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Defining meaning of East Asia

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A STUDY group will be set up to look into the possibility of formalising an East Asian grouping comprising all 10 Asean nations as well as China, Japan and South Korea.

The decision was made by the heads of Government attending the informal Asean+3 summit today.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told reporters that the study would include concessions for a Free Trade Area and investments.

"We need to formalise the grouping and call it something," he said.

Asked whether his proposal made eight years ago for an East Asia Economic Caucus was becoming a reality, Dr Mahathir said:

"I am not allowed to mention that."

However, he said, there would be a need to define the meaning of East Asia as many countries might want to claim to be East Asian.

At present, Japan, South Korea and China are Asean's dialogue partners.

Eight years ago, the last time Singapore hosted the Asean summit, the grouping endorsed the establishment of the EAEC.

The Singapore summit in 1992 had endorsed the Malaysian proposal but changed the name from East Asian Economic Grouping to EAEC. Dr Mahathir's idea was for Asean to establish a loose, consultative forum to promote co-operation and protect members' interest.

The EAEC was to group Asean and China, South Korea and Japan, which are the three countries in the Asean+3. The United States had opposed to the establishment of the EAEC from the start, claiming that the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation was sufficient.

Japan and Singapore, being allies of the US, also objected to the setting up of the EAEC.

The Asean+3, which was formalised in 1996 in Bangkok, is in effect the Asian group in the Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) process, which last held a leaders' meeting in Seoul last month.

Asean Economic Ministers and their counterparts from the three countries had their first meeting in Yangon last May.

Meanwhile, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, speaking on the same subject, said the leaders agreed to study the possibility of an East Asian Free Trade Area to boost regional trade and economic co-operation.

"The study group will toy around the concept of an East Asian summit to replace the Asean+3," he said.

However, Goh said the proposal needed an indepth study.

"We want to ensure that all participating countries will benefit from it," he said.

Asked whether it was a resurrection of EAEC, Goh said EAEC was "a good proposal but many countries were hesitant at that time".

"Even Singapore was hesitant because we wanted Apec to take off successfully. Now that Apec has managed to hold regular summits, I don't see why East Asian nations should not form a group if they want to," Goh said.

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