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**Who wants an East Asia Community  
(and who doesn't) ?**

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## Who wants an East Asia Community (and who doesn't) ?

*Pasuk Phongpaichit*

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An East Asian Summit – the second – had been scheduled for Cebu in the Philippines last week (7-10 December 2006). A few days in advance, it was called off. The host-country Philippines explained that there was a typhoon approaching the site of the meeting. Another report claimed that the US, UK and Australia had warned of a possible terrorist attack at the site of the Summit. A third explanation suggested President Arroyo was so politically insecure that she did not dare leave Manila.

This little incident can be read as richly symbolic. Is the idea of an East Asian Community (EAC)<sup>1</sup> so frail it can be blown away by the wind? Or is the real threat coming from the US (and its allies) which desperately wants to spoil any arrangement which might seriously strengthen Asia, economically and politically?

The summit is now rescheduled for 10-15 January 2007, when it should be safe from natural typhoons, though the political typhoons are not so seasonal.

I think the idea of an EAC is the most ambitious and interesting proposal for Asian cooperation to date. In this talk I plan to do three things. First I will talk briefly about why regional integration is important. Second, I will skim through the history of the EAC idea, looking especially at the stance adopted by the key players. Lastly, I'll make a risky prediction about why the EAC idea may soon become more substantial than a storm-tossed summit on Cebu.

### What's the point of an EAC?

On the economic side, there is already de facto economic integration at various levels and dimensions. The expansion of trade and investment (FDI) within the region has been significant. In 2003, intra-region trade was 53.3 per cent of the total trade of the ASEAN+3. This figure is not far short of the EU level of 60.3 percent. The combined GDP of the region is about 1/5th of the world total.<sup>2</sup> With the spread of FDI from Japan and other East Asian countries, there are extensive production networks criss-crossing the region. This integration has been driven by market forces.

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<sup>1</sup> Here, 'community' is used in a broad sense, referring to a group of countries sharing some values in common and consenting to come together to create, in some sense, common economic, social and political arrangements for mutual benefits. EU is one such institutionalized grouping. But there can be other forms, which are not as comprehensive.

<sup>2</sup> The figure of 53.3 percent included Taiwan and Hong Kong. The rate was 33.6 percent in 1980. In addition, the ASEAN+3 hold half of global foreign reserves. See Ken, 2005:1.

The disadvantage of having *only* integration driven by market forces, while in other places institutional integration has already taken place (EU, NAFTA) is that the region foregoes the opportunity to pool resources to enhance R&D, competitiveness, and the economic and political stability of the whole region. Institutionalized integration can also reduce the risk of being bullied by superpowers (Nipon, 2005). The region lacks any mechanism to cope on a regional scale with fluctuations in the major world currencies, or other destabilizing ripples in the world economy.

On the social side, there has been a massive increase in cross-border flows of people, diseases, arms, illegal trade, and many other matters. These flows are now a major source of friction among countries, and the cause of massive human hardship. Existing systems at the global level can do little more than monitor these flows. Bilateral arrangements are inadequate to deal with the complexities. Some form of regional institutionalization is needed to manage both the human issues and the political ramifications.

On the security side, it can be argued that it is dangerous for the region to rely solely on the US, especially in the aftermath of recent US policies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

## **The emergence of EAC**

### *An emerging idea*

The idea of East Asia as an integrated economic region is not new. It may be traced back to the concept of the co-prosperity sphere in Asia, promoted by Japan in WWII, which was not a happy precedent. Then in 1990, Dr Mahathir, ex-PM of Malaysia floated the idea of the East Asia Economic Caucus as a regional free trade zone, encompassing ASEAN, Japan, China and South Korea. Mahathir's suggestion reflects his belief that the economic future of ASEAN lay with close ties to big powerful countries in Asia rather than to the west. Mahathir's suggestion came to nothing mainly because the US opposed the scheme, and Japan would not go along partly out of loyalty to the US (Malik, 2005).

Talk about an integrated East Asia surfaced again in the aftermath of the financial crisis in 1997. The economic rise of China also played a part.

The 1997 crisis and its aftermath were important because the crisis brought important countries in Asia together, and made them realize several things.

First, crisis countries could not rely on the US to help solve their problem in times of need. The US attitude was one of disinterest. Washington backed the IMF whose policies made matters worse in several of the crisis countries. The US also killed Japan's idea of an Asian Monetary Fund to help the crisis countries. Disappointment with the US response led to anti-US feelings in some quarters, signifying a decline of the US position in the region. Since 9/11, the US absorption in the Middle East has forced several Asian countries to question whether the US is of much benefit to the region any more (Tay, 2005).

The second realization after the 1997 crisis was that it might be a good idea for the region to build a competent and competitive regionalism within Asia, independent of the west, to cope with regional issues arising from the increased complexities and

dependence among countries. The establishment of the EU and NAFTA may have added impetus to this realization.

The third realization was the importance of China as an emerging economic power. China has already shown its potential to act as an engine of growth for the region. In the future, it has the scale to act as a major market. China's huge international reserves, together with those of Japan, could provide a solid foundation for the region's efforts at preventing the next crisis through swap arrangements. China has set a goal for its GDP to reach US\$4.4 trillion by 2020. If so the Chinese economy will surpass Japan in size at the current rate of exchange by 2020. In terms of purchasing power parity it has already surpassed Japan in 1994, and become half the size of the US economy in 2002 (Shiraishi, 2006). China is the only country with the potential to act truly independently of the US, and to stand up against the US in a crisis or dispute. This fact has changed what is possible and impossible in regional power politics.

### *From crisis to Cebu*

The grouping known as ASEAN+3 (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam plus China, Japan, and South Korea) came into existence as a side-effect of the region's efforts to recover from the 1997 crisis. These efforts resulted in the Chiang Mai Initiative, and subsequently a system of currency swap arrangements among the ASEAN+3 to guard against any future occurrence of financial crisis (Pasuk and Baker, 2004; Sayuri, 2005). Next, an Asia Bond market was created to provide a source of funding for investment in the region. Then came an agreement among the ASEAN+3 (1999) to proceed with co-operation on various issues affecting the region, including economic, monetary and financial, social and human development, security, health, cultural and other transnational matters. This was followed in 2000 by the decision to hold an East Asia Summit annually and to plan for a FTA for the region.

In 2001, the East Asia Vision Group suggested an East Asia Community be created with goals such as peace, identity of EAC, and prosperity for all. How did other countries then react to the idea?

The first to show official support for EAC was South Korea, whose concern appeared to be the issue of security and peace.<sup>3</sup>

The second was Japan. At the end of 2003 Koizumi invited all heads of the ten ASEAN member-states to meet in Tokyo for the first time. Out of this came the Tokyo Declaration to build the East Asia Community. This was seen as a confirmation and commitment of Japan to the idea of an East Asia Community, especially to the developing nations of East Asia. But China and South Korea were not present at the meeting.

Japan hoped EAC would bring greater economic co-operation within the region. Also it did not want to leave a leadership vacuum which China might fill. But at the same time, Japan was reluctant to diverge from its loyal alignment with US policy. Japan's

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<sup>3</sup> According to Fei-Ling Wang, Professor of International Relations at the Georgia Institute of Technology and a fellow with the Council of Foreign Relations, 'By promoting EAC identity, an EAC would help to shift paradigms, heal old wounds and resolve explosive disputes like the Taiwan issue and the Korean division.' (Fei-Ling Wang, 2005)

solution was to bring into the picture other countries which are allies of the US – namely Australia, New Zealand and India. Australia and New Zealand welcomed this as EAC became a way for them to pursue closer relations with Asia. (Malik 2005). As a result, the first East Asia Summit held in 2005 in KL was ASEAN+3+3.

ASEAN members liked the idea of EAC because it gave them a key role as the intermediaries between the bigger powers of Asia, and so forestalled the possibility they would be excluded or sidelined in any framework of regional cooperation. At the same time several ASEAN members were initially reluctant because they did not want to offend the US, but after 9/11 the US became marginally more tolerant of Asian regional cooperation as long as it helped their security goals.

China initially supported EAC strongly as part of a generally positive strategy towards ASEAN in the early 2000s.<sup>4</sup> By 2001 China agreed to conclude an FTA with ASEAN within ten years. In 2002 it concluded an Agreement of Comprehensive Economic Co-operation to facilitate economic co-operation with ASEAN, with an ‘early harvest program’ to go ahead with trade liberalization in some sectors before the FTA with ASEAN is completed. China made known its intention to be active on the EAC issue, and anchored its relationship firmly with the ASEAN. In 2003 China was the first dialogue partner to sign the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC) with ASEAN.<sup>5</sup> China has made it clear that the EAC should start with ASEAN+3, and that other countries may be incorporated in later. It offered to host the first EAS, but when this was opposed, instead pushed for having the ASEAN-10 taking turns to act as host.

With this support, the first East Asia Summit was held in Kuala Lumpur in 2005. But three features are worth noting.

Most countries had joined and supported EAC to prevent some country gaining an advantage – Japan to pre-empt China, ASEAN to pre-empt the great Asian powers, etc, etc.

The EAS in 2005 went little beyond the purely symbolic. The ‘summit’ lasted only three hours, and agreed little. It was noted that there appeared to be ‘more discord than accord’, on account of rivalries between Japan and China (Malik, 2005).

The EAC/EAS has not progressed beyond bureaucrats talking to bureaucrats. During the KL event, civil society organizations were allowed to talk to the bureaucrats for 15 minutes.

### *Barriers*

For many commentators the major barrier to progress on the EAC issue lies with the US attitude towards the idea of an EAC in which China plays an important role. The US did not object to the Chiang Mai Initiative, nor the swap arrangements, nor the bond market. But it does not want China to dominate any Asian regionalism which may arise

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<sup>4</sup> Fei-Ling Wang (2005) thinks that 'Many in Beijing tend to view EAC as a useful way to fend off America's hegemonic power.'

<sup>5</sup> This Treaty, adopted by ASEAN in 1976, commits signatories to non-interference in each other's internal affairs, renunciation of threats or use of force, and settlement of disputes by peaceful means. Other countries which have signed this TAC are Australia, New Zealand, India and Russia. France recently said it was going to sign. The US has refused, but recently suggested it might change its stand.

out of this EAS. In a speech in Japan in 2005, the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, made this abundantly clear:

“The future of Asia and the Pacific community will be defined around two great themes – openness and choice. Instead of closed societies or economies, instead of spheres of influence, we stand for an open world. Instead of an exclusive club of powers, we stand for a community open to all. But states must choose. They must choose whether to be a part of that community of openness, accepting the responsibilities that go with it. The United States and Japan have already made that choice, and we are honored to have a democratic Japan as a friend”

The feeling of several scholars who closely watched the event is that the EAC will not emerge very quickly. Simon Tay, Chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, concluded that the EAC is at the moment a framework for co-operation, not a community, because the objection from the US is too important to ignore. Besides, any Japan-China rapprochement will not happen for some time (Tay, 2005). Dr Pisan Buppawes at the Thailand Development Research Institute expressed doubts whether any ASEAN leaders were prepared to trade off autonomy in exchange for a supranational body for increased welfare. According to him, ‘No leaders think of welfare.’<sup>6</sup> In the view of Mohan Malik, Professor at the Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies in Honolulu, China may earlier have been enthusiastic about the EAC as it believed it could serve as a framework for extending China's economic influence to its south and east (the same role that Shanghai Co-operation Organization<sup>7</sup> played to its north and west). But as soon as China realized this was impractical, it may have lost enthusiasm for the new grouping (Malik, 2005).

## Prospects

Let me now end by reviewing the argument, and entering a hazardous but intriguing prediction.

Greater regional integration is a good idea, especially in a world where other regions are much further advanced on the process.

The EAC is the most ambitious such idea to have emerged to date in Asia, and has stirred the interest of many countries.

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<sup>6</sup> His comments at the seminar on 'Emerging Developments in East Asia FTA/EPAs, JSPS-NRCT', Core University Programme, CSEAS and Thammasat University, Kyoto, 27-28, October, 2006. However, the ASEAN as a group has made progress on the ASEAN Economic Community. A plan to create a free-trade zone in the group has been moved forward from 2020 to 2015, and a dateline for dismantling non-tariff barriers was set for 2010-2012, in order to make the ASEAN more attractive to foreign direct investment. A draft of an ASEAN Charter will be reported in early 2007. On 6 December 2004, Badawi, Prime Minister of Malaysia in his speech at the 2nd East Asia Forum in KL, outlined a route map to the East Asia Community, including: East Asia Summit, Charter of East Asia Community, East Asia Free Trade Area, Agreement of East Asia Monetary and Financial Co-operation, East Asia Zone of Amity and Cooperation, East Asia Transportation and Communication Network and East Asia Declaration of Human Rights and Obligations (Badawi, 2004). Note that there was no mention of free labor mobility, as is the case of the EU.

<sup>7</sup> This is an intergovernmental organization, founded in 2001 by leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Some see this organization as a counter to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

There can be three major barriers blocking the idea's progress. The first is the attitude of business groups in different countries. Unless the business people support the idea, it will be difficult for the EAC to move ahead. The Japan Business Federation (Keidanren) surveyed its members on the issue, and found most of them supporting free movements of people, goods, money and information (Keidanren, 2006). This suggests the organization does not object to the concept of an EAC. Businessmen in other countries in the group may think differently, as they may not be in a position to benefit as much as the big and competitive corporations of the Keidanren. But this may not be an insurmountable problem in the long term, as negotiations and compromises can be made to suit everyone concerned.

The second barrier is the well-known skein of historical conflicts and present-day distrust among the key countries of Asia. Ironically, most countries which have joined EAC have done so in order to prevent some other member gaining advantage – that is, for reasons of conflict, not community. However, the history of the EU shows that such conflict can be overcome.

The third barrier is the spoiler attitude of the US. This at present is the main barrier. Without US acquiescence (which in present circumstances is impossible to imagine), the idea of an EAC will go nowhere.

So, my last question is: how might this situation change?

In the present US-dollar-centered global financial system, the dollar's value is propped up by a coalition of countries (chief among these are Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates) which hold dollar assets in various forms, thereby allowing the US to finance its war efforts (such as in Iraq and Afghanistan), and to live beyond its means, with large trade and budget deficits. This system is now in a highly precarious state. In 2006 the US current account deficit will reach around US\$ 800 billion, bringing the cumulative total since 1996 to \$4.4 trillion. In 2005 the US external debt reached 41 percent of its GDP.

For some time, there has been a fear that the value of the dollar will collapse, with implications on all the countries in East Asia which rely on the US market to absorb a major proportion of their exports. In addition, the deepening US entanglement in the Middle East has inevitably compromised the ability of the US to act as security policeman in Asia. If the dollar collapsed, that ability would decline even further.

The prospect of a dollar collapse (or a hard landing) thus means that major powers in East Asia, have to think about creating some framework of political, economic and financial cooperation to manage the massive tensions which will be unleashed by the dollar collapse, as well as preparing for regional economic growth and security in the aftermath.

I am not suggesting that the current fall of the dollar is the start of this process. By virtue of its size and dominance, the US economy has a great deal of resilience. But the progressive destabilization of the US economy by the persistent deficit has now become endemic, and is unlikely to be reversed.<sup>8</sup> That means that there will be a crisis some time,

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<sup>8</sup> In the past Japan had played an important role in propping up the dollar. But things have changed with China now taking a part (Japan and China each is holding around US\$ one trillion in their international reserves); and more of the dollars outside the US are in private hands than previously. These private

so other countries have to begin thinking beyond the era of the dollar's dominance – and for Asian countries, the idea of an EAC is a good framework for that thinking.

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speculators will react to markets rather to political objectives and so the stability of the dollar-centered financial system has become more precarious.



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## **Discussion**

### **Comment 1:**

I don't know enough about an East Asian Community (EAC) to say, but I am certain that for many years the U.S. has been opposing the proposals of any grouping of East Asian countries that does not include the U.S. So I am sure that you are right and there may be nothing new about it.

### **Comment 2:**

I think your point about a distinction between the overall political dynamics and the sector-specific initiatives is an important one. In many of these issues, I think the American stance is not so uniform but a little bit more like the Japan-U.S. alliance. That is, as long as what Japan does is what the U.S. wants, the U.S. is perfectly happy about Japan taking initiatives.

### **Comment 3:**

You mentioned that the Asian crisis in 1997 is a main turning-point in Asia. From my point of view, however, the Asian crisis was mainly caused by a fluctuation of the Japanese yen against the U.S. dollar. Because the strong Japanese yen depreciated against the U.S. dollar, Asian countries were unable to compete with Japanese exports to the U.S. And this is considered as one of the major causes of the Asian crisis. In this sense, the U.S. attitude toward the East Asian countries had an enormous and negative effect. At the same time, however, I think the Japanese attitude also had a large effect on the East Asian countries in those days. So I am interested in seeing how Japan would play its role in East Asian cooperation. Since the Japanese yen is weak against the dollar nowadays, I am sure there is a possibility of developing financial cooperation with a Japanese initiative.

### **Pasuk:**

I think the causes of the Asian crisis are rather complicated and the change of the Japanese yen is only a part of the whole story. Once the crisis happened, however, Japan was very badly affected by it. My focus is on how it was solved. While Japan tried to assist the countries in the crisis, the U.S. was distracted and showed no interests in them at all, although Asian countries considered the U.S. as an ally during the Cold War. By contrast, the U.S. spent a lot of money to help Mexico when it went into crisis. Japan has consequently become a major player in the East Asia after the Asian crisis, and Asian countries' reception toward Japan has improved a lot over the last decade.

### **Question 1:**

Although you focus on an economic aspect of those who want the EAC, what could be a real driving force for the EAC? What would be a main interest of side-sliding from the Asian Economic Zone?

### **Pasuk:**

Although EAC is very much bureaucratic and people in the middle-class tend to be elitist, business-like, and functional in East Asia, they are also concerned what the idea of EAC could mean for people in rural areas and how it would help to solve the problem of high

inequality in the whole region. It is true that an idea of creating the EAC has not gone far ahead, yet they welcome economic integration that can enhance overall economic welfare.

**Question 2:**

I am interested in the way you use the example of Europe. To me, a lesson of the European story is that it took so long and was so hard to build the EU through various stages. But getting together the core countries of the EU was easier because they are geographically next to each other and share common culture. Moreover, they had a strong feeling that they were trapped between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union, and a strong motive to gain an independent voice. In case of Asia, the source of such strong determination is unclear to me. It seems that initial barriers are so enormous that a big event such as the Asian economic crisis was necessary. Do you think that there must be price for integration?

**Pasuk:**

As the cost of dollar collapse is too high for Japan and China, they will not allow it to happen. Although it may not be like the EU as a community, some kind of institutions and economic arrangements are necessary, especially on the currency issue. The experience of the EU shows that there must be some players and leaders such as France and Germany that push for an integration.

**Comment 4:**

In regard to FTA, many FTAs already exist between ASEAN countries and China, South Korea, and Japan. Japan, although it is not yet signed, has FTA with Thailand and Japan and ASEAN as a whole is now negotiating FTA. China and Korea already have FTA with ASEAN. FTA negotiation is expected to restart soon between Japan and South Korea. Also, it seems that South Korea and China are planning to negotiate FTA. In other words, the only FTA that is missing is one between China and Japan. If this missing link is overcome, East Asia FTA would be highly possible.

**Pasuk:**

I agree with you and I think more institutionalization is necessary.

**Question 3:**

You mentioned that there is a huge difference in the degree of economic development among Asian countries. In some way, you seem to suppose EAC as a step forward to remedy such situation. How do you think about EAC playing such role?

**Pasuk:**

The idea of EAC has to contain an element that can make it worthwhile for the whole region. There are a lot of tensions in the idea of pooling resources and of what we should do to make everybody move at the same pace. Integration of market forces is really a high hope.

**Comment 5:**

Unlike European countries in the 1960s that experienced the shortage of dollar and created a custom union to collect dollars, many Asian countries, although they were short of dollars in 1997, now possess huge amount of foreign reserves. I think the problem that Asian countries are now facing is not a current account deficit but a current account surplus. If dollar collapse would happen in the future, I think FTA or EAC have no tools to prepare for that. In this sense, it seems that EAC can provide no suitable policy tool to face the future financial problem since it merely provides a micro-economic policy tool rather than macro-economic policy. What is required in Asia is cooperative financial programs like the Asian Development Fund or the Asian Market Fund. Yet, due to Japan's interest being still quite weak, it may be difficult to establish institutional cooperation among Asian countries.

**Pasuk:**

As long as Japan is still looking to the U.S. to invest its surplus and less willing to put money to Asia, Japan would not change its stance unless a drastic crisis may happen.

**Question 4:**

In regard to the role of NGOs, NGOs often work against globalization movement. In case of Asia, do they tend to oppose or support the formation of the EAC?

**Pasuk:**

I think it is not yet an issue, because the idea of EAC is shared and discussed only at a bureaucratic and policymaking level. There is nothing concrete for NGO people to take part in. But in an area of environment, labor, human rights, etc, there are huge networks of people in the Asian countries and these networks are becoming important pressure groups on policy making that can span several countries.

**Question 5:**

What are the minimum criteria of EAC?

**Pasuk:**

I think some scholars think the first stages of community building must involve economic integration that increases intra-regional trade, investment, production networks, and regular meeting of various policy making bodies over certain issues. Any systematic arrangement and agreement such as meeting of people in Health Ministries to discuss how to stop the spread of SARs can also be seen as a part of community building. The idea of community building is a starting point to expand the cultural exchange in the post Cold War period.