

06/08/2003

If it's not the EAEG, then what?

IT should be clear by now that the East Asian Economic Grouping must be one of the most difficult international alliances to bring into being. Not that it is not already in existence, albeit under a different name and an altered arrangement. But ever since the idea was raised by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during the visit of then-Chinese Premier Li Peng to Kuala Lumpur in December 1990, the response from countries has been nothing less than amazing - hot one minute and cold the next. And some of the reactions were mind-boggling - agreeing yet fearful, hankering yet jealous.

It is absolutely no surprise, therefore, to have Dr Mahathir, more than 12 years after mooted the idea, calling on leaders of East Asian nations to stop "hiding" behind the Asean+3 formation and admit that there is a need to establish the EAEG. In the first place, it has been proven from the many engagements and consultations Asean and the regional big three - China, Japan and South Korea - have had over the past six or seven years that it is not only an achievable idea but a perfectly workable one.

In this era of free trade and increasing globalisation, the EAEG can mean many things to many countries. It can be a forum for East Asian nations to confer on the restrictive trade practices of the richer nations, it can be a forum within the larger Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation which involves the United States, or it can be a trading bloc.

But whatever substance it takes on, the fact remains that there is now a need for a more formalised structure for the grouping. There is no doubt that East Asia is the throbbing heartbeat of global economic growth, but frankly, it lacks the clout. Most of the time, its future hinges on decisions made in Geneva, Washington and New York, where its voice is seldom heard. Furthermore, a proper grouping like the EAEG is very necessary because countries of East Asia are so closely inter-related and enmeshed that a critical threat to peace anywhere in the region is a critical threat to peace everywhere in East Asia.

For this reason, feelings of nervousness, pessimism and jealousy as well as expressions of hypocrisy should take a backseat. Already, it is perplexing that there should be open and covert opposition by free-trade preaching countries to the proposed effort to have a voice in international affairs.