

ISAS Insights

No. 10 – Date: 30 December 2005

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EAST ASIA SUMMIT – AN APPRAISAL

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The East Asian Summit (EAS) held at Kuala Lumpur on 14 December 2005 after a 15-year gestation period was an important event in the evolution of Asian relations. The former Malaysian Premier Dr Mahathir first mooted the idea in 1990. Sixteen world leaders from ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand, representing half the world's population attended the summit. The Russian President Vladimir Putin also addressed the summit after attending the first ASEAN-Russia meeting. Russia has been keen on becoming a part of the EAS.

The summit leaders in their Kuala Lumpur Declaration of 14 December 2005 pledged themselves to work towards realising the dream of building the Asian Community. This will be done through a “broad based dialogue on strategic, political and economic issues of common interests”. In this dialogue process, the significance of issues like “financial stability, energy security, economic integration, growth, and trade and investment expansion, narrowing down of the developmental gap and eradication of poverty, and good governance” were highlighted.

The persisting differences among the participants, particularly China, Japan and South Korea were set aside for the duration of the conference, as the participants were well aware that the EAS countries account for a fifth of the global trade and is expected to be the growth engine of the future global economy. With the significant economic growth registered by the Asian giants, China and India, the revival and reforms in the Japanese economy and the economic dynamism being displayed by ASEAN, the EAS looks certain to emerge as the growth centre of Asian and world economies. The economic thrust of the region has also given it a considerable political clout, which was articulated by the Filipino leader Ms Gloria Arroyo when she said “together, the political clout of this grouping is considerable”.

The key to the success of the EAS therefore lies in “togetherness”. The deep differences that were visible during the summit, as China and South Korea separately refused to have bilateral interaction with Japan, will have to be either harmonised for or isolated from the regional priorities. There is a natural balance of forces emerging in the region and the challenge before the EAS leaders is to make this balance constructive and conducive to the interests of the larger community. The signing of the summit declaration after resolving divergent view

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points, underlines the fact that the EAS leadership has the necessary foresight and resilience to meet this challenge now as well as in future.

The key to constructive engagement in the region lies with ASEAN, which is set to form the core of the emerging community and drive the EAS in desired direction. China may want to join this core to play a leading role in shaping the regional dynamics as it has repeatedly laid the thrust of “ASEAN + 3” formation (China is a part of +3). Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s comments that “the East Asia summit should respect the desires of the East Asian countries and should be led by East Asian countries” reflected China’s aspirations. China also has the material strength of its extensive economic engagement with the region and growing military capabilities to buttress its claims to do so, but a Chinese insistence in this respect, beyond a limit will arouse hidden apprehensions about China’s possible desire to dominate the region. This may provoke anti-Chinese forces in the region to stoke the smouldering fires of regional rivalries to weaken and sabotage the EAS movement. The EAS, accordingly should avoid the so called “class differences” between “ASEAN+3” and “ASEAN+1”. Malaysian Prime Minister and the host of the summit did well to reiterate that “the East Asia Summit together with the ASEAN+3 and the ASEAN+1 process could play a significant role in community building in the region.” The essence of unity lies in aggregating interests and aspirations and not in asserting them. The Summit Declaration, therefore, rightly emphasised the “principles of equality, partnership, consultation and consensus”. The Declaration also made it clear that the ASEAN remains the “driving force” of the EAS and the community building endeavour will be “consistent with and reinforce the realisation of the ASEAN community”.

Yet another challenge before the EAS is to work faster for bridging economic differences in the region. The EAS was a gathering of rich as well as poor countries, of the faster developing and slow growth economies. The economic divide within the ASEAN, which the former Singapore Prime Minister Goh termed as the “digital divide” between the old ASEAN 6 and the new ASEAN 4, namely Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, is wide and striking. There are also questions of political order (democracy) and human rights that insert divergence in the emerging community. These questions will have to be addressed within the parameters of sovereignty and freedom of internal affairs. Here again ASEAN has evolving mechanisms, which can be improved and implemented in the interests of the whole community.

India looks at the EAS as a firm move in the direction of realising its long cherished dream of building Asian community. India strongly supports ASEAN as core of the EAS as it has been supporting the ASEAN Regional Forum to remain ASEAN driven. India’s Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh made this clear on the eve of his departure to Kuala Lumpur on 13 December 2005 when he described ASEAN as the “experienced driver”. He also emphasised the growing co-operation with the other Asian giant, China, rejecting the speculation that India is interested in containing or balancing China in the region. The emphasis on constructive engagement with China was evident during his meeting in Kuala Lumpur with his Chinese counterpart. India sees the EAS as an Asian arc of advantage. To concretise this perspective, India has committed itself to contribute to the stability and prosperity of the region. To fulfil its prevailing and future commitments, India has to reform its economy faster so as to prepare itself for active participation in the Pan-Asian Free Trade Agreement that found echo during the summit. It has also pledged all possible support, ranging from credit lines to building human resource and technological capabilities, to the weaker members of the region. India will welcome the opportunity, as and when it comes, to join the APEC in reinforcing its commitment to the whole region. In playing its positive role in the region,

India will be guided by its legitimate interests in conformity with “peace, stability and prosperity of the region” as a whole, and not by old animosities or new affinities.

The EAS is the first step in the direction of a vision of the Asian people. Through bilateral and multilateral interactions and dialogue on “broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interests and concerns”, the members would “strive to strengthen global norms and universally recognised values”. India’s participation in the EAS is a real opportunity to broaden and deepen its engagement with the emerging Asia.

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