

# Dr M's EAEC concept bears fruit at last

IT HAS taken 11 years for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's proposed East Asia Economic Caucus to bear fruit but the wait was worth it.

At the just-concluded Asean + 3 summit meeting in Brunei, the leaders agreed to set up a secretariat for the organisation.

Though it would be known as the East Asia Economic Grouping or EACG instead of the EAEC, it is the concept and not the exact name that matters.

Its formation has vindicated Dr Mahathir who proposed it in spite of early objections from many quarters, not only the United States but even among several Asean governments.

In fact when the idea was first mooted, the reaction of some of Malaysia's so-called neighbours was quite unfriendly.

One senior official just laughed aloud when asked what he thought of the idea because he thought it was a joke.

However, Malaysia is having the last laugh.

Another was even more blunt and remarked that it would only happen over "my dead body."

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Such sceptics are still around and it will be interesting to know what they think of this latest development. But then people have a very short memory.

Fortunately, too, Dr Mahathir is a leader who is above all such petty thinking and would be the last to claim credit for its formation.

As far as he is concerned, it is a good concept and should work if all the Asean governments put their minds and efforts into making it a success with the help and support of other countries if possible.

Due to the original cynicism and scepticism, Dr Mahathir had suggested that it be called a caucus, a loose organisation aimed at exchanging ideas and information and not an economic bloc in order to win over the critics.

Washington objected to it

because it was not a member and the Australian government was upset for the same reason.

As far as Kuala Lumpur is concerned, East Asia has no European component and so Australia and New Zealand even though they may be situated nearby should not be considered as members.

What is interesting is the location of the secretariat.

No doubt those who ridicule the concept would now be keen to have it set up in their own backyard as hosting it will be another feather in the cap for the successful bidder.

As the initiator of the concept, Malaysia should naturally be given the first option to set up the secretariat.

However, this is not a big issue for Kuala Lumpur, as its main concern is that the organisation

should get off the ground quickly and be effective in bringing benefits to the member states.

With the participation of China, Japan and South Korea, the grouping can now start working towards the common regional good.

It is good for Japan to come on board, as it is the second economic power as well as the only Asian member of the influential G7 group of rich nations.

Tokyo had initially kept away because of American objection even though it was sympathetic with the concept as it could play a meaningful role in helping to shape the economic destiny of the region of which it is very much a part of.

But Washington at that time, felt that Tokyo would enjoy too much of an advantage as an active partner and great pressure was therefore used to get the Japanese to remain out of it.

It is encouraging that the United States has become more understanding that a regional grouping is not necessarily a bad thing or against any country's interest.