

# Call for Asean to

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## 'Grouping must act as a bridge with

ASEAN must not only find ways to strengthen co-operation among its members, but also act as a bridge in resolving differences among its three major trading partners — Japan, South Korea and China.

Thai trade representative Thanong Bidaya said Asean should impress on the three countries the need to co-operate more rather than disagree on issues as there were still conflicts of interest among the "+3" partners.

Speaking at the 30th Williamsburg Conference at the Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel, Bidaya said the three economies should spearhead the formation of the East Asia grouping.

"They can help Asean and move along together with it. using the

region as the production base." However, he said it would not be easy for Asean to mediate differences among the three.

"We are talking about 10 rats trying to pull one elephant, one tiger and one gorilla together. It is not that easy as we might be eaten by them, but I am optimistic that Asean can play the unifying role," said Bidaya, the vice-chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers to the Prime Minister of Thailand.

Supporting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call for East Asia economies to co-operate, Bidaya said the participation of Japan, South Korea and China should not be opposed as no grouping should comprise weak economies only.

Reports by Ramlan Said, Roziana Hamsawi, Farrah Naz Karim and Ngoo Yee Jin

# help unify partners Japan, South Korea and China'

"The European Union has strong economies like Germany and France together with smaller countries that have niche industrial systems.

"Likewise, Asean together with Japan, South Korea and China would form a good combination which is ready to be competitive with the rest of the world."

Bidaya felt the term "Asean+3" was quite misleading as it gave the impression that Japan, South Korea and China were the supplementing economies.

"On the contrary, the '+3' are the core economies that can tilt and change the Asian economies... they are more influential."

On Asean, he said strategies should be drawn up to avoid the

mistakes of the 1997 regional financial crisis.

He said the 10-member grouping should be wary of foreign capital flows, adding that Governments must balance economic growth and stability.

"We should be able to pinpoint the appropriate key industries in each economy so that Asean members can complement each other and create a competitive region."

On the leadership of member countries in Asean, Bidaya said there was a need for the leaders to keep the doors to dialogue open all the time.

"If there is a smooth relationship among the leaders, it can prevent trivial problems among countries

from flaring up."

Bidaya said each country's leadership was different from the other. Malaysia, for instance, is a multi-racial country. Thus, it needed a leader who could unite its society.

Commending Dr Mahathir's leadership, Bidaya said he was highly respected for speaking his mind.

He said when the new Thailand Government was formed last year, its Prime Minister visited Dr Mahathir for advice.

"He has been kind to us. I took on the responsibility of setting up an asset management corporation similar to Malaysia's Danaharta, and Dr Mahathir sent a team to help us. It shows his willingness to help other Asean members."