

08/11/2001

Leaders concur formation of East Asian community inevitable

Ashraf Abdullah

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who attended the Asean and Asean+3 Summits which ended in Bandar Seri Begawan on Tuesday, said he was leaving Brunei a satisfied man.

Indeed, he has every reason to be.

Although the Prime Minister did not say it in so many words, the reason seems obvious - he has been, yet again, proven right.

The leaders of Asean+3 which groups the 10 Southeast Asian nations as well as Japan, South Korea and China, concurred that the formation of an East Asian community was now inevitable.

In 1990, when Dr Mahathir proposed the establishment of an East Asian grouping, many countries including the United States, Japan and South Korea rejected it outright. Singapore chose not to support it.

The US feared that a grouping will eventually become an economic bloc which will adopt protectionist measures and will run contrary to free trade, of which it is the greatest proponent. Being allies of the US, and its important trading partners, Japan, South Korea and Singapore toed the line.

The US continued to reject the idea, even though Dr Mahathir had repeatedly said that the grouping would be an informal gathering to discuss ideas rather than an economic bloc. It was also aimed at giving East Asian nations a stronger voice in international forums.

To appease the US, Dr Mahathir went as far as renaming the EAEG to East Asia Economic Caucus so that it would not be seen as an economic bloc.

But the Clinton administration's hardline approach prevented the formation of the grouping.

Surprisingly, South Korea has now changed its stand. President Kim Dae-jung, who presented to the leaders the East Asian Vision Group report which calls for the establishment of an East Asian community, is now supporting the idea.

An East Asian Vision Group commissioned by the Asean+3 leaders two years ago, presented its report at the summit on Monday and proposed the formation of an East Asian Grouping. The group comprised two members from each of the 13 countries, and headed by South Korea.

The shift in the mindset can be attributed to the economic downturn in the US. Leaders now think that the US could no longer be depended upon as the engine of growth. Depending on the US could be economically disastrous. East Asian countries, therefore, need to depend on themselves.

The Asean+3 leaders agreed to the formation of the Asean+3 secretariat which will pave the way for an East Asian grouping.

Kuala Lumpur, Dr Mahathir said, would like to be the host of the secretariat. It seems only right, because the Asean+3, a de facto East Asian community, was the brainchild of the Prime Minister.

Singapore is host to the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation Secretariat while the Asean Secretariat is located in Jakarta.

Over the past few years, Dr Mahathir has been vindicated several times. When he first accused currency speculators of causing the 1997/98 financial crisis, the so-called internal economic pundits denounced him as an economic illiterate. In the aftermath of the crisis, both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank agreed that speculators played a major role.

When the Malaysian Government used the Internal Security Act to arrest

the Taliban-trained terrorists and to curb their activities, Dr Mahathir was once again accused of breaching human rights.

But after the Sept 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the US - the greatest proponent of liberal democracy - is considering introducing similar laws.

Major decisions were made at the Brunei Asean Summit. Credit should therefore go to both officials and leaders who had the arduous task of convincing one another on the various issues raised at the meetings.

As Asean subscribes to consensus-building in its decision-making process, the agreement of each and every nation is necessary before a decision can be made.

Some of the more significant ones were decisions concerning the Asean-China FTA, terrorism and HIV/Aids.

The Asean-China FTA, when it becomes a reality in the next 10 years, will be the largest in the world. It is designed to give preferential treatment to East Asian nations trading with one another.

With a combined market of 1.7 billion people, an FTA between Asean and China would have a gross domestic product of US\$2 trillion (RM7.6 trillion) and two-way trade of US\$1.23 trillion.

The leaders instructed their Economic Ministers to start negotiations as soon as possible.

On combating international terrorism, the Government called for a stronger Asean co-operation at bilateral, regional and international levels in a comprehensive manner, and rejected any attempt to link terrorism with any race or religion.

The leaders issued the 2001 Asean Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism which was endorsed at their working dinner on Sunday.

However, the declaration stopped short of calling an immediate halt to the US-led attacks on Afghanistan which Malaysia and Indonesia had been pushing for.

The declaration also did not call for an international conference to discuss terrorism and to tackle its root causes, a proposal tabled by Malaysia.

However, the leaders agreed to a proposal by Dr Mahathir for an Asean seminar on terrorism as a prelude to an international conference. They tasked their Ministers responsible for home affairs to study the proposal.

Diplomats say the proposal for an international conference and the attempt to get an Asean consensus to urge the US to stop the attacks on Afghanistan, were met with strong resistance from the Philippines and Singapore, US' strongest allies in the region.

The leaders, however, affirmed that the United Nations should play a major role at the international level to combat terrorism.

The Malaysian proposal for greater co-operation in containing the spread of HIV/Aids was agreed to.

The leaders called for greater collaboration to make affordable drugs more accessible to those living with HIV/Aids.

They also called on each member state to make the combat against HIV/Aids a national priority and for greater efforts to establish an accessible Global HIV/Aids fund.

The decisions which came out of the Brunei Summit will now compel critics, who had earlier labelled Asean and Asean+3 as mere talkshops, to think again.

ashraf@nstp.com.my

(END)