

June 22, 2005

How East Asians Can Coexist and Prosper (2)

By KINOSHITA Toshihiko

Community Spirit

What are the aims of the East Asia Community? And what sort of relationship will it have with countries outside the region? Official talks within the region are yet to be held regarding matters such as these, leaving each country with its own individual image of how things will take shape. Although the countries involved agree on the need for a functional approach, all other areas remain as yet undecided. There have been a number of research findings and opinions put forward by opinion leaders in the region and various national think tanks, but there can be little doubt that the success of this project will come down to how well Japan and China get along with one another.

What do the ASEAN member countries think of the air of economic cohesion tainted by political tension that marks the relationship between Japan and China, the two giants of East Asia? According to K. Kesavapany, director of the Institute of Southeast Asia Studies (ISEAS), "Rivalry, if not excessive, over ASEAN initiatives between Japan and China is not necessarily a bad thing for ASEAN. The ASEAN member countries will not forget Japan's major contribution to the development of the ASEAN economy so far and its powerful support at the time of the currency crisis. We expect great things from Japan in the future too. However, Japan's response to issues such as the opening up of agricultural and service markets has been too slow, to the point of being unreasonable. It was only after China began to reach out to ASEAN countries that Japan started to address ASEAN issues seriously and as a matter of urgency." In addition to hoping for direct investment from Japanese companies to be directed towards them rather than being poured mostly into China, the ASEAN member countries may be observing some degree of improvement in the political relationship between Japan and China after the meeting of Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and China's President Hu Jintao during the Asia-African Summit in late April.

What does the United States think about this project? There has been little fierce opposition from the United States government such as that shown in response to the EAEC project in the early 1990s. This is due to the fact that the European Union and NAFTA already exist (with the United States also aiming to develop NAFTA into the FTAA, a free trade agreement covering the entire American continent) and the fact that the US government hopes to rely on the cooperation of East Asian countries to handle trouble in Iraq and combat terrorism. Nevertheless, not a small number of American officials and people do not hide their concerns over possibilities such as the

East Asia Community being developed at China's pace in the future and the interests of the United States or its companies suffering as a result of the emergence of the community. The United States itself already has a free trade agreement with Singapore and is in the process of forming similar agreements with Thailand and Malaysia.

Protecting Humanity

The road that Japan ought to follow is surely clear. Japan needs to dedicate itself to the creation of a rational East Asian Community that is open to the rest of the world, whilst at the same time maintaining its trusting relationship with the United States. Based on the understanding that the process of developing regional cooperation is irreversible and the realization that East Asia is made up of countries with different cultures, political systems, religions, and languages and at differing stages of development, it is clear that it will be a progressive process and that it will also be necessary to take less-developed smaller regions into special consideration. It will be Japan's role to ensure that this is made known in other areas, the United States in particular, which is something that China is unable to do at the current time.

The image I have of the East Asia Community is as follows. Even if it proves impossible to create a vision for the community around the core concepts of democracy and liberalism, as some Asians wish to realize, due to the existence of the socialist member countries such as China, Vietnam, and Laos, the aim should be to create a healthy civil society that ensures that the universal principal of protecting humanity. This, combined with the development of a systematic framework to strengthen cooperation in areas such as economic integration, currency, environment, energy, and food supplies (or, as I name it, "regional public goods") and an emphasis on the leading role played by ASEAN, will cut down on elements of instability in the region and enable us to coexist in peace.

(This is the text of an article by Mr. KINOSHITA Toshihiko, Professor of Waseda University and Member of the Council on East Asian Community, which originally appeared in the June 2005 issue of "The Japan Journal.")