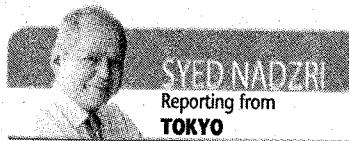


Asian powerhouses urged to close ranks

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FEW are better qualified than Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to speak from the heart about the elusive East Asian community.

He was in the forefront when the idea was conceived 16 years ago, as Foreign Minister to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the prime mover and principal advocate of the concept.

In the same capacity, Abdullah was also there through the difficult birth of the grouping by another name — Asean+3 — nine years ago.

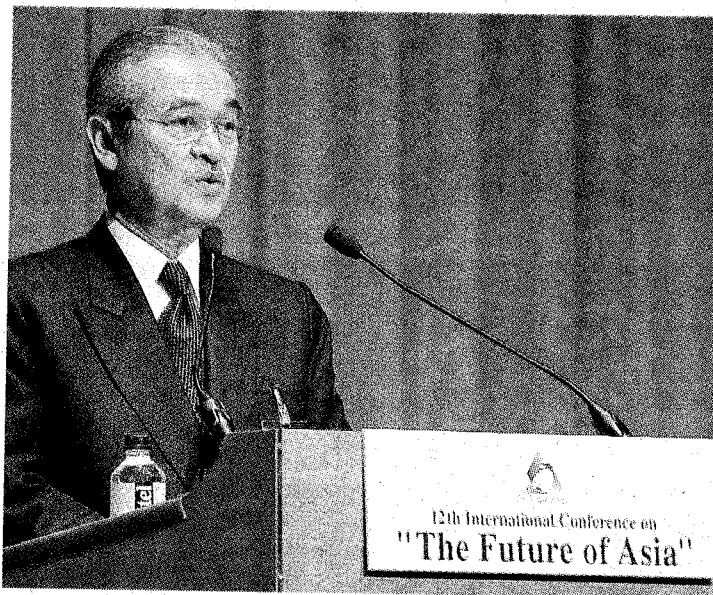
And yet again he was there, on an even bigger platform, when a giant step was made with the inception of the first East Asian Summit in Kuala Lumpur last year, over which he presided.

Yesterday, at the Nikkei international conference on the future of Asia, Abdullah articulated his thoughts on what the future may hold for a region still seeking to establish itself as one community.

And his appraisal: It can be achieved only if the countries are united, have a sense of purpose and can carry out what they are supposed to do.

Abdullah called these the “challenges of cohesion, conviction, and implementation” in his speech on “Challenges on the Way to an East Asian Community” at the start of the two-day conference (of which the *New Straits Times* is a media partner).

He even gave China, Japan and South Korea, the region's Big Three, a ticking-off in his characteristically gentle style, warning them their spats could lead to instability the region could ill afford.



Abdullah warned that quarrels would lead to instability in the region.

“In the last two years, our solidarity has been seriously dented,” he said of the frictions chiefly between China and Japan, and between Japan and South Korea, the many unresolved problems in Southeast Asia and apprehensions on the rise of China.

“The situation has worsened. Our economics is pushing us in one direction but our politics is pulling us in another,” he said.

An Australian journalist said she was startled by Abdullah's remarks because, according to her, no one had been candid enough to bring up the subject on Japanese soil; not even from the United States. But it was a long time coming, she added.

Even the moderator, when summing up the speech, described the Malaysian Prime Minister's remarks as a quiet reprimand.

Abdullah's prescription to the three Asian powerhouses was to close ranks.

“We should not allow regional co-operation to be held hostage to bilateral constraints. Many of the members of Asean, for instance, also have outstanding bilateral issues. But we have never allowed them to frustrate co-operation within Asean. Each of us would always exercise care not to undermine Asean as an organisation.”

Abdullah believes Asean should play a pivotal role in the East Asian process because it is committed to promoting regional co-operation for peace and prosperity.

It is, as he said, a force for moderation and a threat to none.

“It has become commonplace to speak of Asean being in the driving seat of East Asian co-operation. In fact, Asean is more than just the driver. In many respects, it is also the engine,” he said. The initiative was not just about co-operation but community-building.

Abdullah said the problem of implementation was not unique to

the East Asian initiative.

“Back home in Malaysia, one of my greatest challenges is to implement the plans that we have approved and deliver on the promises that I have made. My greatest challenge now is to implement the Ninth Malaysia Plan,” he added.

On that score, he said East Asia lagged behind in the implementation of several measures that had been agreed, such as poverty eradication and the realisation of an East Asia Free Trade Area.

“A region-wide FTA that creates a market of almost two billion people would be the largest in the world,” he pointed out.

“Once established it will be the most impressive achievement yet of co-operation and community-building in East Asia.”

Due to time constraints, the moderator allowed only two questions from the floor at the end of the speech, the first of which was predictably on the differences among China, Japan and South Korea, and whether Abdullah could offer any solution.

The Prime Minister replied that it was not for him to tell other countries what to do. “But please understand that the present situation could hamper efforts towards an East Asian community.

“As for Malaysia, we maintain a position of equidistance with all three, who are our friends. We cannot choose one side over another.”

The other question sought his view on the US commitment to the East Asian community.

“The US as a superpower has been engaged everywhere and not only in this region,” Abdullah said. “The important thing is that there is nothing confrontational.”

“The East Asian community will continue to engage with the rest of the world, and this is something the US must understand.”