

09 MAR 1996

OPPOSITION TO EAEC IS SHORT-SIGHTED, SAYS THANAT KHOMAN

KUALA LUMPUR, March 9 (Bernama) -- Opposition against the East Asia Economic Caucus is short-sighted and irrational and the time is now right to correct that misconception, a noted Thai academician said today.

Tun Dr Thanat Khoman, chairman of the Policy Council, International Studies Centre of the Institute of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, said the opposition against the East Asia grouping was based on an erroneous concept that any cooperative organisation must include the countries of the western Pacific Rim.

"Otherwise it would be considered antagonistic to the latter who could not perceive that such a grouping could serve as a connecting link between the eastern and western Rim of the Pacific," Thanat said in a working paper on "Assessment and New Development of Regional Mechanisms" presented at the symposium on East Asian Economies.

The symposium was officially opened by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim yesterday and is jointly organised by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) and the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA).

He added that the time was now right for start building a team spirit for East Asia which should inspire all those who are in the region to bring forth their contributions and to play active roles.

Thanat pointed out that major East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) parties which were still lukewarm or reluctant to lend their support for the EAEC for fear of displeasing their major trade partners should for their own sake revise their position.

"They should realise that siding with East Asia will improve their negotiating chance rather than decrease it, especially after the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)," he said.

Thanat stressed that EAEC's proponents should also clarify, if they have not already done so, that its construction is only a "concentric ring" next to Asean before arriving to outer rings like the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum.

"It should not be construed as a definitive rejection or exclusion of other entities on the western or southern Pacific Rim," he added.

Meanwhile, Takeshi Kondo, General Manager, Office of Political and Economic Research, Itochu Corporation, said the EAEC, as proposed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, is in the process of becoming a vibrant forum for discussion on the future development of the region.

"It may now be at a point in its development where it would be useful to include in its discussion the possibility of expanding the Asean Free Trade Area (AFTA) in order to form a World Trade Organisation (WTO) consistent free trade area," he said, adding that linking free trade areas could also sustain regional growth and stability.

He said if in the future, AFTA was expanded to include Northeast Asia, the Australia-New Zealand Closer Economic Region (CER), and APEC economies were linked with other free trade areas, a global scale free trade mechanism would be realised within the WTO framework. -- BERNAMA

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