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The ASEAN+3 and East Asia Summit: A Two-Tiered Approach to Community Building

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On December 14, 2005, two days after the annual ASEAN+3 Summit, the ten ASEAN countries, Australia, China, India, Japan, Korea, and New Zealand convened for the historic first East Asia Summit. This issue of *East Asia Insights* traces the background of the two summits and analyzes the future path for East Asia community building.

The Path to an East Asia Summit

The idea for an East Asia Summit has grown out of ASEAN+3 cooperation. The ASEAN+3 Summit was launched in 1997 as an informal meeting among leaders in ASEAN, China, Japan, and Korea, and it has since become an annual meeting held in tandem with the ASEAN Summit. Various regional cooperative initiatives have emerged from the ASEAN+3 framework, and its members have produced several documents that are key to regional community building. The most important of these is the 2001 report of the East Asian Vision Group, titled “Towards an East Asian Community: Region of Peace, Prosperity and Progress,” which recommended the establishment of an East Asia Summit.

After this report was released, some ASEAN leaders suggested that community building could advance best through the ASEAN+3 framework, and thus the ASEAN+3 Summit could simply be converted into an East Asia Summit. Under this proposal, the thirteen ASEAN+3 members would chair the summit on a rotating basis. Other ASEAN leaders, however, contended that an expanded forum would dilute the voices of ASEAN nations, which are much weaker entities than their Northeast Asian partners. ASEAN members subsequently decided to continue the ASEAN+3 Summit and to hold a separate East Asia Summit.

Japan’s Stance on the East Asia Summit

In its discussions with ASEAN, Japan stressed the importance of developing a clear concept of an East Asia

Summit and proposed a two-tiered approach that draws on the strengths of both ASEAN+3 and important regional partners. As ASEAN+3 is a critical element of East Asia community building, Japanese officials believe that its integrity must not be compromised solely for the sake of a wider membership. Instead, they argued that ASEAN+3 should be at the core of East Asia community building, with an expanded regional forum like the East Asia Summit—featuring participation by countries like Australia, New Zealand, and India—forming an inclusive and complementary element of regional integration.

It is clear that East Asian countries today do not possess the conditions necessary for creating a regional community similar to the European Union. The key question facing East Asia, therefore, is not how to define the community’s membership but how to create a fitting venue that promotes functional cooperation in the region. Ideally, this venue would advance political and economic maturity in East Asian countries, while focusing on strengthening regional integrity as a part of the community-building process.

The Japanese government considers it logical to foster closer links not just among ASEAN+3 nations but also with other countries in the region that can play a positive role in promoting functional cooperation. In addition, Japan’s belief in universal values such as human rights and representative democracy means that it has a strong interest in building closer links with other countries in the region that share those same beliefs.

Nature of Community Building

Taking Japan’s input into account, ASEAN established three criteria for participation in the East Asia Summit. First, participant countries must sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). Second, they must be a formal dialogue partner of ASEAN. Third, they must

have substantive cooperative relations with ASEAN. Australia, India, and New Zealand, having fulfilled these criteria, joined the summit as full participants.

There is always the danger that building an exclusive community that shuts out important partners could create a “fortress Asia.” Japan and other countries like Indonesia and Singapore believe that a more open regionalism that promotes functional cooperation is in East Asia’s best interest. Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi articulated the need for an open and transparent approach to regional cooperation during a speech in Singapore in January 2002. Meanwhile, conscious of ASEAN nations’ colonial history and their justified concern about regional hegemony, Japanese officials have advocated that ASEAN countries should have ownership of the East Asia Summit and serve as its host.

These key elements were echoed in the declarations issued after the two summits. The ASEAN+3 Summit Declaration states that “the ASEAN Plus Three process will continue to be the main vehicle in [realizing an East Asian community] with ASEAN as the driving force and with the active participation of the ASEAN Plus Three countries in order to promote a sense of shared ownership.” The Kuala Lumpur Declaration from the East Asia Summit affirms that this new forum “... could play a significant role in [regional] community building ...” It also states that “... the East Asia Summit will be an open, inclusive, transparent and outward-looking forum in which we strive to strengthen global norms and universally recognized values with ASEAN as the driving force working in partnership with the other participants of the East Asia Summit.”

The Way Forward

Although there was no clear language in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration indicating as much, the East Asia Summit will be held annually, with the second meeting scheduled to take place in 2006 in the Philippines. As East Asia looks ahead, it needs to think collectively about the kind of functional cooperation that can help build a stronger and more inclusive regional community. Within this context, ASEAN+3 nations declared in December that they should prepare another joint statement on East Asian cooperation in 2007, the tenth anniversary of the ASEAN+3 process. Hopefully this declaration will serve as a roadmap for regional community building.

At this juncture, only limited functional cooperation exists in the region. The 2007 joint declaration thus will need to outline precise methods for strengthening cooperation. For example, the declaration could expand existing and anticipated bilateral free trade agreements into a multilateral context. It may be an opportunity to lay out methods for further economic cooperation on intraregional investment, financial and economic cooperation, energy and the environment, and cross-border movement of labor. The declaration might address the enormous economic disparities and varying governance standards between the various countries of East Asia. It could initiate regional security cooperation through joint projects that address piracy, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation. Moreover, it might address human security threats such as communicable diseases and natural disasters.

The two-tiered approach to community building—with the ASEAN+3 Summit at the core and the East Asia Summit playing a supportive role—appears to have been accepted in principle by the participants in the two summit meetings. Yet, emerging issues concerning the East Asia Summit’s membership may complicate future community-building efforts.

For example, the Russian Federation, which attended the opening of the December summit, has been seeking admission to the forum as a full participant. Currently, Russia meets two of the three criteria for participation: it has signed the TAC, and it is a formal dialogue partner of ASEAN. The admission of Russia as a full member, however, could shift the summit’s focus away from that of a regional forum to an international one. Russia’s admission may suggest that other partners that have a much more substantive relationship with East Asia, such as the United States, should be invited as full participants as well. This issue needs careful examination by all the nations concerned, as it has the potential to change not only the nature of the summit but also the future orientation of the East Asia community-building process.

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