

Mahathir says no place for Australia in East Asia grouping

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Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said Monday that Australia should be kept out of the new East Asian grouping and slammed the country for refusing to sign a nonaggression pact with Southeast Asia.

"I don't know whether Australia is Asia but it may change its geography. They are ethnic Europeans. They cannot be Asians," Mahathir said.

Australia has "nothing" to offer to the region, he said.

Mahathir, who retired last year, was the first to espouse an East Asian regional bloc over a decade ago only for the idea to be shot down by the United States.

Last week, however, during their meeting in Laos, leaders of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, China, Japan and South Korea agreed to launch an East Asia Summit process next year in Kuala Lumpur.

The East Asia Summit would be the "first milestone on the route to the East Asian Community," Mahathir's successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said in a forum on the East Asian grouping Monday.

While the 10 members of ASEAN and the three Northeast Asian countries -- China, Japan and South Korea -- will certainly be included in the East Asia Summit, some ASEAN officials have not discounted the possibility of Australia, New Zealand and India to be included in the framework in the future.

Leaders from these three countries participated in the ASEAN summit for the first time last week.

Abdullah, who has taken a more conciliatory approach in his foreign policy, indicated last week that Australia and New Zealand would be invited to next year's East Asia Summit.

Australia and New Zealand have launched negotiations for a free trade agreement with ASEAN, but Australian Prime Minister John Howard has irked ASEAN leaders by refusing to sign a regional nonaggression pact known as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

New Zealand has already signed the treaty, which calls for the signatories to respect each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity and the rule of law.

Australia refused to sign the treaty for fear that it would prevent the country from criticizing domestic policies of ASEAN members it finds disagreeable such as human rights abuses in Myanmar.

Poking at Howard's tough talk of possible preemptive strikes against terrorist bases overseas, Mahathir described Australia's stand as telling ASEAN "If you don't behave yourself, you get invaded."

ASEAN groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

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