

## EAST ASIAN REGIONALISM AND ASEAN PLUS 3

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East Asia used to exist and grow without regional multilateral cooperation. That was a kind of unsustainable development in an insecure environment during the Cold War. Confronting sweeping transformations, multilateral regional cooperation has become a pressing imperative in East Asia.

Such a multilateral regional cooperation needs being constructed and implemented in an organized and ordered way with the participation of most of the nations in the region. Multilateral relationship, by nature, is built on the basis of the differences in interest, perception, behavior and competence. It is therefore necessary that an institution be established to reconcile vested interest groups, harmonize understandings, orchestrate actions and combine competencies. In fact, regionalism matters absolutely in formulating and promoting multilateral links. Hence, many scholars have defined "multilateralism as a way to coordinate trilateral or multi-national relationships"<sup>(1)</sup>. There exists a dialectic

inherent link among internationalism-multilateralism-regionalism.

Such an institution proves vital to East Asia where there remain pervasive destabilizing factors, low international stance and level of development falling far behind international par. It is imperative that an East Asian Cooperation Regime be established, which will go to eradicate the aforementioned problems, promote a secure environment and favor cooperation for growth.

And yet, such a very institution has never been in existence. In this context, the emergence of ASEAN plus 3 is expected to be a timely chance for the coming of an East Asian Cooperation Body. Although ASEAN plus 3 is growing at snail speed and operating on limited scale, it is firmly grounded to believe in its continuity. This will be a single cooperation regime for East Asian nations. So far, the regime has been perpetuating its life, whereas other

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<sup>(1)</sup> G. Ikenberry & Jitsuo Tsuchiyama, "Between balance of power and community: the future of multilateral security co-operation in the Asia-Pacific", *International Relations of Asia Pacific* Vol. 2, No. 1, 2002 Journal of the Japan Association of International Relations, Oxford University Press, p.75.

initiatives have yet to be realized. The driving force for the regime to grow is common interest and understanding among its members. ASEAN plus 3 is developing in a way that goes aside with globalization and regional economic integration.

There are ample factors relating to the existence of an institution and its role in international cooperation. From historic perspective, this article attempts to touch upon ASEAN plus 3 as an institution. The emergence of regionalism bodes well for development, as it is both a combined result arising from different factors and a ground for those factors to grow.

### **The process of formulating regionalism prior to the coming into being of ASEAN plus 3**

Is ASEAN plus 3 a newly emerged phenomenon or the result of a process? It would be easier for it to exist and more likely to become an East Asian Cooperation Body if it was the result of a process, which means it was historically supported.

The idea of formulating a regional cooperation regime has not been new and has been conceived with perceived constant urge, even under insecure conditions during the Cold War. A number of initiatives have been proposed but they have proved to be either a failure or ineffective.

Following the establishment of SEATO by the USA in 1954, an

organization which is seen by few as a regional body, there appeared a form of regional cooperation initiated by Japanese Economic Research Center and Saburo Okita's idea of "Pacific Economic Cooperation" in the early 1960s. In 1966, some organizations were established including Asian Development Bank, Asian and Pacific Council initiated by South Korean President Park Chung-Hee, Ministerial Conference on Economic Development in South East Asia. In the next year, Japan proposed the establishment of "Asian Pacific Cooperation", "Pacific Free Trade Area" and ASEAN bloc was established consisting of 5 South East Asian countries. 1968 saw the coming into being of the non-government organization "The Pacific Basin of Economic Council". In 1970, South Korean proposed the idea of an "Asian Common Market". Late 1970s witnessed the ideas of Trilateral Asia Pacific Cooperation Regime (politician, businessman, and scholar) by the Japanese Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira. In 1980, Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference was established under the initiative by the Japanese Prime Minister Ohira and the Australian Counterpart Fraser.

During the *detente* prior to the end of the cold war, in 1988 Japan proposed an "Asian Network" and in 1989 APEC was established under the initiative by the Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke, while the Malaysian Prime Minister

Mahathir Mohamad initiated the establishment of "East Asian Economic Group" in 1990. Initiatives were more realistic after the cold war such as "ASEAN Regional Forum" established in 1994, "Asian-European Meeting" in 1996. The year 1997 marked two important events: the failure of Japanese initiative of "Asian Monetary Fund" and the success of ASEAN plus 3.

The continuity and connectivity of initiatives have indicated that regionalism is a process. On the basis of pre- and post- cold war comparison, some comments should be made on the efforts in constructing regionalism as follows:

*First*, the overwhelming domination of politics over the international relations, and the separation and grave conflicts in the region as well as vehement external interference have spoiled all regionalism initiatives. Politics is a primary factor that has either suppressed or deviated the initiatives. There had also emerged some organizations which either proved fragile or non-viable, or far from the sake of East Asian cooperation. APC and MCEDSEA went under; ASEAN was operating ineffectively; PECC was operating on a limited scale; APEC only focused on inter-regional interests. Insecure international and regional political environment, political motives and designs, complex regional political developments have led to the fragile regionalism. The *detente* and cooperative

trend in the post Cold War has brought about favorable conditions for regionalism. ASEAN, APEC have regained their strengths. There have emerged some regional and interregional organizations such as ARF and ASEM.

*Second*, east-west conflicts and regional security-politics confrontation had resulted in the fact that multilateral bodies were made of nations bearing the same political and economic systems. Politics was a criterion used to tell between friends and enemies and eligibility for new membership. Moreover, efforts to establish multilateral institutions had been exerted by market economies for internationalized markets, shared interests and compatibilities in national legal systems. It was not until the end of the cold war when west-east conflict no longer posed obstacles and market economies became dominant forces that full integration was made possible. Political differences no longer were causes of conflicts. Attempts to regulate international economic legal infrastructures were made. What had been idealistic in the cold war became a reality. APEC admitted new members of different political systems. ARF was established regardless of political diversity. ASEAN admitted its tenth member and has become ASEAN 10.

*Third*, as hierarchical power and development gaps still existed in international relations, initiatives often stemmed from big and small countries

and one did not encompass the other. Therefore, understandings of regionalism differed. Japan's initiatives focused on big countries such as the USA, Japan and New Zealand characterized by an open regionalism, while, ASEAN did the other way round, with close regionalism, particularly at its early stage of development. The heterogeneity in interests and understandings between two groups had made infeasible the initiatives such as "Asian Common Market" or "Asian Network". After the Cold War, the trend to combine the two groups has been predominant in multilateralism. ARF is typical of that trend. APEC and PECC have been expanded. ASEAN has been more likely to evolve itself toward ASEAN plus 3.

*Fourth*, the then complicated politics and security situations had failed initiatives for establishing political organizations quoting APC as a typical example. That MCEDESEA initiative went under boiled down to political triggers. Meanwhile, economic initiatives stood greater chances of success for they were shielded from adverse impacts of political and economic conflicts and stayed attuned to development requirements. Any initiatives and bodies that have maintained their existence until today all arose from socio-economic contexts. It is also for the reason that NGOs such as PECC have been faring far favorably than intergovernmental bodies have done. That the security-politics

atmosphere has been evolving smoothly has made things much easier. There has emerged a politics and security body such as ARF and those in existence have also become increasingly multi-faceted. Intergovernmental efforts to promote regionalism have been exerted. South East Asian regional cooperation regime has been multi-faceted, multi-layered and multi-componential.

*Fifth*, due to strong interference by super-powers and deep divisiveness in regional relations, and external economic dependence, East Asian regionalism has not been taken into consideration. Most of initiatives have been made in the economic and political context rather than geography, history and culture of the region, and either sub-regional or interregional but never fully inclusive. Initiatives of a single East Asian body have just been a bundle of ideas. With external strings being relaxed, regional atmosphere cooling down, initiatives for and efforts in regionalism have been shifted gradually to East Asian issues. Therefore, a single East Asian cooperation regime has taken shape. The course of going from EAEG to AMF and then ASEAN plus three has been mainstreaming through East Asian regionalism.

*Sixth*, regionalism initiatives came about in hair-triggering moments during the cold war regionally and internationally. These are not simply political crafts. Otherwise, advocates for real functionalistic cooperation have

mirrored substantively those efforts. All this has shown that aspirations for security, peace and development through regional cooperation are underlying driving forces. These persistent interests have helped maintain, promote regionalism and translate ideas into practice right after the end of the Cold War. It can, therefore, be said that East Asian Regionalism has been the perpetuation of what has been going on for years.

#### **Favorable conditions for East Asian Regionalism in the post Cold War period**

As aforementioned, it is obvious that post-Cold War situations have laid feasible groundwork for East Asian regionalism to be realized thanks to 4 levels of favorable international relations.

*On global scale*, East Asian Regionalism has been fueled by stormy globalization and international economic integration, and has sought to exploit advantages and lessen their impact. In addition, economic regionalization and competitive pressures from trade blocks have also made East Asian countries stand closer. External influence has no longer been as forceful as it was. East Asian Regionalism has been increasingly involved in trade liberalization, world security and economic development. Politically, a regional cooperation regime can relatively cushion impacts of

countervailing powers in the reshaping of a new world order.

*On inter-national scale*, the interdependence of East Asian countries has been deepened; movements of goods, money and people within the region has been strengthened by and large qualitatively and quantitatively; nations share regional interests and security burdens; economic integration has become a common path to development. At the same time, emerging common regional issues has required the insurrection of a regional body. This discernible interdependence has been built only on historic, cultural and social but also geopolitical and geo-economic grounds.

*On national scale*, that national interests have been common has been driving for regionalizing cooperation, which proves to be essential solutions to disputes and national security. So far memorable lessons of the absence of regional cooperation leading to conflicts and divisions have been drawn. The need for growth has led East Asian countries to opening their doors, boosting investment and export and highlighting economically regional cooperation. Strengthening regionalization has been essential for consolidated security and national development. The prop-up of a regional body will make East Asian voices felt internationally and help improve its position. A comprehensive network of bilateral

relations observing common principles and real situations within and outside has laid firm foundations for East Asian multilateral cooperation.

*On personal scale*, efforts to establish personal relations among leaders have been made and maintained. Inter-party relations have been established and relations among all walks of class have been growing far and wide. Diplomacy channel II is strongly supplementing that in channel I. Mutual understandings and regional sentiment have been growing, arousing the feeling of regionalism.

A regional body is a combination of aforementioned trends, conditions and movements. So far, however, East Asia has been the single region in the world where exists a vacuum for such a body. The convergence of countries in ASEAN plus 3 has been supported by current trends and history, meaning existing favorable conditions and previous regionalization respectively. Therefore, ASEAN plus 3 - a single homogeneous East Asian cooperation framework - is being expected to be such a body.

Is there any possibility for that expectation to come about? At least, institutional preconditions for the emerging ASEAN plus 3 have breathed rays of hope into its survival and growth. Only in so doing can ASEAN plus 3 realize regionalizing efforts.

### **Institutional preconditions of ASEAN plus 3**

Just as the Cold War was thawing out, the Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad proposed establishing *East Asian Economic Group* (EAEG) including 11 countries in the region without outside economic powers. Cherished from previous regionalizing efforts, this could be the first initiative for a pure East Asian. This initiative though supported by regional countries had met with US protest.

In retrospect, EAEG would have stood little chance of success even with or without US protest but then it was a bold and visionary initiative. EAEG did not materialize but many East Asian countries could never forget it. The then Singaporean Prime Minister Li Guang You remarked that EAEG was "a not-to-disappear idea". This initiative marked the beginning of "East Asian era" in the course of regionalization with a view to establishing a regional single body and a pure East Asian body as something possible. It was later embodied in Japan's AMF and revitalized with the coming of ASEAN plus 3.

As with EAEG, *initiative of Asian Monetary Fund* (AMF) was a prerequisite for a second idea. This initiative was proposed in 1997 at the time that the regional financial crisis was raging ferociously. The crisis has shown how vulnerable and economically interdependent East Asian countries

are. This initiative aimed to establish a regional multilateral financial regime to stabilize East Asian currencies. Once again, IMF and USA poured hot water over this initiative. Despite that, this marked a new step in the course of regionalisation toward an East Asian body and a significant precondition for ASEAN plus 3. Later, important items of this initiative was recalled as critical for cooperation in the report "Toward an East Asian Community: Peace, Prosperity and Progress" by East Asian Vision Group (EAVG).

Words and actions are singing the same tune. Practical preconditions of ASEAN plus 3 stemmed from the fact that existing bodies failed to meet the needs of East Asian countries. At present bodies deemed regional such as ASEAN and APEC do not represent East Asian countries and are in trouble. ASEAN is made up of small and medium-sized countries neighbored by North East Asian powers. The body seems incapable of meeting required security and development. It therefore is reaching out for greater capacity. It is economically feeble, loose in defense and politics and increasingly dependent on North East Asia. APEC is non-multi-faceted and larger in size than ASEAN, and is geographically scattered. It therefore can be said that APEC is more an interregional than a regional body, as John Ravenhill remarked<sup>(2)</sup>. Also, APEC

is too diverse and short of a comprehensive bilateral regime to promote economic integration. Notably, since mid 90s, a deep wedge has been driven between Anglo-American block wishing to entrench binding and comprehensive economic liberalization and East Asian countries that want APEC to focus on trade facilitation and economic and technical cooperation, which has resulted in a "speak more and act less" situation. ARF is also deemed a regional body. Though its main focus is on East Asian security, its loose membership and structure as well as influences from external powers have transformed it essentially into an impurely East Asian Body. Limitations arising from regionalization have necessitated needs for amendments and laid groundwork for ASEAN plus 3.

Other practical preconditions have also been paving the way toward an East Asian body. East Asian countries convene at ASEAN Foreign Minister Conference (ASEAN FMC) within the framework of ASEM. Japan, then China and South Korea have been attending annually ASEAN FMC to discuss concerning issues. These meetings are organized in the form of ASEAN plus 10 and ASEAN plus 1, depending on scopes of regional issues. The framework of ASEAN plus 10 has been too large whereas ASEAN plus 1 too small in the context that regional issues are emerging, especially when it faced the 1997-1998 crisis. The idea of combining

<sup>(2)</sup> Richard Stubb, "ASEAN Plus Three: Emerging East Asian Regionalism?", *Asian Survey*, Vol. XLII, No.3, May/June 2002, University of California Press, p.447.

three ASEAN plus 1 has given birth to ASEAN plus 3. That ASEAN acts as a centerpiece is easily acceptable facing little external outcry and spelling no doubt among East Asian countries. ASEAN FMC has laid an institutional background for ASEAN plus 3.

Another practical precondition is ASEM - an initiative of the Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and met with EU and ASEAN approval in 1995. Due to asymmetry between the two bodies, ASEAN has invited three North East Asian countries to join in. Although fears of US antipathy, common interests at last prevail. ASEM 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting took place in Bangkok in 1996 declaring maintaining this structure and framework at summit, ministerial (FC and EF) and expert levels. A developing ASEM has created opportunities for East Asian countries to deliberate common issues, share common views on the basis of common interests, regularly convene and solidify to deal with external relations. That interregional relations are taking shape has also wakened strong regional sentiments. ASEAN plus 3 has been formed along with ASEM. To some extent, East Asian Countries meeting at ASEM constitutes practical preconditions for realizing ASEAN plus 3 which has been quickly recognized and met with less external denial thanks partially to ASEM.

Another important precondition points to *economic side*. During the 1980s and 1990s, Japan had been

expanding investment, trade and production over the region. At the same time, Chinese businesses had also been extensive across East Asia and reaching regional scope. In addition, NIE was investing strongly into neighboring countries. Bilateral economic relations among East Asian countries were elevated to new heights. Regional economic cooperation occupied an important position in national economies and was given top priorities in East Asian national strategies. Multilateral economic ties became driving forces for an East Asian regionalism. East Asian economic partnerships are predominating ASEAN and ascertaining different geo-economic status in APEC. All these have contributed to a finely woven East Asian fabric and laid firm groundwork for multilateral relationships. An East Asian regionalism, economically to say the least, is taking shape with distinctive legal infrastructure. Its regionalistic orientation presents an objective precondition for ASEAN plus 3.

### **Primary steps by ASEAN plus 3 toward regionalism**

On the basis of these preconditions, the 1997 financial crisis was directly conducive to the formulation of ASEAN plus 3. As mentioned above, the crisis has shown interdependence and vulnerability of East Asian economies. IMF's unjustifiable credit requirements imposed on economies at stake stirred up wide upset to this global financial institution. That the USA and Western



countries were less supportive than they were in the case of Mexico was only to bring about disappointments among East Asian economies toward external bailouts. Regional sentimentality was aroused when Japan committed support and suggested AMF initiative - a much more generous credit regime than IMF. At the same time, China vowed not to devalue its local currency - the Renminbi - an act possibly detrimental to its economy. Although much doubt revolved around political calculations behind the so called "sacrifice", those moves had whipped up the sense of regional *esprit de corps*

In the context of the raging crisis, the inability of ASEAN and APEC had deviated the belief in and need for regionalism. The crisis had required the rapid establishment of separate cooperation regime for East Asia to orchestrate efforts for recovering the economies, preventing impending crisis and continuously maintaining regional growth momentum. The 1997 crisis had ingrained into East Asian countries deep understandings of how desperate they felt for a regional body for their own survival.

In that context, ASEAN plus 3 was established consciously. However, it was the consciousness of multiplying ordeals that had underpinned the "modesty" of this event. ASEAN plus 3 was derived from Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto's initiative of an ASEAN-Japan Summit. ASEAN countries suggested that the summit should be

open to include China and South Korea. ASEAN plus 3 made its first start with the first informal summit of leaders of 10 ASEAN countries and Japan, China, and South Korea at Kuala Lumpur in December 1997 on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of this body. No important agreement was approved. No fanfare. Many scholars haven't seen this as a start of ASEAN plus 3. In our opinion, this event was of land-sliding importance as it was the first East Asian summit ever held. And this summit has paved the way for the formation of *de facto* framework of ASEAN plus 3. The name ASEAN plus 3 came to signify as a real regionalism.

If ASEAN plus 3 was consciously established, then it was pushed headlong by practical needs. Along with this, considerable institutional progress has been achieved. *Regarding the operating principles*, so far, ASEAN plus 3 has drawn upon those of ASEAN. However, in the report "Toward an East Asian Community: Peace, Prosperity, and Progress" issued by East Asian Vision Group, some important principles pertaining to institutionalizing ASEAN plus 3 were recommended such as avoiding the overlapping involvement into other regional bodies and frameworks and harmonizing with the global system. The report also set out some norms such as respecting the norms and principles governing relationships among nations, respecting international laws, friendly neighborhood,

and respecting national sovereignty<sup>(3)</sup>. These are considered as fundamental to institutionalizing ASEAN plus 3.

*Regarding operational structure*, at the second ASEAN plus 3 Summit held in Hanoi in December 1998, parties agreed on maintaining summits on a regular basis. From 1997 to 2002, 6 ASEAN plus 3 summits were annually held. To say the least, the regularity of summits at the very first phase has shown how important it is to maintain this framework for East Asian cooperation in general and for establishing a purely East Asian body in particular.

Institutional advancement is measured not only temporally but also spatially. Following the decisions of the third summit in Manila in November 1999, ASEAN plus 3 Foreign Minister Conference was held for the first time on the margin of AMM in Bangkok on 28 November 2000 and most recently in Phnom Penh in July 2003. Since then, ASEAN plus 3 framework has been established at ministerial level in all areas of cooperation such as the first EM conference held in Chiang Mai on 7 October 2000, Financial Minister Conference in Shang Hai on 10 May 2002 or most recently Health Minister Conference for dealing with SARS. At lower level, a system of working groups has been established in many areas such

as E-ASEAN team, ASEAN plus 3's leading patent team, youth leadership team, member team of ASEAN's Council of Science and Technology and North East Asian partners.

There have also emerged some new institutional features. As suggested by Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi, a trilateral meeting among North East Asian countries was held in the form of the first morning meal in 1999. Or, the establishment of East Asian Vision Group has opened new relation channels supplementing governmental ones.

So far, ASEAN plus 3's institutional progress has been made only horizontally. Progress in depth is taking place slowly. Still, ASEAN plus 3 exists as an informal consultancy forum. It has no standing office, decision-making mechanism and a set of binding regulations. Last year, a notable recommendation was establishing the ASEAN plus 3 secretariat, which then was renounced for fear of demoting the role of the ASEAN secretariat. However, remarkable institutional progress made by ASEAN plus 3 shows that its existence suits objective and subjective requirements. ASEAN plus 3 is surviving rather than dying in bud as did many previous initiatives. Although ASEAN plus 3 is not as perfect as ASEAN and APEC, its potentials, economically, have been recognized<sup>(4)</sup>. With objectives set out in "Joint Declaration on East Asian Cooperation"

<sup>(3)</sup> Sang-Ho Chung, "A move toward an East Asian community and its future outlook", *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. XV, No. 2, Fall/Winter 2001, p.399.

<sup>(4)</sup> Richard Stubb, "ASEAN Plus Three: Emerging East Asian Regionalism?", *Asian Survey*, Vol. XLII, No. 3, May/June 2002, University of California Press, p.450

in 1999, ASEAN plus 3 has been more comprehensive than APEC and ARF<sup>(5)</sup>. These have constituted firm stepping-stones for promoting regionalism for East Asian cooperation. With the coming of ASEAN plus 3, regionalism is emerging.

History of institutionalizing process in East Asia is accelerating this course. In turn, the coming of ASEAN plus 3 has laid foundations for realizing historic efforts ever made.

Institutionalization presents a single element relating to the survival and growth of ASEAN plus 3. The body is depending heavily on internal and external cooperation milieu. However, it could be inferred from the history and reality of East Asian institutionalization 4 scenarios for the process of institutionalizing ASEAN plus 3:

ASEAN plus 3 continues to be as limited as it is a forum, meaning a place for exchanging viewpoints and consultancy among member countries. Its institutional principles are dependent with weak autonomy on that of ASEAN. Its agenda focuses on socio-economic aspects. Cooperation is mainly bilateral and it is seeking multilateral cooperation projects.

ASEAN plus 3 will become an East Asian cooperation regime with institutional framework as

recommended by WACG involving holding summits, East Asian Forums, etc. Trade, investment, finance, socio-culture will be areas of primary cooperation. Member cooperation will be bi-multilateralism.

ASEAN plus 3 will grow into a loosely organized association with clear purviews and objectives, multilateral agreements entered into. This association will have a standing mechanism such as a secretariat, for instance. Its agenda will cover more long and medium - term regional projects. There will also be some policy cooperation, including external relations. It is nearly similar to existing ASEAN.

ASEAN plus 3 will become a regional body with tight structure and clear legal frames on the basis of binding agreements. The body will run in economic integration ways and facilitate foreign policy coordination among members. This model bears some similarities to EU.

These 4 scenarios may also represent 4 stages in institutionalizing ASEAN plus 3 into an East Asian Body. As observed, ASEAN plus 3 is possibly running under 2 scenario. However, the rest may not be ruled out. Though with whatever scenario and at whatever stage, ASEAN plus 3 will still be an important imprint in the process of East Asian Regionalism.

<sup>(5)</sup> Tsutomu Kikuchi, "East Asian Regionalism: A Look at the ASEAN plus Three Framework", *Japan Review of International Affairs*, spring 2002, p.1-2.

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