

# Arduous journey for Asian grouping

East Asia is emerging as a powerful economic group that matches Europe and North America. But the region remains split and without a united front. The First East Asia Congress held in Kuala Lumpur from Aug 4 to 6 was unanimous on the need to build an East Asian community. The burning question is: who would bell the cat?

STAR 1 0 AUG 2003 HOO BAN KHEE reports.

The United States was not there but it loomed large even in its absence at the First East Asia Congress to kick-start the East Asian Community, a.k.a. East Asian Economic caucus, a.k.a. East Asian Economic Grouping.

It is the X-factor in the equation, the hidden key to realising the dreams of the billions of people living in the eastern part of the Asian continent spanning Tokyo to Jakarta.

The East Asian Economic Grouping was first mooted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during the state visit of Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng to Kuala Lumpur in December 1990.

The idea was to give East Asia a voice on the world stage, with the ultimate objective of making East Asia a zone of cooperative peace and prosperity.

Nevertheless, the proposal was – in Dr Mahathir's words – atrocious 13 years ago as those who believed in and advocated an East Asian community then were regarded as “heretics fit for burning at the stake.”

It was snuffed out. When the mighty United States withheld its blessings, Japan and South Korea, the two Asian economic powerhouses expected to take the lead then, went spluttering.

But the idea was unstoppable, and so when the grouping took shape eventually, it went around in disguise as Asean Plus Three (A+3).

As he is, agreed to the four P's formula – principles, persistence, pragmatism and patience – in pursuing the goal.

Japan, being mindful of the US stance, supports the idea of institutionalising an East Asian grouping but was wary of naming it EAEG which has the connotation of being exclusive.

Prof Haruhiko Kuroda, Senior Adviser to the Japanese Prime Minister, said Japan was prepared to co-lead with other key players: China, South Korea and Asean to institutionalise the grouping.

term peace and prosperity of the region.

Politically, he said the past three decades have seen a massive peace transformation in East Asia and peace is best made when there is peace.

“It is too late to make or strengthen our peace once it has broken down. Like the judicious farmer, we must make hay when the sun shines, not when the storm clouds gather, certainly not when it is pouring.”

Economically, he cautioned that although East Asia had performed remarkably well to be called miracle economies, tigers and dragons, there are weaknesses.

“Over the last few years, we have all learnt that our feet are made of clay; we have indeed performed incredible deeds but we remain full of weaknesses and continue to face enormous challenges.”

As a region, Dr Mahathir said East Asia was most dependent on world trade and economic development and yet East Asians were without voice and without clout.

“The decisions that directly determine our present and dictate our future are made elsewhere. It is time for us to empower ourselves, for the good of our people and for the sake of our future and the future of the world.”

He stressed that in the years ahead, efforts must be concentrated on building an East Asian Community of Common and Cooperative Peace and Prosperity, a

Now with those in the White House who were against the idea gone and emerging China being roped in, does EAEG stand a better chance of coming out in the open?

The First East Asia Congress, organised by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (Isis) and attended by nearly two thousand economists, academics and thinkers from the region, spent three days scanning the horizon for possible clues.

The landscape, one must say, is still full of potholes and pitfalls. Even if the idea and ideals have already walked a thousand *li* (miles), as how Dr Mahathir summed up the past, the rest of the journey appears arduous.

It is beyond doubt that participants at the congress were unanimous that East Asian countries should form some kind of union but beyond that, they were not sure of how the new creature should be called.

Different ideas had also been debated on its set-up and functions: should it be modelled after the European Union, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, or should the A+3 status quo be kept?

Finally, the crucial question was: which country should take the lead. Japan is non-committal and South Korea is too busy focusing on the Korean Peninsula crisis. China seems to agree on a joint leadership basis.

It was significant that the congress agreed on the need to set up a secretariat to chart the road map to its final realisation in whatever form it takes.

This was the best compromise in view of the sensitivity and complications of the subject as even Dr Mahathir, impa-

Former Japanese Vice-Minister of Finance Prof Eisuke Sakakibara was more forthright, lamenting the lack of coordinated political will by political leaders to realise a truly Asian cooperation.

He warned that if Asian regional cooperation was not proceeding in any meaningful way, the future will see Asia being divided and ruled by the rest of the world.

"We have a choice of joining the EU or becoming part of the US zone or creating an East Asian community," he said while calling Japan and South Korea to re-examine their so-called special relationships with the US, and Japan Korea and China to jettison their historic baggage.

Dr Hank Lim, director for research at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, was also not comfortable with the old name EAEG. "Why revive something that could provoke antagonism from the West?"

"We are all for cooperation but we must concentrate on what is do-able first," he said, adding that he supported the idea of setting up an East Asian institute, using Asean as the hub, and then "tilling in the bones and flesh."

Dr Mahathir, before the brainstorming session began on Monday, asked East Asian leaders to come out in the open and say "yes" to the formation of the East Asian Community of Common and Cooperative Peace and Prosperity which he said was already alive in the form of A+3.

In the passionate keynote address peppered with proverbs and illustrations, he explained the urgent need for such an initiative to safeguard the long-

community empowered within our region and empowered in the wider world.

"Why Common and Cooperative? Common because our East Asian Peace and Prosperity are now truly indivisible. We are now so inter-related, so enmeshed, so much in the same boat that a critical threat to peace anywhere in East Asia is a critical threat to peace everywhere in East Asia.

He said the 1998 economic crisis had made this clear beyond any doubt. So did SARS. The events of the last few years leave room for no other interpretation.

"Why cooperative? It is because our peace and our prosperity will be less fragile and more durable if all sides work together and are committed to our common peace and prosperity and if friends and neighbours are around and engaged in the process of making sure that everyone gets along and prospers together."

Tan Sri Noordin Sopiee, chairman and CEO of Isis, in summing up the three-day session, said the consensus to set up the East Asian Community was palpable.

There will be complications and obstacles ahead but there is no choice in the face of an expanding European Union and the eventual merging of the North and South Americas into a gargantuan economic union.

East Asia has the money, the skills and the people. With more concerted political will, the First East Asia Congress could go down as a major concrete step in the proverbial thousand-mile walk.

But the journey could be arduous if our leaders were to look over their shoulders in every step they take.