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Begin East Asian integration with core group

By Chandra Muzaffar

IT was on Dec 13, 1990 that the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, proposed the formation of an East Asian Economic Group comprising the states of Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia at a dinner to welcome his Chinese counterpart, Li Peng.

For more than a decade, Dr Mahathir persevered with the idea despite the overwhelming odds.

Three weeks ago, on Dec 29, the Asean Summit in Vientiane agreed that a formal East Asian Summit would be held in Kuala Lumpur next year.

It has become even more urgent now than before for the 10 Southeast Asian states and the three Northeast Asian states (China, Japan and South Korea) to forge a closer and more integrated economic relationship.

The world's leading economic power, the United States is so preoccupied with the "war on terror" and with the expansion of its military hegemony that important economic issues facing the East Asian region and humankind as a whole have been banished to the sidelines.

East Asia as a collective entity should now address these issues ranging from trade and investment to poverty eradication and intra-regional disparities with vigour and vitality.

At the same time, Japan appears to be casting aside its post-WWII pacifism and moving towards a form of military activism, which must raise its neighbours' ire.

A regional grouping may help to check this dangerous propensity. A larger regional outfit may also serve to reduce tensions between North and South Korea and pave the way for the eventual reunification of the peninsula.

Effective regional integration may also make it easier for the rest of East Asia to adjust to China's new economic dynamism and its increasing political clout.

Last but by no means least, a common forum would enable states in Southeast and Northeast Asia to attend to problems which concern both the sub-regions such as the longstanding dispute over the Spratly islands.

Underlying these reasons for regional economic integration is the unstated assumption that the East Asian grouping that we envisage will not go beyond the nations of Southeast and Northeast Asia.

Over the last few years, through the Asean+3 (China, Japan and Korea) meetings, the 13 states of East Asia have begun to understand the political sensitivities prevailing in the region and the constraints under which they operate.

A common credo in dealing with one another has begun to evolve. In the ultimate analysis, it is this kind of intangible in inter-state ties that help to solidify regional groupings in their nascent stage.

It explains why the three Northeast Asian states, including Japan and South Korea, both close allies of the US were prepared to sign the Asean Treaty of Amity and Co-operation which calls for non-interference in each other's internal affairs and the settlement of disputes through peaceful means, while Australia, citing its military obligations to the US, refused to endorse the non-aggression pact.

A nation which has very little appreciation of what the ethos of mutual respect demands in the East Asian milieu will only undermine the new regional grouping if it becomes a founding member.

We should also remind ourselves that there is a geographical dimension

to East Asia underpinned by centuries of interaction, especially between China and various part of Southeast Asia.

The most compelling argument for restricting next year's East Asian Summit to the present 13 East Asian states is the fundamental importance of a strong, stable core in any endeavour to promote regional co-operation. Such a core, in the initial period, will in a sense determine the content and character of the regional body in question.

Asean had had such a core in the first decade of its existence before it began incorporating new members. So did the European Union in the 1950s and 60s.

The 13 states of Southeast and Northeast Asia should constitute that cohesive core within our proposed East Asia grouping. After a few years, the group can expand to other parts of Asia and even the Pacific.

But for the time being, East Asia should ensure that it puts the right foot forward.

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