



Historic meeting: Leaders posing for a group photo at the inaugural EAS of the 11th Asean Summit. (From left) Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, Cambodian Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Laotian Prime Minister Bounnhang Vorachith, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Australian Prime Minister John Howard, Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Myanmar Prime Minister General Soe Win, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai

STRONGER THROUGH ALLIANCE

Does the East Asia Summit stand to bring any real benefits to member nations or will it become just another pointless forum?

By Habhajan Singh

THE recently concluded East Asia Summit (EAS) was full of photo opportunities of leaders of some very powerful nations. Topping the Kodak-moment list would be Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi extending his hand to borrow a pen from his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao during the signing of the summit declaration. Both nations have been at loggerheads for some time now. While altering nothing on the political front, both the premiers touched the hearts of the delegates with their gesture.

On that note, is the EAS any different? Beyond the niceties and exchange of pleasantries, will it make any difference to the regional political map? Is it the beginning of something beautiful or merely another grand-but-pointless forum? Malaysia mooted the idea of an EAS-like forum in 1991. Now that it has finally taken root more than two decades later, will it generate new opportunities for member nations?

In a region packed with ongoing rivalries and saddled with weighty political baggage,

the summit was somewhat of a milestone.

The Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the EAS is very clear on the role of the region: It's a 'source of dynamism for the world economy' today.

The declaration states that the EAS 'has been established as a forum for dialogue on broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest and concerns with the aim of promoting peace, stability and economic prosperity in East Asia'.

There is a lot more of this than where it's coming from. But is the money spent on bringing together the top leaders of 16 nations and a retinue of officials worth it?

Regionalism

The EAS, like many other ventures, raises the interesting question as to what motivates states to accept regionalism despite its glaring weaknesses.

The most important factor, according to regional analyst Amitav Acharya, is the fear of the unknown. 'The desire to participate in regional groupings is driven not so much by their expected utility, but the fear of the

unexpected. Asian regionalism today, as in the past, is an insurance against strategic uncertainty,' observers Prof Amitav, Deputy Director and Head of Research of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, in his paper on the role of regional organisations presented in Washington last year.

While some regional groupings may start off as mere measures to fend off the unexpected, under the right circumstances, it can grow. Look at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean). The 10-member grouping, which is the driving force behind the EAS (the EAS is held back-to-back with the Asean Summit), has come of age since its inception in 1967. Today, partly due to some degree of regional stability, its member nations with a population of 550 million have seen total trade exceeding US\$ 1 trillion.

During the recently concluded 11th Asean Summit, its leaders laid yet another foundation when they agreed to establish the Asean Charter. The charter will act as a

'landmark constitutional document embodying fundamental principles, goals, objectives and structures of Asean cooperation capable of meeting the needs of the Asean Community and beyond'.

But Asean has enough of its own problems. Getting its trade act together is still a major hurdle, as observed by Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. 'One reason why Asean has not been more successful in attracting investments is the relatively high cost of operating in the region. As some foreign investors have indicated, Asean currently still operates as 10 different economic entities, with different rules and standards, all of which raise transaction costs,' he said when addressing

Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC).

The US had its reservations. After all, it saw no need for such a grouping when the regional countries were already meeting under the auspices of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec).

The-then US Secretary of State James Baker warned of the danger of drawing the line down the middle of the Pacific. On the surface, Baker and the US took a moderate line in its campaign to subvert Dr Mahathir's brainchild. But not so behind closed doors. Years later, the true extent of the US's anger became clear. In his memoirs, Baker revealed: 'In private I did my best to kill it.'

However, the final structure of the summit was also not to Dr Mahathir's liking. He



On a lighter note: Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (second, right) smiling after lending his pen to Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (right) at the signing of the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the EAS at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre on Dec 14. Looking on are Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (centre), Australian Prime Minister John Howard and South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun (left)

the third Asean Business and Investment Forum, one of the many events organised on the sidelines of the Asean gathering.

Genesis

Beyond procuring political insurance, former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had the grand idea of East Asian nations sitting at the table to thrash out their problems and working out common grounds in the face of the outside world. It was also supposed to be one of the biggest and strongest alliances of Asian nations with the United States clearly not in the driving seat. Back in 1991, the idea was mooted as the East

campaign hard to keep groupings limited to East Asians. When the EAS finally took place, there were 16 leaders – 10 Asean members plus the initial three East Asian nations: Japan, South Korea and China. Finding themselves at the party were leaders from India, Australia and New Zealand.

In an interview just before the summit, Dr Mahathir said: 'I have always opposed the idea of Australia and New Zealand being in the group simply because Australia and New Zealand are not really East nor are they Asian.'

Abdul Razak Baginda, head of the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre, agrees

with Dr Mahathir on this score. The local political analyst believes that the EAS should have, as its name suggests, remained the domain of East Asian nations. 'Asean has created a monster and does not know what to do with it. East Asia should have remained with the East Asian countries, basically Asean + 3. When you open up to too many countries, you risk things falling apart,' he says.

Dr Mahathir, on the other hand, is fine with India's participation as it is an Asian nation. Here, Abdul Razak doesn't quite buy his argument. If the forum was opening its doors, he argues, then Malaysia actually has more in common with Australia than India. 'In fact, there have been Australian blood shed in the defence of Malaysia,' he says.

Of course, the actual composition is the result of intense regional horse-trading. In a way, the EAS, while still bearing the regional geography of East Asia, actually pulls together members from South Asia to New Zealand on the other side. In a way, it is a balancing act. For example, India was brought to the table as a counterbalance to China's dominance.

Moving forward

So what happened at the summit? Leaders of the 16 nations touched on recent developments in the region, international terrorism, maritime security and the threat of infectious diseases.

'We had extensive and in-depth discussions on the EAS and its role in the evolving regional architecture. We agreed that the EAS with Asean as the driving force is an integral part of the overall evolving regional architecture,' said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, in his capacity as the first chairman of the EAS.

The statement also noted that the EAS should remain open and outward looking, with Asean as the driving force.

Regardless of who sits in the driving seat, the road ahead remains hazy and fuzzy. Should we just write off this group as yet another bad deal? We take another interesting quote from the paper presented by Singapore's Amitav. Though not referring to the EAS in particular, the idea certainly is worth noting: '... it will be a mistake to write off regionalism completely or regard it as a spent force. Multilateralism does offer important benefits, including, as noted, the engagement of China.' **mb**