

East Asia seeking community

The Star - 6/12/2006

CANDOUR has long been a given at events organised by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, a quality all the more valuable when contentious issues are debated within the bounds of civil discourse.

This week's two-day Fourth East Asian Congress in Kuala Lumpur beginning on Monday was no exception. The event, focused on East Asian community-building, typically demonstrated the art of agreeing to disagree without being disagreeable, even where differences exist.

It would have been only too easy to avoid all disagreement by steering clear of controversy and relying only on bland platitudes. But that would have reduced delegates to diplomats, and defeated the purpose of conferring frankly to reach resolution or at least a better understanding.

So on the first day itself delegates jumped directly into the hot issue of difficult bilateral relations in North-East Asia, principally between China and Japan.

Over lunch later, a Chinese professor said privately that his compatriots had cautioned him against talking about regional perceptions of a "China threat" for fear of stirring up a hornets' nest.

But in his better judgment he persisted, in the belief that opening up such issues for discussion meant a degree of frankness that would have been better than pretending such issues did not exist. It is a credit to the collective wisdom of the delegates that the consensus around the table wholly agreed with him, regardless of personal views on the subject.



Midweek

By BUNN NAGARA

The debate over the current state of China-Japan relations centred on the motives and sincerity of each country in fostering closer East Asian cooperation. A Chinese view was that Beijing had approached Tokyo in the 1990s to develop regional cooperation jointly, but Japan did not reciprocate.

Then after China had given up hope on a Japanese response, Beijing turned to South-East Asia (Asean) through a range of projects, including proposed free trade agreements and Asean's several treaties and declarations. It was said that only then did Japan sit up and take notice, stirring from its earlier indifference.

A Japanese academic immediately took exception to that view, rejecting the version of events outright as an unhelpful "myth." He added that if China was genuinely seeking regional cooperation, its delegates should not be disseminating such tall tales.

The problem was that the Japanese delegate gave no explanation as to why that was a myth. Thus the Japanese retort was no more than opinion, being neither a substantiated statement nor a sound argument.

Then minutes later, a Japanese profes-

sor and veteran policy analyst offered a quite different view from his compatriot's. He said that when he was working with the OECD in Paris, the East Asian proposal for a common regional currency was floated "but Japan killed it."

It might also be remembered that when the idea of an (East) Asian Monetary Fund was proposed, Japan similarly snuffed it out. Whether this was because Tokyo wanted no dilution of its hold over the Asian Development Bank, or it was merely taking orders from Washington (or both), it is hard to say.

Nonetheless, East Asia had also seen how, after Malaysia suggested and Asean considered an East Asia Economic Grouping (EAEG), Japan repeatedly refused to lend its support. It is one thing to reject overtures for improved regional cooperation, and another again to deny there was any such rejection.

Since December 1990, former Malaysian prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad worked hard to canvass support for an EAEG, but the idea suffered from Asia's biggest economy staying out of it.

Still, over the past 16 years the impetus for an EAEG did not go away, only occasionally submerged. It morphed into the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) at Singapore's urging, which then became an Asean project that still lacked Tokyo's support.

It was only after the EAEC morphed into the Asean+3 (APT), and following the 1997-98 economic crisis, that Japan began to move to give its assent. How much of the loss from the crisis, which might have been mitigated if not averted had an EAEG been in place in the early 1990s, can only be guessed at.

However, delegates at this week's congress still remember Dr Mahathir as the prime mover of East Asian integration for the EAEG idea and much work for it.

A Japanese delegate even proposed an Okakura Tenshin Asia Prize, with Dr Mahathir as the first recipient. Others cited as having contributed to a regional identity were former Singapore prime minister Goh Chok Tong and former South Korean president Kim Dae-jung.

Now that Japan is aboard the APT along with the other 12 members, attention has shifted to the guts of East Asian community-building. Yet here a few prefer the more nebulous 16-country framework of the East Asia Summit (EAS), which includes non-regional Australia, New Zealand and India.

That would mean a dissipation of the East Asian community, with no common strands in East Asian culture or history as a basis for community-building. The issues of regional culture(s) and values were explored on the second day of the congress yesterday, but amounting only to a start at scratching the surface.

These and related issues would take many more days to iron out, particularly when no answer was given to the question of what exactly constitutes values.

"Open norms and principles" were advocated as necessary underpinnings of regional community-building, with no questions even being asked about what made norms and principles "open" or "closed." Then an argument was made that a regional identity need not be based on indigenous attributes, but could be a "political construct."

Yet another Japanese delegate, reputedly influential in Tokyo policy circles, insisted that Japan had yet to decide which framework to support for East Asian integration. Despite its past indifference, there might still be hope for Japan in a unified East Asia of the future.

Certainly for Asean at least, the established APT process has its rightful place without being an "option" like the EAS, which is no more than a forum event.