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## East Asian Community: Intelligently Aimed Evolution

By ITO Kenichi

The Council on East Asian Community (CEAC), which was established in May 2004 in Japan, has recently published a policy report titled “The State of the Concept of East Asian Community and Japan’s Strategic Response Thereto.” The product of yearlong discussions at the CEAC’s Policy Plenary Meeting, the report was signed by 58 members of the council.

In retrospect, the most shocking event for me during the past year has been the anti-Japanese demonstrations that erupted in China in April.

If such violence is condoned as an act of patriotism, and if the government concerned offers neither an apology nor compensation for the vandalism and refuses to punish the perpetrators, how can friendly relations be maintained with such a country?

It would be all the more out of the question to form a community with such a country. I do not deny this argument; I fully support it. Actually, within the CEAC, there were members who contended that past discussions should be undone and that the council should start from scratch again.

In a situation like this, it is important to go back to the starting point to rethink the issue. It is necessary to remind ourselves that the concept of an East Asian Community is an evolving one within the international framework of ASEAN (10 member Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Plus Three (Japan, South Korea and China).

At one time the United Nations imposed an international order that a defeated Japan had no choice but to accept, however unfavorable and unreasonable it might have seemed. That was the reality in which Japan found itself.

Japanese tend to be blinded by the phrase “East Asian Community,” and rush to express their positions either for or against such a community without thinking much about it. They don’t necessarily look at the realities squarely. The fact is that, whether the phrase “East Asian Community” is used or not, a regional order is steadily taking shape in East Asia.

At the very least, in the economic fields of trade, investment, currency and finance, an

irreversible and accelerating tendency of interdependence is progressing among nations in the region. And in other fields, such as energy, environment, terrorism, piracy, and infectious diseases, functional cooperation is strengthening. As a result, a regional order is being formulated day after day.

It must be an aim of Japanese diplomacy to keep watch over and exert pressure on moves toward the evolving order to make it as desirable as possible for the nation. Refusing or boycotting moves toward a new order will only result in reproducing the adverse relations that existed between defeated Japan and the U.N.

Still, we cannot overlook the transformation of China, which is ruled by a single-party dictatorship, into a hegemonic military power that is likely to contribute to instability in the region. Against the background of this reality, the concept of an East Asian Community may end up as nothing more than a pipe dream.

However, if we remove prejudices from the word “community,” we may realize that the security purpose of an East Asian Community is not to transform “community” into a quasi-nation power center but rather to stabilize peace in the region by easing political tensions.

No major war has occurred in East Asia since the civil war in Cambodia ended more than a decade ago. It is the security purpose of the East Asian Community concept to perpetuate this state of peace in the region. It is conceivable that help from the U.N. and/or the United States may need to be mobilized. It is also conceivable that North Korea and/or Taiwan may be brought into the “community.”

The policy report just published by the CEAC proposes that Japan’s strategic principles emphasize freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. These might look like distant goals against the background of East Asian reality, but the important thing is to show directions toward policy goals.

On Aug. 21-23 in Tokyo, the annual conference of the Network of East Asian Think-Tanks (NEAT) will meet, and representatives of think tanks from 13 East Asian countries will gather to discuss proposals to be presented at the East Asian Summit in Kuala Lumpur in December. At this conference, we wish to convince our East Asian colleagues of the importance of CEAC policy recommendations, especially with regard to values such as freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

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