

# East Asia bloc under threat

By WONG SAI WAN in Tokyo

*The Star - 26/05/2016*  
THE formation of the East Asian Community under the East Asia Summit banner is now in jeopardy due to the lack of cohesion among member countries who seem to have forgotten the lessons of the 1997 financial crisis.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said that while East Asian nations could be proud of the progress achieved, the concept of a single community was at a critical juncture.

"The unifying impulse of the Asian financial crisis appears to have lost some of its momentum. New anxieties and doubts have developed. Some of us appear to be tugging in different directions," Abdullah said in his keynote address titled *Challenges on the way to an East Asian Community* at the 12th Nikkei International Conference on the Future of Asia here yesterday.

Of the many challenges in forming a single community for the region, Abdullah said there were three which were the "most crucial and most urgent".

He labelled them the Challenges of Cohesion, Challenges of Conviction and Challenges of Implementation.

On cohesion, he cited Japan's worsening relations with China and South Korea, as an example



**Abdullah: 'A region-wide FTA will be the largest in the world'**

of threats to the vision of a single regional community.

"I am afraid I have to be candid and say that the situation has worsened. Our economics are pushing us in one direction, but our politics are pulling us in another."

Abdullah added that East Asia must be careful not to regress to the time when Asia was divided and carved up "at the whims and fancies of others."

On the second challenge, he said countries must give their full conviction to the vision.

Asean must not only be the driver of the East Asia community but also its engine, said Abdullah.

He added that the Asean+3 (China, Japan and South Korea) set-up should be considered the vehicle.

On the challenge of implementation, he said cohesion and conviction would count for nothing if the plans drawn up were not implemented.

He cited plans to alleviate poverty in the region as an example of a programme that had not been implemented well.

Another programme that suffered a similar fate was the formation of an East Asia free trade area, said Abdullah.

"We should make greater effort to consolidate and link the many bilateral and sub-regional FTAs that we already have.

"A region-wide FTA that creates a market of almost two billion people will be the largest in the world.

"Once established, it will be the most impressive achievement yet of cooperation and community building in East Asia."

Later during a dialogue, Abdullah was asked to suggest a solution to the strained ties between Tokyo and Beijing as well as Seoul.

He said he could not suggest how the issue could be resolved but stressed that the differences should not affect the single community vision.