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A rose by any other name

EAST Asian cooperation already exists in fact, in the form of ASEAN+3 or ASEAN and its three dialogue partners of China, Japan and South Korea. In the current multipolar world order, growing convergence of economic, financial and political interests presses the case for giving this interaction a formal framework. Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, long an advocate of greater East Asian regionalism, shares his insights on the subject. Well-known for his tendency to call a spade a spade, Mahathir thinks it is time to drop the ASEAN+3 term of convenience and declare it EAEG.

Should ASEAN+3 be referred to for what it is, the EAEG?

The concrete step we have to take now is to say yes to EAEG. The ASEAN+3 should stop hiding behind the title and say we are EAEG. There is some nervousness among some of the people and I don't know whether they have accepted the idea.

As far as Malaysia is concerned, we accepted the idea 12 years ago.

Why was there this need to cloak the EAEG with the ASEAN+3 coat?

Calling the EAEG the Asean+3 was a practical way of not wanting to ruffle some feathers. We have been trying to get East Asian nations to reach a consensus on the formation of the EAEG but because of disapproval from some quarters, we have had to do it in a roundabout way.

How realistic is the EAEG idea?

We have to come out in the open and say we want an EAEG. Asean countries have shown the way. We have been able to work together after our leaders declared the formation of the grouping. Asean can work because we agreed to form it. Once this was agreed, the process was simple.

The roots of ASEAN's existence?

Asean was formed out of the failure of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which has been replaced by the World Trade Organisation. We have been watching the progress - or the lack of it - of GATT and found that it was not getting anywhere. We were not benefiting as there were so many rounds of talks until we felt dizzy. It was not without good grounds that it was referred to as the General Agreement to Talk and Talk. So we thought that maybe a smaller group was much easier for the building of consensus.

What of Japan's role?

Economically and politically, it had a big role to play. Japan has the technological prowess and is a leader in innovation and manufacturing. This can bring about change in the other countries via the spread of knowledge and skills. I hope that since Japan is an East Asian nation, it would feel some loyalty for East Asia.

China's growing political and economic muscle?

China has a critical role to play in the building of our East Asian community. This is clearly one of the core challenges in the decades to come, as China continues to be the powerhouse of regional and global growth.

In the quest to reach the EAEG goal, whose help should East Asia turn to?

We will need the advice and help of all our friends and everyone who wishes us well. Let me emphasise; those who are not our enemies are our friends. It goes without saying that we must not turn away from the wisdom of the West, of the North and of the South. Yet we must not forget the wisdom of the East. We must not forget our special circumstances, our unique history, our particular priorities and our distinctive needs. One shoe does not fit all. This is especially true when we literally know that our feet are definitely much smaller than those of our friends in South

Asia, Europe and the Americas.

Who should lead in building the community of East Asia?

Over the last quarter century, the pioneers of East Asian community building have not been the governments of East Asia, the media of East Asia or the intellectuals of East Asia - but the corporations of East Asia. In the years ahead, they will continue to weave the web of economic community in our region, which will remain the most important foundations for regional community building. But it is time for others to fully join the process. It is certainly time for the governments of East Asia to get in the comprehensive business of community building.

Which governments then should take the lead and in whose mould?

I am not sure if some of you will like my answer because so many have become too steeped in the glorification of power politics - so called realpolitik, so-called leadership which is not true leadership at all and so-called realism which is not at all realistic - or for that matter productive. I do not believe in the wonders of imperial dominance or benign hegemony. In the case of East Asia today and in the future, this will clearly be catastrophic. Fortunately it is impossible.

Pax Nipponica, Pax Americana, Pax Sinica - all three are not desirable. Fortunately too, all three are not possible. The government leadership that an East Asian community will need in the years ahead must come from various sources, on various issue, at various time. This is not only desirable, but fortunately, it is also inevitable.

Why the need to harp on the building of an East Asian Community of Cooperative Peace and Prosperity when we are already on such a route?

It cannot be more obvious. Although East Asia of today is completely different from the East Asia of the past, although in so many directions we have made breathtaking progress, we still have a very long way to go. There is no doubt that we have come a long way in building peace, friendship and stability in East Asia. Over the last three decades especially, we have seen a massive outbreak of peace in this region. For most of the last 20 years, we have been more at peace than at any time in the last two centuries, So why bother with peace when it is already there you might ask. The answer is quite simple; Peace is best made when there is peace.

The fear that an East Asian economic community would be exclusive in outlook?

Both the East Asian economic community and the East Asian political community that is advocated should be outward looking. There must not be a retreat behind a great East Asian economic barricade. There must not be an encircling of the wagons. No hiding behind Great impenetrable walls. The whole world should be welcome to our East Asian market. The world is as much ours as it is everyone else's.

A union calculated to elevate image and project the East Asian voice?

The East Asian community I speak of must be empowered within our own region. Very importantly, we must also be empowered to play our rightful role in the world. Today we are the most dependent on international trade. Our very lives, our entire future hinges on decisions made in Geneva and Washington or New York. Yet our voice is seldom heard and even more seldom heeded. We owe it to our people to amplify our voice, to aggregate our weight, to boost our clout. Singly we are weak, together in cohesion we are strong.

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