

ASEAN Regime: Its Implications for East Asia Cooperation - A Japanese View -

- Abstract -

Koichi Sato
Obirin University

East Asia cooperation has been under hot debate between Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, and China in the Post Cold War era. ASEAN has been recognized as the core actor of East Asia cooperation by the East Asian neighbors though ASEAN has not been structurally monolithic organization such like European Union (EU).

ASEAN's main role in East Asia is to hold the international conferences based on its soft regime: ASEAN regime. International conferences based on ASEAN regime are quite popular among the Asia Pacific states because of its consensus base decision making process and small states' initiative without major powers' forcible interference, though ASEAN regime is unreliable because it provides a means of escape to fragile members.

It leads to the creation of new conferences such like the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference (APEC) in 1989, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 1996, ASEAN+3 Summit Meeting in 1997, and the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005. EAS has been established for East Asia cooperation through the ASEAN+3 process. An ASEAN+3 senior officials group: East Asia Study Group (EASG) suggested seventeen short-term measures, nine medium and long-term measures for promoting East Asia cooperation in its final report in 2002.

It includes thirteen economic related measures such like East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA). The Japanese government aims at realizing the Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) to promote the trade of manufactured goods and their parts freely among eleven Japan-ASEAN partners. The Japanese government plans to extend the EPAs to its trade relations with China and Republic of Korea in the future. This is an idea to prevent the hollowing effect of Japanese industrial structure, and secure the domestic employment and income tax revenue.

It is clear that East Asia cooperation focuses on economic issues, and it has no other choice to follow the ASEAN regime. If so, Japan should admit East Asian developing states, especially ASEAN states, quasi-FTA or low tariff area such like ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) for long term, and Japan should open its market gradually for agricultural and fishery products of ASEAN and China in return for promoting EPAs, otherwise those states cannot maintain their interests in East Asia cooperation. It is an uphill task for the Japanese government to persuade farmers and fishermen at home.