



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (92/2005)

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## **The Rise of East Asia? ASEAN's driver role key to ties between Japan and China**

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AT the December 14 signing ceremony in Kuala Lumpur to launch the first-ever East Asia Summit, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao were seated next to each other. When his turn came to sign the historic document, Koizumi did the unusual by borrowing Wen's pen. Specially made for writing in Chinese characters, Wen's pen would apparently be easier for Koizumi to sign his name with. When the Chinese premier obliged, the audience of officials and journalists broke into appreciative applause. The symbolism of the gestures of the two leaders was too vivid to miss.

Japan and China had been embroiled in tension as a result of Koizumi's controversial visits to the Yasukuni shrine in memory of the World War II dead, including Japanese war criminals. Chinese as well as South Korean leaders have criticised the visits as insensitive to their feelings. There had been fears that this spat would mar the historic East Asia Summit, or EAS. Beijing had threatened to skip the three-way informal meeting of the leaders from China, Japan and South Korea, usually held back-to-back with the annual ASEAN summit. Since 1999, the ASEAN members have formally engaged the three in annual parleys called the 'ASEAN Plus 3' process, sometimes known as APT.

China, Japan and South Korea do not have a habit of meeting regularly and working together as a group, given their history of mutual suspicions despite growing economic ties. Amid their recent tensions, Beijing had described ties with Tokyo as "economically hot, but politically cool". Yet, for ASEAN, all three were important trading partners. It would be to ASEAN's interest to encourage the three countries to develop a culture of cooperation for the sake of peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Indeed, this was one of the reasons why ASEAN had initiated first the ASEAN Plus 3 process – and now the EAS. But Beijing lived up to its threat and the trilateral talks failed to take place. According to a Japanese official, there was no reason for the 'Plus 3' to meet when this year's chair – China -- was not interested to initiate. In fact, according to him, there had been of late no 'Plus 3' meetings.

In Kuala Lumpur, the Japanese side was pressed by the media to explain the state of ties with China. Each time, the Japanese spokesman would emphasise how Japan could not understand China's reaction to Koizumi's Yasukuni visits. The shrine visits did not mean Japan had a desire to return to its militaristic past, the spokesman said. If Japan had a desire to dominate the region, it could have easily done so, given its economic power, and it would take twice the combined strength of Asia to balance Japan, he added. But the Yasukuni visits were in fact to remind all Japanese never to go to war again, Akira said. "We tried that in the past, but

it was a very painful experience for Japan as well as the region. We do not want to go through that again,” the spokesman said.

At the end of the East Asia Summit, Koizumi himself met the media and made the same point. A Hongkong journalist asked him why he chose to borrow the pen from the Chinese premier. Koizumi’s reply suggested it to be a deliberate symbolic gesture. He said friendly ties with China were “extremely important” to him and both sides should “never allow one or two issues to impede our relations”.

Koizumi insisted that his Yasukuni visits had been misunderstood. The visits were meant to express his conviction never to go to war again. They were also to pay his respects to those who died during the war even though they were against it. “I don’t understand why people criticise me,” he said. Koizumi took the opportunity to state that Japan would never become a military power again. “We may be an economic power, but we will never be a military power,” he said. He was prepared to hold summit talks with both China and South Korea as he harboured no ill-feelings towards them.

Prime Minister Abdullah has declared the EAS a clear success – a position that was backed by the other leaders, including Koizumi and Australia’s John Howard. The EAS has certainly been a resounding success as a scene-setter for the future, whatever its critics may say. Bringing together countries of disparate ambitions and interests is never an easy task. But to be truly successful, the EAS will need time; yet the EAS’ future will be determined by many other things – not least relations between Japan and China, Japan and South Korea and of course, between China and the United States, which has been kept out of the new regional forum.

Indeed, the rise of the EAS is reminiscent of the emergence of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), both of which were motivated by essentially similar goals – confidence-building and in the longer term, community-building. While APEC was designed to preserve American strategic interests in the Asia Pacific, the EAS is clearly meant to, among other things, manage the inherently difficult relations between a rising China and a powerful Japan.

Hiroshi Tanaka, a former deputy foreign minister and now a senior research fellow at the Japan Centre for International Exchange, said at a pre-summit seminar in Singapore that at their current rates of growth, the GDP of both China and Japan could equal the United States in 15 years’ time. East Asia could in future be unstable and one key factor would be the rising nationalism in China and Japan. But while the dispute over history is a clear sign of this and had clouded the EAS, it did not derail the meeting.

Tanaka traced Chinese nationalism to Tiananmen. The Chinese Communist Party needed to reinforce its legitimacy post-Tiananmen and did so by emphasising patriotism. But given the CCP’s fight against Japanese aggression in the past, the drive inevitably stoked anti-Japanese sentiments. In Japan, on the other hand, nationalism has been stoked by a public sense of frustration with the country’s low-key foreign policy despite being the world’s second largest economy. This was why Koizumi received strong public support when he pushed for a more assertive foreign policy. Also, the Japanese public felt frustrated that after 60 years as a peace-loving nation, Japan continued to be hounded by China and South Korea over the question of history. China’s strong opposition of Japan’s bid for a seat in the United Nations Security Council exacerbated Japanese public frustration. “Japan is fed up with China using

the history card,” Tanaka said.

At the same time, China’s rapid economic growth, coming at a time of Japanese economic stagnation, fueled the feeling of frustration, which he said had been perceived, somewhat wrongly, as a sign of an increasingly hawkish Japan. “I don’t think that’s the case. There is more frustration (than hawkishness). This problem can lead to confrontation. We need to avoid this between Japan and China. Competition between China and Japan for regional leadership must be avoided,” Tanaka said.

It is precisely to avoid a destabilising race for regional leadership between the two Asian giants that some regional countries wanted the US to be involved in the EAS, and failing this, Australia, New Zealand and India. But given the opposition to US involvement, a neutralist ASEAN has to be in the driver’s seat in the emerging East Asian architecture. The first-ever East Asia Summit has made it clear that this must be the case.

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