Towards an East Asia Community: The Journey Has Begun

By Termsak Chalermpelanupap

We, the people of East Asia, are witnessing a historic development in our vast region. For the first time in modern history, our government leaders have voluntarily come together to explore and participate in regional cooperation. They have come together with a common conviction that in this new millennium of globalization, we in East Asia must cooperate as we face and try to tackle common challenges in this increasingly borderless interdependent world.

In coming together, our leaders share a common vision that with huge potentials of human, natural and economic resources, the nations and people of East Asia can, by working together, strengthen peace and human security, promote development and ensure sustainable prosperity. And they are convinced that a united community of peaceful, prosperous and dynamic East Asian nations can become an effective force for peace, justice and development in the world.

This paper is about the rapid developments of regional cooperation in East Asia in recent years. Looking at them from the perspective of an East Asian, the steadily expanding regional cooperation is very encouraging.

The regional cooperation in East Asia has increased our self-confidence to try to think and act together in the face of common challenges that we cannot avoid. It has opened up new opportunities for governments to normalize and improve their relations; for business people to trade and invest and reap more profits; and for people to come to know more about their East Asian neighbours through tourism, information and cultural exchanges.

Most important of all, the regional cooperation has brought home the exciting realization that we, the people of East Asia, are very capable of working together, with goodwill and solidarity, to create a better future for all of us and a better world for our descendants.

ASEAN and Regionalism in East Asia

Compared with Western Europe, Latin America and Africa, East Asia is a newcomer to regional cooperation. After the Second World War, regional cooperation in East Asia was mostly undertaken under the UN auspices (ECAFE, now ESCAP; Mekong Committee, now Mekong River Commission; and the ADB) or in the Cold War context (SEATO and ASPEC, now defunct). The Korean War and the wars in Indochina effectively divided East Asia into opposing ideological camps, with the US playing a dominating role in virtually all East Asian countries in the so-called “Free World” camp. With military might, immense economic resources and hyper-active diplomats and secret operatives, the US propped up friendly regimes and undermined or overthrew unfriendly ones at will. East Asia then was firmly in the grip of the US.

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Out of the blue, the US turned to seek normalization with China in the early 1970s. Suddenly, peaceful coexistence with China became a higher priority of the US than confrontation and containment of China. All the followers of the US in the “Free World” camp in East Asia had no choice but to scramble to adjust their policy orientation accordingly.

Nations in Southeast Asia had long suffered from submitting to the whims of external powers. All in Southeast Asia, except the fortunate Thai nation, were colonized. After the Second World War, foreign interference in our internal and regional affairs continued as part of their Cold War struggle against China and the Soviet Union.

With high hopes in the aims and objectives of the UN Charter, several Southeast Asian nations took part in the Bandung Conference of 1955 in Indonesia, which came up with the Declaration on the Promotion of World Peace and Cooperation, based on the principles of peaceful coexistence. And while the US was escalating its direct involvement in the Viet Nam War in 1967, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand founded the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The ASEAN Declaration of 8 August 1967 (which is sometimes referred to as the “Bangkok Declaration,” for it was issued after a ministerial meeting of the five founding members in Bangkok), emphasized the desire to end external interference and to take primary responsibility in regional affairs. The ASEAN Declaration said in part that:

“Considering that the countries in Southeast Asia share a primary responsibility for strengthening the economic and social stability of the region and ensuring their peaceful and progressive national development, and that they are determined to ensure their stability and security from external interference in any form or manifestation in order to preserve their national identities in accordance with the ideals and aspirations of their peoples; ...”

What ASEAN hoped to achieve politically was further spelled out in the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers in Kuala Lumpur on 27 November 1971. The Kuala Lumpur Declaration, which is also known as the ZOPFAN Declaration, again stressed the high hopes in and adherence to the principles in the UN Charter. The Declaration said in part that:

“Recognizing the right of every State, large or small, to lead its national existence free from outside interference in its internal affairs as this interference will adversely affect its freedom, independence and integrity; ...”

The Declaration stated also:

“That Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand are determined to exert initially necessary efforts to secure the recognition of, and respect for, Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, free from any form or manner of interference by outside Powers;

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1 All ASEAN documents mentioned in this paper, as highlighted in bold font, are available on the web site of the ASEAN Secretariat at: www.aseansec.org
“That Southeast Asian countries should make concerted efforts to broaden the areas of cooperation which would contribute to their strength, solidarity and closer relationship.”

A few months after the end of the wars in Indochina, ASEAN Leaders met for the first time in Bali on 24 February 1976. In their Declaration of ASEAN Concord, they spelled out their common objectives and principles, which included at the top of the list the following two:

“I. The stability of each Member State and of the ASEAN region is an essential contribution to international peace and security. Each Member State resolves to eliminate threats posed by subversion to its stability, thus strengthening national and ASEAN resilience.

2. Member States, individually and collectively, shall take active steps for the early establishment of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality.”

The ASEAN Leaders also adopted at their Bali Summit programmes of action in the following areas: political, economic, social, cultural and information, security, and improvement of ASEAN machinery (which included the establishment of the ASEAN Secretariat). Interestingly, the programme of action on security matters merely called for “Continuation of cooperation on a non-ASEAN basis between the member States in security matters in accordance with their mutual needs and interests.”

In addition, the ASEAN Leaders signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), which laid down the legal framework for inter-States relations based on the principles of UN Charter, the Ten Principles of the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955, the ASEAN Declaration and the ZOPFAN Declaration. “Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another” was written down in Article 2 c as one of the fundamental principles. The Treaty provided for pacific settlement of disputes through regional processes, including the convening of a ministerial High Council to “take cognizance of the dispute or the situation and shall recommend to the parties in dispute appropriate means of settlement such as good offices, mediation, inquiry or conciliation... [and] when deemed necessary, the High Council shall recommend appropriate measures for the prevention of a deterioration of the dispute or the situation.”

ASEAN’s strict adherence to the principles of non-interference, equality and mutual respect, was an important reason for the other Southeast Asian nations to join the young regional grouping. First it was Brunei Darussalam, immediately after its independence from the UK, which joined ASEAN in January 1984. Next came Viet Nam in July 1995. The expansion of the ASEAN membership to include Viet Nam symbolically heralded a new era in Southeast Asia, in which differences of ideology and political system were no longer considered as any hindrances to regional cooperation. This reflected a paradigm shift in the strategic thinking in Southeast Asia.

In December 1995, at the Fifth ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, the Leaders of the seven ASEAN Member Countries together with their counterparts from Cambodia, Laos and
Myanmar signed the Treaty on Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ). Without the paradigm shift and the growing mutual trust in Southeast Asia, signing such a monumental regional agreement would be impossible.

SEANWFZ is now the second strategic component of ASEAN’s ZOPFAN after the TAC. ASEAN has been engaging all the five Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) to persuade them to sign the Protocol to the SEANWFZ Treaty, to recognize and respect SEANWFZ and to support ASEAN in developing cooperation with all parties concerned, including the IAEA.

Laos and Myanmar joined ASEAN in July 1997 and Cambodia in April 1999. The long-cherished dream of the ASEAN Founders to see all nations of Southeast Asia come under one ASEAN roof to work for common regional peace, progress and prosperity was realized.  

While ASEAN members have laboriously been making concerted efforts to unify Southeast Asian nations, they have never lost sight of the need to engage their external friends and partners in cooperation activities for mutual benefit and common good. In the ASEAN Vision 2020, adopted by ASEAN Leaders at their 2nd Informal Summit in Kuala Lumpur on 15 December 1997, the Leaders stated that:

“We see an outward-looking ASEAN playing a pivotal role in the international fora, and advancing ASEAN’s common interests. We envision ASEAN having an intensified relationship with its Dialogue Partners and other regional organizations based on equal partnership and mutual respect.”

Over the years, ASEAN has built an elaborate process of engaging as Dialogue Partners key countries that are economically and/or politically important to ASEAN. They are: Australia, Canada, China, the EU, India, Japan, the RoK, New Zealand, Russia and the US. The UNDP is also a Dialogue Partner. Pakistan is a Sectoral Dialogue Partner.  

ASEAN and Northeast Asia

The relations of ASEAN as a grouping with Northeast Asia started with its dialogue with Japan in 1973. In August 1977, at the Second ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, ASEAN Leaders met with Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda. Under the so-called “Fukuda Doctrine” Japan reassured that Japan’s policy towards Southeast Asia would give the top priority to supporting national development in ASEAN countries. At the Third

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2 East Timor, which gained independence in May 2002, has expressed an interest in joining ASEAN in the future. So far both ASEAN and East Timor have agreed to take some more time to learn more about each other. The Foreign Minister of East Timor was invited to the 35th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, in July 2002 as Guest of ASEAN. East Timor has also informed ASEAN of its wish to accede to the ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) as a regional State, and to apply for the Observer status in ASEAN. Meanwhile, East Timor has reportedly been accorded the status of Special Observer in the Pacific Islands Forum. Papua New Guinea is in the Pacific Islands Forum; it was accorded in 1976 the status of Special Observer in ASEAN (with no intention to join ASEAN as a member), and it was the first in 1989, and so far the only non-regional State, to accede to the TAC.

3 There is no political/security cooperation in a Sectoral Dialogue relationship. Pakistan does not attend the annual AMM/PMC or the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).
ASEAN Summit in Manila in December 1987, ASEAN Leaders met with Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita.⁴

The RoK is ASEAN’s second Dialogue Partner from Northeast Asia. ASEAN and the RoK first established their Sectoral Dialogue relations in November 1989. The ASEAN-RoK cooperation was at first confined to the areas of trade, investment and tourism. The cooperation with the RoK was upgraded to full Dialogue Partnership in July 1991 at the 24th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Kuala Lumpur.

ASEAN’s relations with China started in 1991 at the 24th AMM when the Foreign Minister of China was invited as Guest of the Host (Malaysia) to attend the opening ceremony and, more importantly, to meet with ASEAN Foreign Ministers in an informal consultation session. ASEAN and China quickly found mutual interest in their subsequent contacts and consultations. China became a full Dialogue Partner at the 29th AMM in Jakarta in 1996.

China, Japan and the RoK joined ASEAN in launching the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Bangkok in 1994.⁵ Through the ARF, ASEAN found its newest friend in Northeast Asia, the DPRK. The Foreign Minister of the DPRK attended for the first time the 7th ARF ministerial meeting in Bangkok in July 2000. The DPRK must have found reassurances in the track record of ASEAN in using the “ASEAN way” to manage the ARF process through consultation and consensus building and to develop the ARF at a pace comfortable to all of the participants.

APEC, AFTA, ASEM, EAEG/EAEC

In the late 1980s, ASEAN was alarmed by the growing competition from the mushrooming free trade areas (FTA) in the world, including the formation of a single European market, the market integration between the US and Canada and the US and Mexico, which soon led to NAFTA. ASEAN was also dismayed by the slow progress in the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations. Four significant developments emerged during the 1980s and 1990s that represented efforts of ASEAN and its Members:

⁴ The Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand also had separate meetings with the ASEAN Leaders on the sidelines of the Second ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in August 1977. But there were no such meetings with Australia and New Zealand during the Third ASEAN Summit in Manila in December 1987.

⁵ The main event of the ARF is the day-long annual meeting of Foreign Ministers on the fringes of the AMM. Participants in the ARF are: Foreign Ministers of all the ASEAN Member Countries and the Secretary-General of ASEAN, all the 10 ASEAN’s Dialogue Partners (not including the UNDP), Papua New Guinea (as a Special Observer in ASEAN), Mongolia and the DPRK. Pakistan and East Timor have expressed their keen interest to join the ARF. At the 9th ARF in Bandar Seri Begawan in July 2002, the ARF Ministers agreed to defer participation of Pakistan and East Timor in the ARF until the right timing. In between the annual ARF ministerial meetings, participating countries take part in a growing number of political/security/defence meetings, workshops and other cooperation activities. The ARF has established only one supporting body, i.e. the Inter-sessional Support Group on Confidence Building Measures (ISG-CBM). In this 2002-2003 inter-session year, the ISG-CBM is co-chaired by Laos and New Zealand. At the 9th ARF, the Ministers agreed to establish a new inter-sessional meeting on counter-terrorism and transnational crime (ISM-CT/TC). It will be co-chaired by Malaysia and the US. ISM is ad hoc in nature; it will be discontinued once the ARF Ministers deem it no longer necessary. The ARF had ISMs on peace-keeping operations and on disaster relief operations in the past; they were discontinued a few years ago.
Countries to try to improve their collective as well as individual positions in the face of the adverse world economic situation.

**APEC**

First, ASEAN cooperated with Australia in establishing APEC in 1989. The decision to locate the APEC Secretariat in Singapore in 1993 could be seen as recognition of the active support of ASEAN, and of Singapore in particular, for the APEC process. The APEC process opened new opportunities for ASEAN Member Countries to cooperate with not only China, Japan and the RoK, but also with Chinese Taipei and Hong Kong. Participation in the APEC process is on the national economy basis. So far, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are still waiting for the first opportunity to join APEC.

**AFTA**

Next, came the idea of an ASEAN Free Trade Area first espoused by Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun of Thailand. At the Second ASEAN Summit held in Singapore on 27-28 January 1992, ASEAN Leaders endorsed the idea of an AFTA when they signed the Framework Agreement on Enhancing ASEAN Economic Cooperation. The Framework Agreement spelled out their commitment to promote cooperation in several areas, most important of which was the cooperation in trade. Also at the Singapore Summit, ASEAN Economic Ministers signed the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) Scheme for the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) to start the realization of AFTA.  

**ASEM**

With active support from China, Japan and the RoK, ASEAN Member Countries initiated the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process for East Asia to engage the EU, especially in economic cooperation, human resource development and transfer of technology. Thailand was given the honour to host the First ASEM in Bangkok in 1996. Like in APEC, participation in ASEM is also on the national basis. So far, the three newer ASEAN Member Countries – Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar – are still out of the ASEM process.

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6 In 1992, ASEAN had only six members: Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

At first, AFTA was to be created in 15 years starting in 1993. Just one year after implementation, the six ASEAN members quickly realized that their original 15-year target was too conservative. The ASEAN Economic Ministers in 1994 agreed to accelerate the realization of AFTA from 15 to 10 years, by 1 January 2003, instead of 2008.

Immediately after Viet Nam joined ASEAN in July 1995, Laos and Myanmar in July 1997, and Cambodia in April 1999, each of the new Member Countries was given a 10-year timetable to complete implementing the CEPT Scheme.

At the Sixth ASEAN Summit in Ha Noi in December 1998, ASEAN Leaders agreed that the six older ASEAN Member Countries would accelerate their implementation by one year to complete AFTA in their countries by 1 January 2002.

7 ASEM could be attributed as the brainchild of Singapore’s Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who wanted to see East Asia develop a stronger inter-regional link with the EU.

Participation in ASEM is on the individual national basis; ASEAN Member Countries do not go in as a group. Hence ASEAN membership does not automatically qualify Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar...
The third response of direct interest to this Roundtable was the emergence of an idea to establish an East Asia Economic Group (EAEG). Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia began to espouse his idea of an EAEG in 1990. His view was that countries in East Asia (Southeast Asia + Northeast Asia) should do more in consultation and cooperation to help lesser-developed economies in the region overcome difficulties, and to help transitional economies such as Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam in reform and reconstruction.

Soon after that, the Malaysian Minister of International Trade and Industry visited the other ASEAN countries to explain the EAEG idea. The thinking then was that the EAEG would comprise the six ASEAN Member Countries, Japan, the RoK, China, Hong Kong, Chinese Taipei and Viet Nam. The Group could meet as and when necessary, either back-to-back with the annual ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and Post Ministerial Conferences (AMM/PMC) of Foreign Ministers, or back-to-back with the annual meeting of ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) to discuss issues of common concern to East Asian economies.

ASEAN convened a special Senior Economic Official Meeting (Special SEOM) in Bandung, Indonesia, on 15-16 March 1991 to discuss the EAEG formally for the first time. Subsequently, the EAEG was discussed at the 23rd AEM in Malaysia in October 1991. At the opening of the 23rd AEM Meeting, Prime Minister Mahathir stressed the need to work together with the East Asian economies through the formation of the EAEG, because ASEAN Member Countries alone were not strong enough to make a difference in world trade. He said that the EAEG would be GATT-consistent; it would not be a trade bloc because it would stand for free trade, and it would not be detrimental to ASEAN’s cohesiveness.

The 23rd AEM agreed to an East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC), instead of the EAEG, and recommended it for consideration at the Fourth ASEAN Summit in Singapore in January 1992. Some details of the EAEC were described in the Joint Press Statement of the 23rd AEM.

At the Second Summit in Singapore, the EAEC was endorsed by ASEAN Leaders as part of ASEAN’s efforts in strengthening and/or establishing cooperation with other countries, regional/multilateral economic organizations, as well as APEC. In the Singapore Declaration, ASEAN Leaders stated that:

“With respect to an EAEC, ASEAN recognises that consultations on issues of common concern among East Asian economies, as and when the need arises, could contribute to expanding cooperation among the region’s economies, and the promotion of an open and free global trading system; ...”

Viet Nam will be the host of the Fifth ASEM in 2004. A concerted effort is underway to lobby for support of China, Japan and the RoK for the candidatures of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar to join ASEM in time for the Fifth ASEM in Viet Nam.
Subsequently, the Secretary-General of the ASEAN Secretariat, 8 Mr. Rusli Noor from Brunei Darussalam, was tasked to study an appropriate modality to realize the EAEC. The study was completed by the new Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dato Ajit Singh from Malaysia, who took over the helm of the restructured ASEAN Secretariat at the beginning of 1993.

ASEAN officials considered the modality of the EAEC proposed by the Secretary-General of ASEAN and submitted it to ASEAN Foreign Ministers, who at their 26th AMM in Singapore in July 1993, decided that the EAEC would be a “caucus within APEC” and that the AEM would provide support and direction to the EAEC.

The “caucus within APEC” indicated that the EAEC would function independently; it would not be a mechanism of APEC. The understanding of ASEAN then was that the EAEC need not discuss only APEC issues; it could determine its own agenda and work programme. The EAEC need not necessarily report to APEC either.

China was interested in joining the EAEC. But China’s support would come with a condition that Chinese Taipei and Hong Kong must not be included, even though these two along with China already joined APEC in November 1991. China’s preference was to confine the EAEC membership to only sovereign States. Japan and the RoK, meanwhile, were reluctant to take a clear stand, especially after the US expressed strong opposition to the EAEC.

The US unfortunately considered the EAEC as both a threat to APEC and to the US presence in the Asia-Pacific region. The US argued that by including some and excluding others in APEC, the EAEC could “weaken APEC or complicate its deliberations.” Moreover, said the US in a demarche to the Secretary-General of ASEAN in 1993, “the US would be concerned about anything that raises questions about United States commitment to the region and exclusion from the region.”

Nevertheless, ASEAN continued to try to explain the EAEC to win support from especially China, Japan and the RoK. The Secretary-General of ASEAN visited these three countries in November 1993 to discuss the EAEC. More importantly, ASEAN Foreign Ministers held a working lunch with Foreign Ministers of Japan, China and the RoK in Bangkok on 25 July 1994, on the sidelines of the 27th AMM/PMC.

The Joint Communiqué of the 27th AMM reported that the Foreign Ministers had a discussion on the EAEC and agreed that the consultations would continue on this informal basis. Incidentally, the Foreign Minister of RoK at that time was Dr. Han

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8 Until the end of 1992, the head of the ASEAN Secretariat was designated as the Secretary-General of the ASEAN Secretariat. His appointment to a 3-year term was based on alphabetical rotation among ASEAN Member Countries.

Following the major restructuring of ASEAN mechanisms in 1992, the head of the ASEAN Secretariat was re-designated as the Secretary-General of ASEAN and was accorded the Ministerial status. His selection is based on merit as well as nomination from Member Countries. The Secretary-General is appointed to a 5-year term by the ASEAN Heads of Government/State.

The current Secretary-General of ASEAN, Mr. Rodolfo C. Severino, Jr. from the Philippines will complete his term at the end of 2002. Mr. Ong Keng Yong, press secretary to the Prime Minister of Singapore, has been nominated by ASEAN Foreign Ministers to succeed Mr. Severino. His appointment is expected at the upcoming Eighth ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh on 4-5 November 2002.
Sung-joo, who would subsequently play a leading role in advocating community building in East Asia when he chaired the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG).

While the ASEAN side learned nothing new from the Foreign Ministers of China, Japan and the RoK at the working lunch, one unintended but very significant outcome from the informal meeting was the agreement to continue to meet on the same informal basis. This paved the way to what would turn out to be the ASEAN+3 process for cooperation in East Asia.

From 1995-1997, the ASEAN Economic Ministers took the lead in consulting their partners from China, Japan and the RoK on the EAEC. In 1996, the AEM reported “increasing receptiveness of the EAEC among the Asia-Pacific countries” and agreed to continue the ASEAN efforts to realize the EAEC. The AEM also agreed to develop programmes for development of SMEs and human resources and assigned Malaysia to come up with a paper on this matter. In 1997, again the AEM reiterated the “increasing receptiveness of the EAEC among the Asia-Pacific countries” and took note of the SMEs development programme being undertaken.

By 1998 when the financial crisis in East Asia was in full-blown, the AEM no longer mentioned the EAEC in the Joint Press Statement. Even when Malaysia hosted the APEC Economic Leaders Meeting in 1998, Prime Minister Mahathir did not pursue the EAEC anymore. Thus the EAEC idea was quietly laid to rest. Or is it?

ASEAN+3 Process

The reason Prime Minister Mahathir need not pursue the EAEC any more was because he succeeded in initiating something even more satisfying and far-reaching. For on 16 December 1997, he played host to the historic inaugural meeting of ASEAN+3 Summit, which was followed by three successive ASEAN+1 Summits with the Chinese President, the Prime Minister of Japan and the Prime Minister of RoK.

Apart from Prime Minister Mahathir, another East Asian Leader who could rightly share the honour for initiating the historic development was Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto of Japan. In his policy speech in Singapore on 14 January 1997, Prime Minister Hashimoto called for a “broader and deeper partnership” between ASEAN and Japan. In particular, he proposed, among other things, a “broader and deeper exchanges between Japan and ASEAN at top and all the other levels”.

The Japanese proposal for an ASEAN-Japan Summit would certainly be considered positively in ASEAN. After all, Japan has been one of the most active Dialogue Partners of ASEAN since the early 1970s. And ASEAN Leaders had met with the two Japanese Prime Ministers in 1977 and 1987. Malaysia quickly found all the other Member Countries fairly receptive to the idea of an ASEAN-Japan Summit, beck-top-back with

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9 The other two Japanese proposals in the “Hashimoto Doctrine” called for active cooperation between ASEAN and Japan “to preserve and restore cultural heritages, and to maintain and development unique cultures”; and joint initiatives to tackle problems confronting the international community such as “terrorism, the environment, enhancing health and welfare, food and energy shortages, population growth, AIDS, narcotics, and reinforcing the rule of law”.
the 2nd Informal Summit in Kuala Lumpur. The initiative quickly grew into a more ambitious plan to also invite China and the RoK to meet ASEAN Leaders. The responses from China and RoK were also very positive. Thus the ASEAN+3 process was born.

At first, the emphasis was more on strengthening cooperation between ASEAN-China, ASEAN-Japan and ASEAN-RoK, building on their existing dialogue mechanisms. The inaugural meeting between ASEAN Leaders and their counterparts from China, Japan and the RoK on 16 December 1997 was followed by three successive bilateral meetings between ASEAN-China, ASEAN-Japan and ASEAN-RoK. In the end, ASEAN Leaders and their counterparts from China, Japan and RoK issued three Joint Statements on their respective bilateral cooperation towards the 21st century.

The ASEAN-China Joint Statement affirmed the commitment to:

“promote good-neighbourly and friendly relations, increase high-level exchanges, strengthen the mechanism of dialogue and cooperation in all areas to enhance understanding and mutual benefit. ... “China underlined its conviction that the economies of the East Asian region would continue to be one of the fastest growing in the world. ASEAN member States and China agreed on the need to consolidate their close economic relations by promoting trade and investment, facilitating market access, improving the flow of technology and enhancing the flow of and access to trade and investment related information. ...”

The ASEAN-China Joint Statement also stated the agreement that

“the maintenance of regional peace and stability served the interests of all parties, they undertook to resolve their differences or disputes through peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force. The parties concerned agreed to resolve their

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10 After the First Summit in Bali on 23-24 February 1976, ASEAN Leaders met in Kuala Lumpur in the Second Summit in Kuala Lumpur on 4-5 August 1977, which coincided with the 10th anniversary of ASEAN (ASEAN was established in Bangkok on 8 August 1967). The Third Summit was held in Manila on 14-15 December 1987 (the 20th anniversary of ASEAN). The Fourth Summit was held in Singapore on 27-28 January 1992.

In Singapore, ASEAN Leaders agreed to convene a summit every three years. Hence, the Fifth Summit in Bangkok was held in 1995. In Bangkok, ASEAN Leaders further agreed to convene an informal summit in each of the two years in between the two formal summits. The 1st Informal Summit was held in Jakarta on 30 November 1996. The 2nd Informal Summit was held in Kuala Lumpur on 14-16 December 1997. In 1998, the Sixth Summit was in Ha Noi on 15-16 December 1998. The 3rd Informal Summit was in Manila on 27-28 November 1999; and the 4th Informal Summit was held in Singapore on 22-25 November 2000.

At the 4th Informal Summit, ASEAN Leaders agreed to meet in an annual summit without the distinction of it being either formal or informal summit. State ceremonies and preparatory meetings would be minimized, while papers and documents reduced to a necessary minimum. The emphasis would be on providing a congenial atmosphere for ASEAN leaders to discuss issues of their common interest.

The Seventh Summit in Bandar Seri Begawan on 5-6 November 2001 was the first summit held under the new format. This year the Eighth ASEAN Summit will be held in Phnom Penh on 4-5 November 2002.

11 The “parties concerned” in the disputes in the South China Sea usually refer to Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Viet Nam on the ASEAN side and China. Taiwan has laid claims over many disputed areas in the South China Sea and militarily occupied some of the disputed islands. But Taiwan has never been involved in the ongoing ASEAN-China process to draw up a code of conduct in the South China Sea.
disputes in the South China Sea through friendly consultations and negotiations in accordance with universally recognized international law, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea."

In the ASEAN-Japan Joint Statement, Leaders of ASEAN Member Countries and Japan:

“expressed their determination to work together to ensure that future generations would live in peace and stability and that social and economic development would be sustained. With a view to fostering an enhanced partnership, they decided to intensify dialogues and exchanges at all levels.”

In the ASEAN-RoK Joint Statement, Leaders of ASEAN Member Countries and the RoK:

“agreed that the stability and prosperity of Northeast and Southeast Asia were interlinked and it was essential for both sides to work closely together for the mutual benefit of both regions.”

These three separate Joint Statements were based on one common theme: cooperation between ASEAN and each of the three Northeast Asian nations would benefit both sides and would become building blocks for regional cooperation in East Asia.

Formation of the East Asia Vision Group

At the ASEAN+3 Summit in Ha Noi on 16 December 1998, it was agreed that Leaders of ASEAN, China, Japan and RoK would meet regularly every year. Another important outcome was a decision to set up the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG).

The EAVG was President Kim Dae Jung’s initiative designed to bring together experts from Track-2 to discuss the future of cooperation in East Asia and to submit recommendations to the fifth ASEAN+3 Summit in Brunei Darussalam in 2001. Two representatives from each of the 10 ASEAN Member Countries, China, Japan and the RoK would form the EAVG.

Subsequently, former RoK Foreign Minister Dr. Han Sung-joo, now a professor at Korea University, was appointed to chair the EAVG. The EAVG Secretariat was run by the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, whose president, Dr. Lee Kyung-Tae, was also a Korean representative on the EAVG. The ASEAN Secretariat was invited as an observer to EAVG meetings.12

Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation (1999)

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12 Dr. Suthad Setboonsarng, Deputy Secretary-General (Operations) represented the ASEAN Secretariat to attend the first two EAVG meetings; the author of this paper attended the last three EAVG meetings.
It was at the third ASEAN+3 Summit in Manila on 28 November 1999 that Leaders of ASEAN Member Countries, China, Japan and the RoK spelled out what they hoped to achieve together in East Asia. In their Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation, the Leaders said in part that:

“They noted the bright prospects for enhanced interaction and closer linkages in East Asia and recognized the fact that this growing interaction has helped increase opportunities for cooperation and collaboration with each other, thereby strengthening the elements essential for the promotion of peace, stability and prosperity in the region.”

“Mindful of the challenges and opportunities in the new millennium, as well as the growing regional interdependence in the age of globalization and information, they agreed to promote dialogue and to deepen and consolidate collective efforts with a view to advancing mutual understanding, trust, good neighbourliness and friendly relations, peace, stability and prosperity in East Asia and the world.”

Historic Meeting of China, Japan and RoK

Also at the third ASEAN+3 Summit in Manila another historic event took place. Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, and President Kim Dae Jung had an informal breakfast meeting at Manila Hotel on 27 November 1999. This was the first meeting among the heads of government of these three countries in modern times. And it was their common desire to work with ASEAN and to develop East Asia cooperation that brought them together.

At the fourth ASEAN+3 Summit in Singapore in November 2000, Leaders of China, Japan and RoK held their second informal breakfast meeting. They agreed, among other things, to regularize their working breakfast meeting to improve coordination in cooperating with ASEAN under the ASEAN+3 framework. They also established a +3 coordination group to work closely with ASEAN’s Working Group on e-ASEAN on ICT cooperation.

ASEAN+3 Ministerial Meetings

The 1999 Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation mentioned only the ASEAN+3 Foreign Ministers Meeting as a mechanism to review the progress of the implementation of the Joint Statement. Since then ASEAN+3 ministerial meetings on finance, economic/trade, labour, agriculture and forestry, tourism have been convened and regularized. A few more ASEAN+3 ministerial forums are emerging.

Japan convened in Osaka on 22 September 2002 a working luncheon meeting among the ASEAN + 3 Energy Ministers on the fringes of the 8th International Energy Forum held in Osaka from 21-23 September 2002. ASEAN+3 Ministers of the Environment plan to convene their first meeting in November 2002 in Vientiane. ASEAN Ministers on Transnational Crime will convene the first ASEAN+3 ministerial meeting on Transnational Crime with China, Japan and the RoK in Thailand in October 2003.

Each of these ministerial meetings is served by a lower layer of senior officials meetings (SOM). One relatively new addition at this level is the ASEAN+3 Directors-General
Meeting, which was formally established in an inaugural meeting in Seoul on 30 August 2002. This newest ASEAN+3 body will have a direct responsibility in exploring all relevant issues concerning the future direction of East Asia cooperation.

EAVG Meetings

The EAVG met five times: EAVG-I, Seoul, 21-22 October 1999; EAVG-II, Shanghai, 20-21 April 2000; EAVG-III, Tokyo, 2-4 October 2000; EAVG-IV, Bali, 14-16 February 2001 (organized by the ASEAN Secretariat); and EAVG-V, Seoul, 27-29 May 2001. In the afternoon of 29 May 2001, the EAVG paid a courtesy call on President Kim Dae Jung. The RoK President emphasized the importance of the task undertaken by the EAVG and his keen interest in awaiting the Final Report of the EAVG.

In early October 2001, the EAVG Report was submitted to the Leaders of ASEAN countries, China, Japan and the RoK. The EAVG Report was formally considered at the fifth ASEAN+3 Summit in Bandar Seri Begawan on 5 November 2001.

East Asia Study Group (EASG)

Interestingly, one year before the EAVG Report was submitted, an official group at the Senior Officials (SOM) level was formed to look into the future of East Asia cooperation as well.

At the fourth ASEAN+3 Summit in Singapore in November 2000, President Kim Dae Jung’s proposal to establish an official East Asia Study Group (EASG) was adopted. The EASG would consist of the Secretary-General of ASEAN, ASEAN SOM leaders and SOM leaders from China, Japan and the RoK. According to its TOR, the EASG would “explore practical ways and means to deepen and expand the existing cooperation among ASEAN, the People’s Republic of China, Japan and the Republic of Korea, and prepare concrete measures and, as necessary, action plans for closer cooperation in various areas”. Of special importance is that mandate for the EASG to “assess the recommendations of the EAVG” and “explore the idea and implications of an East Asian Summit”. The EASG was tasked to submit its report and recommendations to the sixth ASEAN+3 Summit, to be held in Phnom Penh on 4 November 2002.

In 2001-2002, the EASG was co-chaired by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brunei Darussalam (the country chairing the 35th ASEAN Standing Committee) and a Deputy Foreign Minister of the RoK. Now the ASEAN co-chair is the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia (the country chairing the current 36th ASEAN Standing Committee) and a Deputy Foreign Minister of the RoK.

The EASG has established a working group, consisting of ASEAN DGs, officials from +3 countries at comparable level and a representative of the ASEAN Secretariat, to assist in its work. The EASG Working Group now has assumed a new function as the ASEAN+3 DGs mechanism.

EAVG Report and Recommendations
Towards an East Asian Community

The title of the EAVG Report was “Towards an East Asian Community: Region of Peace, Prosperity and Progress”\(^\text{13}\). The EAVG explained its Executive Summary of the Report that in proposing the formation of an East Asian community, “we seek the following goals:

* Preventing conflict and promoting peace among the nations of East Asia;

* Achieving closer economic cooperation in such areas as trade, investment, finance and development;

* Advancing human security in particular by facilitating regional efforts for environmental protection and good governance;

* Bolstering common prosperity by enhancing cooperation in education and human resources development; and

* Fostering the identity of an East Asian community.”

The EAVG put forth altogether 57 recommendations; 22 of them were highlighted in the Executive Summary of the Report, covering the following areas: Economic Cooperation (4 recommendations); Financial Cooperation (3); Political and Security Cooperation (4); Environmental Cooperation (4); Social and Cultural Cooperation (5) and Institutional Cooperation (2).

Initial Responses

At the fifth ASEAN+3 Summit in Bandar Seri Begawan on 5 November 2001, the Leaders considered the Report of the EAVG and warmly thanked President Kim Dae Jung for launching the EAVG initiative in 1999. President Kim, who led the discussion on the EAVG Report, highlighted three recommendations in the EAVG Report:

* "Evolution of the ASEAN+3 Summit to an East Asian Summit, together with institutionalization of the East Asia cooperation process to create regular channels of communications and cooperation;

* Establishment of an East Asia Forum consisting of government representatives and others from outside the government to serve as an institutional mechanism for social exchanges and regional cooperation in East Asia; and

* Establishment of an East Asian Free Trade Area (EAFTA), starting with an interim step of linking existing free trade areas in East Asia together."

The Press Statement issued after the 2001 ASEAN+3 Summit said that the EAVG Report contained key proposals and concrete measures to broaden East Asia cooperation. “Some are bold yet feasible such as establishing an East Asia Free Trade and liberalizing trade well ahead of APEC’s goals.” The Press Statement added that

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\(^{13}\) The EAVG Report is available on the ASEAN Secretariat’s web site, at the section about the Seventh ASEAN Summit in Bandar Seri Begawan in November 2001.
the EASG established by the ASEAN+3 Summit in 2000 would continue to assess the EAVG’s proposals.

The EASG has now completed its study of the EAVG recommendations. At the 6th EASG Meeting in Phnom Penh on 13 October 2002, the EASG adopted the final report of the EASG for submission to Leaders of ASEAN Member Countries, China, Japan and the RoK. The EASG is recommending for consideration of the sixth ASEAN+3 Summit in Phnom Penh on 4 November 2002 a total of 26 measures (17 of them are short-term measures, while the rest are medium-term and long-term measures) selected from the EAVG recommendations. The short-term measures that are relatively easier to implement include the formation of an East Asia Forum, an East Asia Business Council and a network of East Asian eminent intellectuals, and the promotion of East Asian studies. The long-term measures include the formation of an East Asia Free Trade Area and the evolution of the ASEAN+3 Summit into an East Asian Summit.

The Journey Has Begun

Table 1 attached to this paper shows economic indicators of East Asian nations. A quick look at the numbers will see the following:

- The combined land area of East Asia (ASEAN+3) is about 50% larger than that of the USA. In terms of economic size, the combined GDP of East Asia (ASEAN+3) is about two-third that of the US, and nearly nine-tenth that of the EU (15); but East Asian economies are growing steadily and their combined economic size could soon surpass that of the EU (15).
- The combined volume of trade of East Asia (ASEAN+3) is larger than that of the US, but is only about 40% of the EU’s.
- Most important of all, East Asia (ASEAN+3) has the combined population of about 2 billion, which is about 150% larger than the combined population of NAFTA + EU (15).

It is quite comforting to know that one in every three people in the world is an East Asian. What can we do together in East Asia? The possibility is actually endless. But first of all, we must believe in ourselves and in our collective wisdom. We must have self-confidence to take full responsibility in trying to shape our collective future together. The financial crisis of 1997-1998 in East Asia should be taken as our last wake-up call. It is time East Asians help one another and join hands in overcoming our common challenges.

Table 2 attached to this paper shows a web of regional and international cooperation schemes that East Asian nations participate. Many linkages are being forged, especially in the ASEAN+3 process. The foundation for the integration of our markets is being built with separate building blocks, including ASEAN’s AFTA, ASEAN-China FTA, ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (CEP). At the upcoming ASEAN+3 Summit in Phnom Penh on 4 November 2002, Leaders of ASEAN, China, Japan and the RoK are expected to call for a study on the feasibility and implications of an East Asia Free Trade Area, which was proposed by the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG).
For political cooperation in East Asia, the EAVG’s recommendations included the evolution of the ASEAN+3 Summit into an East Asia Summit. This idea will be further discussed among officials on the ASEAN+3 DGs Meeting. Implicitly the idea seems to entail the creation of an East Asian Community as a new regional organization, but the EAVG did not elaborate on this point in its report.

While there is no roadmap towards a community of East Asian nations, our leaders have come to accept the crucial common belief that we, East Asians, must cooperate and build our future together. They deserve our active support. For we are all in this together. The journey has begun.

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<th>Table 1: Economic Indicators</th>
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<td>ASEAN 10</td>
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<td>China</td>
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<td>NAFTA (USA+Canada+Mexico)</td>
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<td>EU 15</td>
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Sources: 2002 ASEAN-Japan Statistical Pocketbook published by the ASEAN-Japan Centre in Tokyo; and APEC Secretariat’s Economic Indicators of APEC Member Economies.
### Table 2: East Asian Nations and Growing Regionalism

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<th>Forums</th>
<th>ASEAN 10</th>
<th>ASEAN 7</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Japan</th>
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<th>DPRK &amp; Mongolia</th>
<th>Hong Kong</th>
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See explanatory notes of Table 2 on the following page.

**ASEAN 10** means all the 10 Member Countries of the Association.

**ASEAN 7** means the older 7 Member Countries, except Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

*n* means not applicable.

y¹ The Mekong countries in the ADB-organized Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Economic Cooperation Conference are Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. Cambodia will host the first GMS Summit in Phnom Penh on 3 November 2002 to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the GMS. The President of the ADB and the Chinese Premier have been invited to attend.

**EALAF** is East Asia-Latin America Forum. ASEAN, China, Japan and the RoK have teamed up to engage 17 countries in Latin America in economic cooperation consultations.

**IDEA** is Japan’s Initiative for Development in East Asia. Japan convened the Ministerial Conference on IDEA in Tokyo on 12 August 2002.

y² **ACD** is Thailand’s initiative on Asia Cooperation Dialogue. Myanmar did not attend the inaugural meeting in Cha-am, Thailand, last June because of border tensions with Thailand. Thailand will host the second ACD in Chiang Rai next year.

**ACCORD** is ASEAN-China Cooperative Operations in Response to Dangerous Drugs.

**AMBDC** is ASEAN’s initiative on ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Cooperation. The AMBDC’s best known flagship project is the Singapore-Kumning Rail Link (SKRL). Japan and the RoK have been invited to join the AMBDC as its core members; but both of them have declined the invitation, saying that they need more time to study the AMBDC’s activities.

y³ in **Quadrilateral** are Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and China. The Quadrilateral is promoting, among others, river transport on and tourism along the Mekong River.

**MRC** is the Mekong River Commission based in Phnom Penh.

y⁴ are Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Viet Nam; China and Myanmar are Observers in the MRC. Both China and Myanmar are seriously considering joining the MRC.

The **Boao Forum for Asia** was initiated by China. Though it saw active participation of several government leaders, the BFA is considered as a Track II forum.