

## **Building the East Asian Community: Many Questions, A Few Answers**

A great German philosopher, Schopenhauer, was right when he said of the great ideas in history that “all truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as ‘self-evident’.”

The historic idea of building an East Asia Community was first proposed by Tun Dr Mahathir more than 13 years ago. It was initially ridiculed. Then it was violently opposed. Today, the idea is accepted as natural. The process is seen as only logical. The value of such an East Asian Community is regarded as self-evident.

It is as self-evident as the fact that ASEAN has over the last 37 years managed to turn enemies into friends and opponents into partners. A Southeast Asia at sixes and fours has been turned into a Southeast Asia at one. Despite perhaps its long list of failures and deficiencies, ASEAN has been able to work as one of the most successful regional conflict-reduction, peace-making and friendship-building machines in the history of the modern world.

As a conflict-reduction, peace-making and friendship-building machine in the modern world, only the European Union has been more dramatically successful than ASEAN. Before the Treaty of Rome – which 50 years ago decided on the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC), which started the European Community-building process in all earnestness – Europe had seen two devastating European civil wars – civil wars so devastating that history calls them world wars: ‘the first world war’ and ‘the second world war’. Whatever the long list of failures and deficiencies of the European process, especially in the field of economics and foreign policy, no one can deny its prowess on the battlefield of regional conflict-reduction, peace-making and friendship-building. After centuries of war, Western Europe is now at peace.

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Keynote Address by Dato’ Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Prime Minister of Malaysia at The Second East Asia Congress at Palace of The Golden Horses, Kuala Lumpur on 21 June 2004.



East ASEAN Community, something like the Bangkok Declaration signed on August 8, 1967, which established the association of South-East ASEAN nations?

As you know, the NAFTA agreement between the United States, Canada and Mexico exceeded 3,000 pages. The Bangkok Declaration of 1967 ran to a full three pages. Roughly one page was devoted to the title and preamble; one page was devoted to the general aims and purposes of ASEAN and the very simple machinery of the association; and the last page set out the signatures of the ministers from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, who committed their nations to the establishment of ASEAN.

You might wish to note that 1967 was a year of substantial turmoil in Southeast Asia. Three of the signatories had just emerged from an undeclared war among themselves. Diplomatic relations between two of the countries that signed the Bangkok Declaration were still in limbo. Two of the signatories were to break their diplomatic relations shortly after signing the Bangkok Declaration. In many ways, the present ASEAN+3 process has advanced further than the problematic ASEAN in its first half decade.

We already have an annual summit meeting of ASEAN+3 leaders who meet regularly – at the highest possible level. ASEAN held its first summit in Bali in 1976. The leaders of ASEAN have held nine formal and four informal meetings in 37 years. The leaders of ASEAN+3 first met in Kuala Lumpur in 1997. This year, they will meet in their eighth summit in Vientiane. In a future ASEAN+3 summit, why not a ‘declaration’ or a ‘concord’ of East Asia? Would that be a good idea symbolically and in terms of laying down the second major milestone?

Ladies and gentlemen, there are many other questions that are already well set out in the agenda for this Second East Asian Congress. How can the economies of East Asia work together to sustain the region’s massive economic growth and near-miraculous economic dynamism? How can we cooperate to make sure that what we have seen over the last generation is merely the end of the beginning? How can we work together to make sure that the tribulations since the economic crisis of 1997 are not the beginning of the end? How can we work together to ensure that expanded Europe and the free trade area of the Americas will not be a threat but an opportunity for us and the rest of the world in the years to come? How can we work together to ensure a fairer, gentler, freer and more productive global trading system?

What specific proposals can we evolve with regard to East Asian monetary and financial cooperation? Why not the creation of the Asian or East Asian Monetary Fund (by any name) that supplements and does not challenge or supplant the IMF, very much in the same way that the Asian Development Bank in Manila supplements and does not challenge or supplant the World



There are many other questions which I can put forward for your deep deliberations. I am sure there are many more questions which your deep deliberations will generate. All this is for the good. I believe that the process of finding the right questions is critical, especially at the beginning of any difficult and protracted process. It is very much better to be equipped with the right questions than to be handicapped by the wrong answers.

Whether East Asians like it or not, whether our friends from other regions like it or not, the process of greater East Asian cooperation, integration and community-building cannot be stopped. Will it eventually be 'EU minus'? Will it be 'ASEAN plus'? Only time will tell, and only our efforts and the intervention of others in the many days ahead will shape the form and the substance of our East Asian Community.

Having set before you many questions, let me end with one set of answers, one very personal vision on the community that we in East Asia should build in the decades to come.

I would suggest that it is important for us to know what we do not want our East Asian Community to be. And it is important to have a clear idea of the imperative parameters, the imperative spirit, the imperative character and the imperative content of the regional community which we want to create.

Let me set out what I personally believe must be the six cardinal imperatives for East Asian Community building. I strongly believe that the East Asian Community we build must be:

- Egalitarian and democratic;
- Omnidirectional and embracing, turning its back on no one;
- Caring and mutually beneficial;
- Committed to global empowerment;
- Devoted to economic prosperity; and
- Obsessive about regional peace and friendship.

First, let me say a few words on the imperative of egalitarianism and democracy. It is surely clear enough that no nation, no state, no people in East Asia wishes to see the rise of 'the greater East Asia co-prosperity sphere' in whatever guise, under whatever façade. There must be no national egotism, no imperial design, no unequal treaties, no compulsion, no intimidation, no coercion, no bullying, no hegemony.

Instead, we must surely seek to build a community that is egalitarian and democratic in structure and spirit. For the countries of the ASEAN Community, this is no new concept. No nation can be expected to be submissive to another, but some nations must be given pride of place. Those accorded this pride of place must in turn know how to behave.



Some will provide more than the average share of activist leadership. But their leadership must be a responsibility to build our regional orchard, not to harvest the entire crop, to reap the fruits of the labour of others.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me now explain what I mean by the imperative of omnidirectionality.

I deeply believe that the East Asian Community we build must be an omnidirectional community of many omnidirectional outward-looking nations with a voracious appetite and capability for multi-tasking, confronting no one and eager to befriend all who can contribute to our peace and prosperity.

States fortunately are not like people. People can only look in one direction at any one time. States can look in every direction all of the time – unless they are lazy or asleep. People can do a limited number of tasks at any one time. Governments must be made up of many hard-working people, doing many different things.

Malaysia's first circle of regional concentration must be ASEAN. But besides its commitment to ASEAN and to East Asian community-building, it must also be a leader of the Organisation of Islamic Conference, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Commonwealth. It must devote time, attention and commitment to APEC, the UN and the WTO. Bilateral relations are incredibly important. We must ensure the strongest productive relations with key countries outside East Asia such as the United States, Saudi Arabia, India, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Australia. It is quite clear that East Asia would be making a mistake if we turn our backs on our friends outside the region who can help us, whose goodwill and friendship we must treasure and enrich. It goes without saying that we in East Asia must be obsessive multi-taskers, with no enthusiasm whatever for making enemies and obsessively active at making friends.

Let me now turn to the imperative of mutual caring and mutual benefit.

From the North Atlantic experience of the 1930s, the world derived the phrase 'beggar thy neighbour'. From the massive growth explosion of the 90s in East Asia was derived the ideology of 'prosper thy neighbour'. We in our region know that if our neighbours do well, so will we. So it must be our duty to our own people and to our own future to ensure as far as possible that our neighbours do well. And when our neighbours are down and are in need of help, we must care and we must offer our helping hand, modest though it may be. All this is not woolly, soft-headed sentiment. It is hard-headed, rational, enlightened self-interest that we must continue to adhere to. We are fortunate that our political leaders do not have to consider the immediate and the very short term, and can hold on to the longer view. We must continue to do so.

In our regional East Asian joint ventures of cooperation, integration and community building, we must also always bear in mind the need to ensure

mutual benefit. Ventures that result in excessively lopsided advantage to one without offering a reasonable benefit to others are not a good idea – even for those temporarily reaping the lion's share.

As for the imperative of regional empowerment, this is nothing more and nothing less than the need to ensure that East Asia's voice, East Asia's weight and East Asia's role should be enhanced in the years to come. We need to be more empowered in the world of economics, in the world of politics and in the world of ideas and culture.

The first is necessary because we live or we die, we prosper or we perish, depending on how the economic world turns. We are the most economically dependent economies in the world, not like the American economy or the European economies, which trade mostly within Europe. Our present and our future are incredibly dependent on decisions made in Washington or New York or Geneva. A continuation of today's disempowerment is too dangerous to leave unattended and unremedied.

We must enhance our voice, our weight and our role also in the world of security and politics and in the realm of ideas, culture and values. We are punching way below our weight. We are a heavyweight, compartmentalised and cribbed in the featherweight class. Our contribution to the fast evolving global structure of peace, security and civilisation remains minimal. This must not be allowed to pass. It must be remedied. And it must be remedied by us.

Ladies and gentlemen, the imperatives of East Asian devotion to economic prosperity also need a little elaboration. Let me merely mention the fact that a great deal of the absolute poverty in the world is to be found in east Asia and a great deal of east Asia is to be found in absolute poverty. The most dramatic progress has been made. But we must not kid ourselves. The long journey to a much better life for our people has only just begun.

Let me end, as I began on the importance of regional peace and friendship. I will press only one point: we must not make the mistake that we and others have made in the past because we took our eyes off the most important objective of all; or because we subordinated peace and friendship to other goals. There are very few, if at all, economic, social, diplomatic, or political benefits that justify a threat to regional peace and regional friendship.

In the years ahead, we must not be prepared to sacrifice the development of our peace and friendship in exchange for other gains. When it comes to our priorities, peace and friendship must be the first without equals. It must be the over-riding imperative.

You may think that this is a controversial point. To the East Asians who remember our history since the 1930s no proof is needed.



To go back to the German philosopher I mentioned at the start (Schopenhauer), I sincerely hope the idea that peace and friendship is by far the most important objective of East Asian Community building will never need to be ridiculed, or violently opposed, before it is accepted as self-evident – by this generation and succeeding generations of East Asian Community builders.

Our desire for peace and friendship must be our main compass. I believe that if we lose this compass, East Asia will be in peril. I believe that if we keep this compass always by our side, we will not lose our way, no matter how the storms of adversity might try to blow us off course. Through the darkest of nights, the thickest of fog, we will be able to find our way to the East Asian Community that we must build in the decades to come.