

[ISIS Focus Oct-Dec 2004]

## Second East Asia Congress

### East Asia: Towards Political Community and Concord

*East Asian community-building – that is, the forging of a grouping whose members promote and share common values, beliefs and attitudes – is, first and foremost, a political exercise. In this connection, every community, no matter how informal, must have or must try to evolve norms and practices that enable it to develop in an orderly, stable and progressive manner. The final sessions of the Second East Asia Congress considered this matter. Steven CM Wong reports.*

“Community connotes people.”

In introducing the subject, Tan Sri Dato' Ahmad Fuzi Haji Abdul Razak, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, said that the search for a political community in East Asia is the search for a political commonplace that can be considered uniquely East Asian.

The defining feature is, he said, the “sense of community” shared by members of the community or, as Karl Deutsch put it, “a matter of mutual sympathies and loyalty; of ‘we-feeling’, trust and mutual consideration; partial identification in terms of semi-images and interests.” In this sense, the East Asian Community is one of a shared core set of political values.

In order to be sustained over time, these values need to be rooted and reinforced by institutions and instruments, and to have strong driving forces. In other words, there must be both values-building and institutions-building.

#### Clusters of values

As far as East Asian values are concerned, there needs to be respect for international law and norms in inter-state relations. These include sovereignty, good neighbourliness, territorial integrity and equality. Then, there is the desire for peace, amity and friendship. Here, it is necessary to reject the use of force (or threat of the use of force), achieve transparency in security matters, undertake confidence building, avoid arms races, reject extra-territorial military bases, and totally eliminate weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Yet another cluster of values involves respect for human dignity, rights and obligations. Included are rights of access to health, education, economic prosperity and cultural expression. Lastly, there are values that relate to global problems such as environmental pollution, transnational crime, communicable diseases and vital resources.

Other core values can be added. Codes of conduct for inter-state relations have to be put in place to ensure that they are formalised and practiced. In this respect, ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia is already one *de facto* instrument that is widely accepted by countries in the region.

Another element could be political and security dialogue and, incrementally, also defense cooperation. There can be consultation on matters of common concern such as the Korean Peninsula, proliferation of WMDs, terrorism and information-sharing on defense-related issues. The region also needs balanced international covenants of human rights, that is, ones that do not merely underscore political rights but also health, education, economic and cultural rights.

### **The role of ASEAN**

The vision of East Asian community-building is one characterised by diversity and pluralism. It should be reiterated, however, that ASEAN has already internalised many of the norms and is the farthest along in terms of structures and mechanisms. It is therefore a natural driving force for an East Asian political community. The development of the ASEAN Security Community, in particular, serves as a basis for the larger East Asian Community. The adoption of an ASEAN Charter, to give the association a legal status and a permanent secretariat, is thus an element on the road to an East Asian political community.

In the opinion of HE Dr Chem Widhya of Cambodia, the driving force for the East Asian Community is twofold. First, there is a political commitment to "catch up" with stronger regional groupings in Europe and America. East Asia's leaders are driven by the economic necessities brought by the challenges of globalisation. Second, community-building is the result of a favourable environment, the region having recovered from the Asian Financial Crisis and currently demonstrating dynamic growth driven largely by the two Northeast Asian giants, China and Japan.

To Dr Chem, however, the idea of an East Asian political community has to focus on three "circles of imbalance", namely:

- Within ASEAN and between the old and new members of ASEAN;
- Between Southeast and Northeast Asia; and
- Between East Asia and other regional groupings, in particular the EU and NAFTA.

These circles need to be addressed in a parallel and complementary manner. The development of the ASEAN Communities and the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) will nevertheless have to be given special attention because ASEAN lies at the core of the region.

The ASEAN community embraces the two philosophical mainstreams of human security and community values, and this further facilitates the building of an East Asian Community.

## **Leadership, roadmaps, foundations**

Another facilitating factor is the fact that political decisions come from the top leadership. This is very important to overcome potential obstacles created by bickering at lower levels.

The top leadership therefore has to decide on the degree to which the East Asian Community is loose or integrated, and the amount of sovereignty that is retained or ceded. Regardless of what is decided, members will have to set specific programmes of actions with a roadmap outlining the phases needed, within a clear time frame.

The key to East Asia political community-building is the convening, in the medium term, of an East Asia Summit (EAS) which must be held regularly. The First EAS could eventually be held in 2007 in commemoration of the Tenth Anniversary of ASEAN+3 Cooperation.

To conclude, one must be clear that the East Asian Community is a long-term objective. The laying of its foundations, however, has already been taking place since 1999. Despite the unequal economic and technological development levels presently existing in Northeast and Southeast Asia, both regions are complementary, mutually reinforcing partners for development that is based on mutual respect and equality.

After all, “every long journey begins with the first step.”