 concrete short-term, medium-term and long-term measures.

The ASEAN+3 countries are now in the process of implementing these measures through an intense and sustained programme of activities. Both Track One and Track Two processes are involved, and Track Three processes are just emerging as well. As far as Track One processes are involved, no less than 33 mechanisms are presently operational, and at least 48 meetings involving the ASEAN+3 countries have been held.

One of the long-term measures proposed for East Asian community building by the EAVG and EASG was the evolution of the ASEAN+3 Summit into an East

Asian Summit (EAS). The evolution was to be a “step-by-step process”, during which comfort levels among the ASEAN+3 will be strengthened. It was clear from the EAVG and EASG Reports that the EAS was to be confined to the ASEAN+3 countries of geographical East Asia, and not beyond.

The First East Asian Summit will now be held on 14 December 2005 in Malaysia. The original idea of Malaysia as the host was that the EAS should be gradually eased in as the ASEAN+3 Summit is phased out. Initially it would be held together with the ASEAN+3 Summit in Malaysia, but after that the EAS would be held once in 2 or 3 years until, when all are comfortable and agree, only the EAS, consisting of the same ASEAN+3 countries as envisaged by the EAVG and EASG, will exist.

But in the course of discussions and negotiations between countries with sometimes conflicting interests and now, different agendas, the EAS that will be held in Kuala Lumpur next month departs from the original intent of Malaysia and the EAVG and EASG Reports that were agreed upon by all ASEAN+3 countries. It deviates in two important respects:

1. It is to exist and function concurrently with the ASEAN+ 3 Summit, instead of being an evolutionary replacement.
2. It includes participants who are not the ASEAN+3 countries as originally envisaged, but other countries as well, countries that are not geographically part of East Asia.

It is therefore a completely different mechanism from the one originally envisaged by the East Asian Vision Group and East Asian Study Group. The simultaneous functioning of the two processes (the ASEAN+3 Summit process and the East Asian Summit process) has also forced the governments concerned to differentiate between the terms of reference of the two processes, and to distinguish the EAS from other regional processes such as the Asia Pacific Economic Council (APEC) as well.

The critical issue being debated now: (a) should EAS be a forum for dialogue on strategic issues between ASEAN+3 countries and the others, with no community building functions, or (b) should it be also vested with an East Asia community building role, thereby reducing the primacy of the ASEAN+3?

What will be the implications of all this to East Asian cooperation and integration? It is too early to tell, because both the ASEAN+3 and East Asian Summit processes are mechanisms that are being debated as said, and are still evolving. In the case of the EAS especially, participation is likely to increase in the near future, and the terms of reference are still being discussed.

One of two broad outcomes is anticipated depending upon how the East Asian Summit process evolves. One will be favourable to East Asian cooperation and integration. The other will effectively bury it.

An outcome favourable to East Asian cooperation and integration will obtain if the following situation prevails:

1. The integrity of the ASEAN+3 process as the primary vehicle for East Asian community building is preserved.
2. Additional participants to this process, making it ASEAN+ 4 and so on, are limited to geographical East Asia and the process extends no further than India in the west.
3. The East Asian Summit functions primarily as an important forum for dialogue between East Asian countries and other countries that relate closely to East Asia, and the focus is on broad strategic issues of mutual interest. This will facilitate and enrich East Asian cooperation and community building. At the same time it makes East Asian regionalism “open” as advocated by all of us.
4. The United States becomes a participant in the East Asian Summit. This would be desirable and good, because the US is the most powerful country in the world.

An outcome unfavourable to East Asian cooperation and integration however, will emerge if the following situation develops:

1. East Asian community building is not confined to processes and mechanisms that engage only East Asian countries, but is instead made the function of processes like the East Asian Summit which includes non-East Asian states. The community is then no longer “East Asian”. Any community-building, to be successful, must meet at least 2 requirements: (a). It must have something common to bind the community – geography, economics, culture or religion, etc. (b). It must be clearly differentiated from other communities, and not fudge with them.
2. Deliberate attempts are made to undermine the ASEAN+3 process and make it secondary to the East Asian Summit process, such as by according the latter greater recognition and substance and making it responsible for community building in East Asia.

In the final analysis, an East Asian community of cooperative “peace, prosperity and progress” will only emerge if the members of the community work *with* each other for mutual benefit instead of working against each other, and seeking to undermine each other.

A note on the US. There is a lot of talk that the US should be engaged. I agree fully. It is absolutely important to engage the US, because it is the world’s most powerful country and has important links in the region. But engagement can be in different ways. It cannot be engagement in a process for community building in East Asia, because it is not part of that community. What is important is not that the US be part of the community building of East Asia, but that the East Asian community have the fullest and most productive of relations with the US, as well as other countries important to East Asia, such as Australia, etc. This can be done if the US agrees to be a participant in the EAS. Indeed, we should all get together and persuade the US to do so.

Let me conclude on this note: it is especially incumbent upon the Republic of Korea, as an important parent of the historic East Asian regionalism process, to safeguard the primacy and integrity of the ASEAN+3 process. The failure of this historic initiative would mean a failure of South Korean foreign policy and diplomacy.

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