

BUILDING THE EAST ASIAN COMMUNITY: THE WAY FORWARD

We must make peace long before we need to make peace. We must be prepared not only to plan but, more importantly, to act. We must be persistent, at the same time practical and patient. If the European community process had begun with the Treaty of Rome signed by 25 or more European states, the European Union of today and tomorrow would have been killed at birth. It would have landed in the dustbin of history 40 years ago, so said Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in his keynote address at the three-day First East Asia Congress on 4 August 2003. This article summarises his speech.

Dato' Seri Mahathir Mohamad started his address by recalling a speech he had made on 13 May 1993 to the Asia Society Conference on Asia and the Changing World Order held in Tokyo where he had called for the launch of a zone of co-operative peace and prosperity stretching from Jakarta to Tokyo. In fact, three years prior to that, in December 1990, immediately after the breakdown of the Brussels negotiations in the Uruguay Round, he reminded the audience that he had suggested the formation of the East Asian Economic Group (EAEG). Today, the idea of East Asian co-operation and community building is more readily acceptable.

He mentioned the topics the Congress would be discussing: the Asian Monetary Fund, China's critical role in the building of an East Asian community, trading regimes, health co-operation, educational collaboration, tourism co-operation, labour migration, the media's contribution to community-

building and specific institutions such as the Asean+3. Then he posed several fundamental w-h questions that he thought could aid in the coming plenary sessions. First, who should build our East Asian community of Cooperative Peace and Prosperity? Second, why should we build this East Asian community? Third, what should be the East Asian community that we must try to build in the years and decades ahead? Fourth, how should we undertake this enormously important but complicated task? Fifth, when should we begin in earnest?

In answering his first question, he said the responsibility to build an East Asian community would have to lie with East Asians themselves, although friends should not be forgotten. In this long and difficult journey, East Asians need to learn from the experience of others. "We have many friends in Europe. The experience of Western Europe certainly provides a rich reservoir of lessons. We should certainly not turn

away from the experience of Asean, which I believe is even more directly relevant ... because Asean's experience provides a closer fit with regard to regional community-building at a lower level of integration; at an earlier stage of development. We in East Asia will for the foreseeable future be in this phase of lower-level integration, political and economic."

He commended the corporations of East Asia as the pioneers of East Asian community-building in the last quarter century as they had weaved the web of economic community in the region, the most important foundations for regional community-building. He called for the governments of East Asia to act and get involved in the comprehensive business of community building. This governmental leadership must inevitably come from various sources, on various issues, at various times. As to why we should build an East Asian Community of Cooperative Peace and Prosperity, he said East Asia might have come a long way in building peace, friendship and stability in East Asia but that was "the easier part and we are almost half way there." On the economic front, he lauded East Asia's economic performance, but said "we remain full of weaknesses and continue to face enormous challenges."

Another reason for building

an East Asian community he gave was that although East Asia was the most dependent region in the world on world trade and economic development, it was without voice and without clout. The decisions that directly determined its present and dictated its future were made elsewhere. "It is time for us to empower ourselves."

Turning to the question: What is the East Asian community that we must try to build in the years ahead? His answer was an East Asian Community of Common and Cooperative Peace and Prosperity, a community empowered within the East Asian region and empowered in the wider world. In explaining his selection of the words "common" and "cooperative" he said East Asian peace and prosperity were so indivisible that a critical threat to peace anywhere in East Asia would prove a critical threat to peace everywhere in East Asia. He cited the recent Asian economic crisis and the SARS epidemic. East Asian peace and prosperity would be less fragile and more durable if all sides worked together and were committed to a common peace and prosperity and if friends and neighbours were around and engaged in the process of making sure that everyone got along and prospered together.

He stressed that both the East Asian economic community and

the East Asian political community should be outward-looking and must not retreat behind a great East Asian economic barricade. "The whole world should be welcome to our East Asian market." Similarly, the East Asian political community should open itself to the world.

The schemes for co-operation must be founded on the principles of mutual benefit, mutual respect, egalitarianism, consensus and democracy, each important in its own right.

How should East Asia undertake the complicated task of building an East Asian community? The answer: by working on the atmospherics and the relaxation of tensions and the climate for healthy co-operation, while at the same time focusing on a few of the more promising joint ventures; concentrating on the easy and the doable, the most productive and promising with the biggest spill-over or multiplier effects. In the process, East Asians should engage the widest measure of participation at all levels – governmental and non-governmental. "The East Asia Economic Centre at ISIS Malaysia and this First East Asia Congress are but steps in the entire process of community building."

He concluded with a few words on the "when" question: "When should we begin in earnest?" and said "Day before yesterday." ●