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**“Realizing The East Asian Community”**

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**I. East Asia Community Formation: A View from Malaysia**

Malaysia has been at the forefront in initiating and promoting the idea of East Asia Community. It dates back from December 1990, when former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad first mooted the formation of an East Asia Economic Group (EAEG). In May 1993, in a speech entitled “*Building East Asian community: The Way Forward*,” to the Asia Society Conference on “*Asia and the Changing World Order*” held in Tokyo, the Malaysian leader said:

“I believe that it is now time for all of us to launch a process – on top of and over all the other important processes which are already in place – a process whose final destination is a zone of cooperative peace and prosperity stretching from Jakarta to Tokyo.”

Since then, despite some skepticism and objections (some indeed vehement), Malaysia continued to promote the concept through official and un-official channels. Malaysia welcomed the inaugural meeting of the Asia-Europe Forum (ASEM) in 1996 as a concrete step towards East Asian regional cooperation because Asia’s members comprised ASEAN7 + Northeast Asia 3, countries which were initial candidates for membership in the East Asian Community.

The financial crisis that hit several of the regional economies (1997-98) convinced Kuala Lumpur of the imperative of setting up mechanisms by the regional states to assist in the recovery of the affected economies and to prevent the recurrence of such a catastrophe. The informal meeting for the first time of the ASEAN+3 heads of state and government signaled the start of East Asia's regional cooperation. At the ASEAN+3 Meeting in Manila in 1999, an unprecedented Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation was issued.

As in the case of community building in other regions of the world (eg, the EU), Dr Mahathir's proposal for an East Asian Community of Cooperative Peace and Prosperity called for the enterprise to be built by East Asian countries alone. The principle of "self-determination" must guide community building so that it is truly a product of East Asia's own regional specifications, circumstances, aspirations and needs.

## **II. Common Factors for Building East Asian Community**

### ***Geographical proximity***

Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia are close neighbors in the geographical region of East Asia, which also includes North Korea, Mongolia, and the territories of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. Most of the ASEAN countries have more than one borderline neighbor. Malaysia has the most common borders (6) with other ASEAN members.

### ***Historical experiences***

Most of the East Asian countries have the common historical experience of having been either fully or partially-colonized by imperialist powers. Most have attained their hard-earned independence after World War II, and still are developing countries fully engaged in the important endeavor of nation building.

### ***Common cultural values and practices***

Many East Asians still adhere to common cultural norms and practices **generally** known as "Asian values." Community interests still outweigh individual needs. East Asians greatly appreciate saving and thriftiness and have high regard for close family relationships, respect for the elderly and personal honor. They see great virtue in politeness and consideration for others' need for saving "face." They seek consensus and harmony, are in favor of avoiding open disagreement or conflict and are conformist by

nature. They are pragmatic in seeking compromise as well. They have patience (tendency to have a longer view) and are not for instant gratification. They respect authority and long for stability, and believe that government and business can be partners and not adversaries for promoting national interests.

### ***Securing a peaceful future***

Clearly aware of the potential for future conflict in the region because of unresolved issues (such as the Korean Peninsula problem, the cross strait relations between mainland China and Taiwan, the strained relations between the two major neighboring powers, China and Japan, and territorial disputes in the South China Sea), the East Asian countries earnestly wish to avoid conflict by promoting peace collectively so as to ensure a peaceful and prosperous future.

### ***ASEAN community building shows the way***

Expanding the concept of ASEAN Community (to be achieved by 2020) to East Asia (to be achieved beyond 2020) would be a reasonable and logical approach. The ASEAN Community to be built on three major pillars of ASEAN Security Community (ASC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Social and Cultural Community (ASCC) could be extended to the East Asia region. Hence, the East Asia Economic Community, East Asia Security Community and East Asia Socio-Cultural Community.

### ***Need for regional empowerment***

East Asia is region of world most greatly dependent on world trade. Yet its voice in global economic system can hardly be heard. There is great need to empower the region in order to promote its interests and to work towards a fairer global economic system. East Asia can be a model for North/South cooperation where developing countries can have a productive relationship with the developed nations.

### ***Common and cooperative enterprise***

Concerted efforts for promoting peace and prosperity in East Asia are necessary because peace and prosperity are inter-twined and indivisible. Instability in one country or subregion can affect other countries and subregions. The recent trans-boundary health problems such as the haze, SARS, Avian Flu and natural catastrophes, i.e. last December's Earthquake and Tsunami have demonstrated clearly that crisis in some regional

members can affect others in the region as well. Added to these is the growing need to counter international terrorism.

### ***Community of peace***

The prerequisite of regional peace is vital for national, subregional and wider regional political, economic and social development. East Asia should take advantage of the current peaceful environment to enhance peace rather than try to do so when region is not peaceful. For Malaysia, as example, a peaceful external environment is crucial for achieving its Vision 2020 goal of becoming an industrialized and fully developed nation.

### ***Community of prosperity***

While East Asian countries have achieved much in the last two decades, the fact remains that poverty is still a major problem for such countries as China, Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand. East Asia owes its citizens to fulfill its potential for attaining prosperity so that their livelihoods can be significantly improved.

### ***Founding principles***

The aspired East Asian Community must be based on principles of mutual respect, mutual benefit, egalitarianism, consensus and democracy, non-hegemonic, preference for multilateralism over unilateralism, and harmony with the global system.

### ***Participation by all levels of society***

Apart from government initiatives, the private sector (business bodies) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can and must contribute to the community building process. It the welfare of the people must be the focus of East Asian Community building and they must be the ultimate beneficiaries.

## **III. Road Map for Building An Integrated East Asian Community**

In his keynote address to the *Second East Asia Forum* in Kuala Lumpur last December, Malaysian Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Abdullah Badawi outlined seven "markers" or "milestones" for the road map for establishing an East Asian Community:

### ***Charter of East Asia Community***

The Charter to be adopted by the ASEAN+3 should set out the promises, principles and objectives to guide the process of community building and the vision of East Asia as a community of peace, friendship, prosperity, development and progress that the region must strive to build over the coming generations.

### ***East Asia free trade area***

East Asian countries must strategize to make the leap forward towards an East Asia Free Trade Area. ASEAN has already formalized the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and has entered into free trade agreement with China. Soon, ASEAN will begin negotiations with the Republic of Korea for an FTA. ASEAN's arrangement with Japan is the Framework for Comprehensive Economic Partnership with the ultimate goal of achieving a FTA.

### ***Agreement of East Asia monetary and financial cooperation***

East Asia has registered notable achievements in monetary and financial cooperation since the regional financial crisis of 1997-98. Since the Chiang Mai Initiative in May 2000, the region has adopted concrete measures for closer economic and financial integration including the expansion of the bilateral swap arrangements and the Asian Bond Market Initiative. There is also the initiative for deepening dialogue on exchange rate coordination. The cooperative process will surely gain strength and momentum in the days ahead.

### ***East Asia zone of amity and cooperation***

Such a zone would guarantee respect for the rule of law, sovereignty, territorial integrity, good neighborliness and equality among nations. It should furthermore renounce the use or threat of force, enhance transparency in security matters, promote confidence building among nations including the avoidance of arms race and, ideally, exclude weapons of mass destruction from the zone.

With Korea acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in the Vientiane Summit in 2004, all members of the ASEAN + 3 have embraced it. This is a clear manifestation of "Pax Aseana," a quiet peace that is growing gradually and incrementally in the region beyond Southeast Asia towards Northeast Asia and beyond (ASEAN's relations with South Pacific/Oceania

countries such as New Zealand and Australia, and further afield to India). TAC is now the de facto East Asian charter for peace and good neighborliness. With TAC as foundation, East Asian countries should strive to achieve a Zone of Amity and Cooperation, especially crafted for the region.

#### ***East Asia transportation and communications network***

As a key feature for the East Asian Community is “connectivity,” there is clearly a need for a region-wide transportation and communications network. The network should include facilities not only for the physical movement of people and merchandise but also electronic connections between peoples and countries. The outlines of this milestone is already visible with various projects such as the proposed Trans-Asian Railway from Singapore to Kunming.

#### ***East Asia declaration of human rights and obligations***

As the interests of the community takes precedence over the interests of the individual, the East Asian Community will undoubtedly have to deliberate and establish its own standards and issue an East Asian declaration on human rights and obligations. At the same time, East Asia should accept international standards of human rights. As safeguarding the dignity of the human person is of highest priority, it is crucial to eradicate poverty throughout East Asia. This calls for the availability of adequate food, clothing and shelter as the basic requirements for a decent life. The total eradication of absolute poverty and the institution of good governance should therefore be the sacred mission of every government in East Asia. These key responsibilities will positively contribute to ensuring stability in the country and avoiding one of the root causes of radical dissent.

In the future, Malaysia would like to see the establishment of a permanent secretariat for the ASEAN+3 in order to coordinate and enhance the process of community building in East Asia. Meanwhile, there is a clear need to strengthen the ASEAN+3 Unit in the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta so that it can be play a more effective role in regional community building.

#### ***East Asia Summit (EAS)***

While the ASEAN+3 Summit and all other mechanisms should continue to play major roles in East Asia Community building, the EAS -- to be convened in Kuala Lumpur for the first time -- will be a forum for discussing broad strategic issues of interests of East Asia (eg, environment,

energy, trans-border health problems, and financial cooperation). It is the vehicle through which ASEAN+3 dialogues with the East Asian partners (countries outside the region such as Australia, New Zealand, India and the US), which have substantial interests in the region.

#### **IV. Role of ASEAN, China and Korea**

##### ***ASEAN***

As the only organization with an established institutional framework, ASEAN should do its utmost to facilitate arrangements, disseminate information and provide services normally provided by a secretariat to ensure smooth and effective community building among the East Asian countries. Because of problematic relations between the Northeast Asian countries, ASEAN will have to remain in the drivers seat for community building in East Asia for some time to come. The “ASEAN Way” of seeking consensus and peaceful approach to resolving disputes can contribute positively to regional community building.

##### ***Korea***

The Republic of Korea’s 1999 initiative calling for the setting up an unofficial East Asian Vision Group (EAVG) comprising experts from the ASEAN+3 countries to examine ways and means to promote regional cooperation has been exemplary. The resulting report, *Towards An East Asian Community: Region of Peace, Prosperity and Progress (2001)*, has been a noteworthy regional cooperative effort in proposing concrete modalities for the building of a regional community.

More advanced members of East Asia such as South Korea can assist in the human development and human resources programs, particularly those that aim at eradicating poverty, developing SMEs, enhancing education and skills, increasing ICT knowledge, both in terms of monetary contributions and know-how.

##### ***China***

China could play a bigger role in ASEAN with the conclusion of the ASEAN-China FTA by providing market access to ASEAN goods. ASEAN should also encourage the flow of Chinese direct investment into the region as well as actively promote tourism from China to ASEAN countries and vice versa.

As the biggest member of the community, but with some of its neighbors concerned about its future role in the region, it will be incumbent upon China to demonstrate that its on-going “peaceful rise” is truly peaceful.

In the important matter of regional security, all East Asian member countries are urged to exercise restraint and encourage cooperation and dialogue in facing crisis and to refrain from unilateral action that could damage the peace and security of the region. It is also important for member countries to exercise respect for the sovereignty and equality of all member states regardless of their size and wealth.

## **V. Concluding Remarks**

The enterprise of building an East Asian Community has already begun. The process will indeed be long-term. Malaysia, from the beginning, has been steadfast in not giving up on the concept. Despite huge obstacles, it has stayed the course. It has done so because, then as now, it firmly believes that it was an idea whose time had come. While there will undoubtedly be setbacks on the way, striving together, the regional states will overcome them and continue the course until the ultimate goal has been achieved. The realization of an East Asian Community will truly usher in a new and major epoch in the long and checkered history of the region. With its achievement, East Asia can realize its potential for working cooperatively with other regional communities to bring about a better global community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.