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The Rise of East Asia? A new regional forum finds form

Yang Razali Kassim*

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AT the 11th ASEAN Summit on December 10 in Kuala Lumpur, Australia formally acceded to ASEAN's non-aggression pact called the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia. Almost overlooked, this event actually marked one of the decisive steps in the redefinition of East Asia.

Australia's accession to the TAC means that the Howard government accepts the territorial integrity of its neighbours. This is significant in view of Prime Minister John Howard's post-September 11 comments that Canberra could launch pre-emptive strikes against terrorist bases in other countries. Utusan Malaysia, the outspoken Malay-language newspaper, carried a commentary which said that signing the TAC must have been painful for Canberra because it was "like licking back its own spit". Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has however insisted that Australia was happy to sign the TAC, and why not?

In return, Australia got what it wanted for a long time – membership in a grouping that would underscore its claim to be part of East Asia. In a highly symbolic gesture, Prime Minister Howard was accorded a seat to the right of the ASEAN host at the signing ceremony to mark the first-ever East Asia Summit (EAS) on December 14.

Indeed, Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi declared in no uncertain terms that the EAS was a clear success in laying the groundwork for a future East Asian community. Taking a political rather than a geographical definition, the ASEAN leaders had launched the EAS by bringing the ASEAN 10 together with the three Northeast Asian countries (China, Japan and South Korea) as well as Australia, New Zealand and India. Even Russia is knocking hard on the door to join.

However, the birth of this new grouping has not been without controversy. The formation of the EAS should have made Abdullah's predecessor, Mahathir Mohamad, happy. After all, it brought to fruition Mahathir's idea of an East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG) 15 years after he first floated it in the late 1980s. But far from it, the now retired but still vocal Mahathir shot down the EAS as a "useless" club. The inclusion of Australia and New Zealand, which he described as neither East nor Asian, would water down East Asia's voice. Interestingly, however, Mahathir's broadside was softened by Abdullah who said the EAS demonstrated ASEAN's capacity to "eschew dogmatism and orthodoxy".

But Abdullah has also made a crucial point that should put to rest the dispute over who would

drive this new East Asian entity. What will happen now to the ‘ASEAN + 3’, the annual consultations with China, Japan and South Korea initiated in the 1990s which preceded the EAS? The ASEAN + 3 and the EAS will exist in parallel, he said. But the ASEAN+ 3 would be in the driver’s seat to build an East Asian community. “The EAS would neither replace nor be an alternative to the ASEAN + 3”, Abdullah told the press.

The phrase, ‘in the driver’s seat’, captured the fundamental debate that has divided the region into two schools of thought. The first school, led by Malaysia and China, wanted the ASEAN + 3 to be the main vehicle for the future East Asian community. The second group, led by Indonesia and Japan, wanted the EAS to be the main vehicle. When it became clear that the US would be excluded from the EAS, Indonesia and Japan pushed for the inclusion of Australia and New Zealand, and subsequently India. The idea was to counter-balance the possible dominance of China in the evolving architecture.

Whichever the vehicle, it is clear that at the core would be ASEAN. Indeed, in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the East Asia Summit issued on December 14, the “driving force” was neither the EAS nor the ASEAN+3 but ASEAN itself. In other words, it is ASEAN that will define how East Asia would shape up in the coming years. This is a crucial point in the new balancing game in the region.

A new phase may have begun in the changing landscape of East Asia. But will the EAS live up to its mission as a force for peace, stability and prosperity in East Asia? Or will it end up as the new theatre for old quarrels, as manifested by the ongoing tensions between Japan and China, which was apparent for all to see at the KL summit? The road to the East Asian Community is still a long and hazy one.

* Yang Razali Kassim is a Senior Fellow with the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.