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ASEAN-Japan Summit 2003: Towards an East Asian Community

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The leaders of Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will hold their Special Summit meeting in Tokyo on 11-12 December. They are expected to explore the possibilities of stronger cooperation in various areas such as economics, security, culture and education. This summit meeting will mark a new third stage of the cooperative relations between ASEAN and Japan, in which they will endeavour to create an East Asian Community, embracing most of the countries of Northeast and Southeast Asia.

The first stage, which began in the late 1960s, concentrated on economic cooperation. The volume of trade between ASEAN countries and Japan increased dramatically. So did the amount of direct investment in the 1980s. In the second stage, the early 1990s, Japan began to play a role in East Asian security, through peace building efforts in Cambodia and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). In the ARF process, together with ASEAN, Japan has been promoting various measures to enhance mutual trust between countries in the Asia-Pacific region. In the third stage in the 21st century the ASEAN-Japan relationship will focus on the creation of a community of friendly nations in East Asia.

Towards an East Asian Community

When they meet in Tokyo, the leaders of ASEAN and Japan will set their seal on the willingness of both parties to develop cooperative relations. They will issue a Tokyo Declaration, which will announce their intention to pursue an East Asian Community. The creation of such a community would involve international exchange in diverse areas. Cooperative initiatives in the economic area, including a plan for an ASEAN-Japan free trade area, are important elements of such a community. Greater security cooperation, addressing new security issues such as terrorism and maritime security, is also emphasized. Japan is expected to accede to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which emphasizes ASEAN's diplomatic norms and principles, such as non-interference in other countries' internal affairs and peaceful resolution of disputes.

An East Asian Community (EAC) will be constructed on the framework of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), involving China and South Korea, besides Japan. While the APT brings 13 countries together to discuss economic cooperation and security issues, in the EAC cooperation will extend to broader areas, covering cultural, societal, intellectual and educational fields.

Broader categories of actors would be involved in such a community. While governments and giant multilateral corporations were the central actors in security and economic cooperation, citizens' participation would now be more salient. Through their transnational interaction in many issue areas, a sense of community would develop among citizens of ASEAN and Japan,

on the basis of a shared identity as East Asians.

On an East Asian Identity

While the proposed community involves China and South Korea, it does reflect the extensive linkages between ASEAN and Japan over the last three decades. The two parties have designated the year 2003 as a special commemorative year to mark the deep cooperative relationship between them. Under the rubric of “ASEAN-Japan 2003,” a number of events have been organized, including economic initiatives, art and music performances, as well as youth exchanges and sports events.

Significantly, while Japanese music, movies and fashions have become popular in ASEAN capitals, many young Japanese have been visiting Southeast Asian countries. Over the last decade, the number of Japanese travellers to ASEAN has increased by nearly 50 percent. The number of Japanese travelling to ASEAN is now larger than that going to Europe. For ASEAN, Japan is the largest source of visitors from outside the Southeast Asian region.

The expansion of intellectual exchange is epitomized by strong educational links between universities in recent years. Waseda University plans to establish a graduate school in Singapore, an educational hub of the Southeast Asian region, and to take students from various countries in this region. Furthermore, a growing number of Japanese universities are sending their students to their counterparts in Southeast Asia. Six Japanese universities have a formal exchange student agreement with the National University of Singapore today, where there was none in the mid-1990s. At the same time, the number of Southeast Asian students studying in Japan has increased. Over the last decade the number increased by forty percent. In the upcoming summit, Japan is expected to put forth its plan to receive 10,000 students from ASEAN countries over the next five years.

These exchanges in various areas facilitate ASEAN and Japan’s efforts toward an East Asian Community. An obstacle to their efforts is negative perceptions toward each other held by some groups of people. On the one hand, owing to historical reasons, some in Southeast Asia are still suspicious of Japan’s international activities. On the other hand, for some Japanese, Southeast Asia is still a remote place.

In order to overcome such a psychological gap, in the upcoming Summit, the leaders are to announce various initiatives aimed at enhancing exchange between citizens. Recent data shows promising trends. According to a survey conducted by the Japanese Foreign Ministry in 2002, the percentage of those who consider Japan “trustworthy” or “on balance, trustworthy” is 80 percent on average, in Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. In these countries, on average, 92 percent views the relationship between their country and Japan “favourable” or “on balance, favourable.” Moreover, the Japanese people’s perception toward Southeast Asia is becoming more favourable in recent years. According to a recent survey conducted by the Cabinet Office of Japan, nearly 40 percent of Japanese feel a sense of affinity to Southeast Asia. When the same survey was conducted for the first time in 1989, the percentage was less than 30%.

Mutual understanding between citizens is the key to creating an East Asian community. In the third stage of ASEAN-Japan relations, cooperation is driven by a sense of friendship and a common identity as East Asians, instead of the governments’ pursuit of tangible economic or security interests.

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