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Plus 3 `home' dogs Asean

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THE senior officials at the on-going 35th Asean Ministerial Meeting in Bandar Seri Begawan, being mostly career diplomats, are again beating around the bush. Trained to do exactly that, they have been very careful with their Press statements, especially on issues close to the hearts of members.

One such issue is Malaysia's offer to host the Asean+3 secretariat in Kuala Lumpur.

Less than 24 hours after Malaysia formally submitted its plan for the secretariat, senior officials from other member countries emerged from the meeting admitting that Asean co-operation with its three giant neighbours - China, South Korea and Japan - is very important but "they are still discussing how to do it".

They stopped short of saying they had reservations about having it in Kuala Lumpur or having a secretariat rivalling the Asean secretariat in Jakarta.

Thailand has clearly indicated that it preferred the Asean secretariat in Jakarta to be strengthened.

"We prefer to strengthen the Asean secretariat in Jakarta but we are open to discussion," said Suchitra Hiranpreuk, the director-general of Asean Department in the Thai Foreign Ministry.

Former Philippines foreign secretary Domingo Siazon, its Special Envoy to the meeting, says the Asean+3 Secretariat is necessary when the China-Asean Free Trade Area agreement is sealed.

"(However) it's too early right now to have one, you have to look at the structure, the costing... maybe three or five years down the road," he added.

The decision by Foreign Ministry secretary-general Datuk Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak to call off his scheduled Press briefing on Saturday could have been prompted by the developments that may not be very comfortable for Malaysia.

The Malaysian delegates decided to remain tight-lipped about what transpired but Philippines Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Lauro Baja said the Asean Standing Committee had considered three options. The first was a proposal to establish a separate secretariat to be hosted by an Asean member country.

The second option is to expand the Asean secretariat in Jakarta to undertake the role, and thirdly to establish an Asean+3 bureau within the Asean secretariat.

However, it will be known today whether Malaysia's offer will be accepted by the Foreign Ministers of the 10 Asean members who will meet at the 35th Asean Ministerial Meeting.

At the Seventh Asean Summit in Bandar Seri Begawan last year, the 13 Southeast and Northeast Asian leaders agreed to institutionalise Asean+3, the de facto East Asia Economic Grouping first proposed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad 12 years ago.

The decision followed a favourable report by South Korea, which headed the expert group to study the formation of an East Asian grouping.

The report, tabled by South Korean President Kim Daejung, said an East Asian grouping was necessary for the region to set its own pace for development.

The expert group, comprising a member from all 13 States, was

commissioned by the Asean+3 leaders three years ago to study the need for an East Asian grouping. They felt the United States, on which many countries in the region are dependent for trade and services, could no longer be relied on as the engine of growth.

The economic slowdown in the United States, even before the Sept 11 terror attacks had a domino effect on countries in the region. Japan, South Korea and Singapore were among those who paid a heavy price for their overdependence on the US.

The 1997/98 financial crisis which devastated economies in both Southeast and Northeast Asia was another reason.

Lessons well learnt, and hence the decision to institutionalise Asean+3. Malaysia is the first country to offer to host the Asean+3 secretariat.

In fact, the Government has gone as far as to offer seed funding of US\$10 million (RM38 million) for the first five years of the secretariat's operations.

It feels it should get the honour, and since Plus 3 should be Asean driven, Kuala Lumpur is the best bet since many international or regional organisations are already housed in Singapore, Bangkok, Manila and Jakarta.

Going by the history of the Plus 3 process, Kuala Lumpur should naturally be the venue, as the EAEC and Asean+3 secretariat idea was mooted by Dr Mahathir in the first place.

But some felt that an Asean+3 secretariat would erode the importance of the Asean secretariat in Jakarta and diminish the role of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) secretariat in Singapore.

Such fears have no place really, merely because of a perception that the Asean+3 secretariat will be a rival to their clout and influence.

In the words of Siazon: "The Asean secretariat has to be confident of itself. It should not worry it would lose its reputation because of another secretariat.

"If you are good, you should be able to compete... If you have an Asean+3 secretariat, then the more you will need an Asean secretariat to make sure the interests of the 10, with their differing levels of economic development, are fully represented in the Asean+3 grouping."

The Asean+3 secretariat will help to co-ordinate East Asia's position vis-a-vis other members of Apec and the Asean-Europe Meeting, while the Asean secretariat will still shoulder the vital role of facilitating closer co-operation among the 10 countries in Asean.

The role and mandate of the SecretaryGeneral of Asean will not be diminished and his priority will remain to forge greater and closer regional integration.

In fact, there could be closer co-ordination between the two secretariats towards this end and newer members of Asean - Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam - would benefit from the greater resources of and contributions from the Plus 3 nations as 70 per cent of Asean trade is with external partners.

According to an official of the Asean secretariat, members may be feeling jittery because the idea (to have an Asean+3 secretariat) came up too fast.

"They probably need time to study whether they really need an Asean+3 secretariat. Their concern is whether there will be a duplication between the two secretariats," he said.

But the problem of duplication, some say, can be ironed out. Should the setting up of Asean+3 secretariat be delayed considering the global economic trend?

It has been noted that the future is in East Asia. Undoubtedly, East Asia looks more attractive than Asean.

The power of its market and the political clout that it commands are evident.

The Asean+3 secretariat's mandate certainly will have to go beyond that of the Asean secretariat.

While the Asean secretariat will continue to be mandated to initiate, co-ordinate and implement co-operation among the 10 members of the association, it appears that it does not have sufficient resources to move faster and further.

That's why Malaysia feels that the Plus 3 countries should be involved in the process - more deeply - not just as an appendage to Asean. Hence, a separate entity is needed.