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Toward a Principled Integration of East Asia: Concept of an East Asian Community (1)

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In all of modern history, East Asia has never before captured the global attention or evinced the energy and drive that it does today. In economic terms, the region is a tremendous source of dynamism for the global economy, and the “de facto” economic integration that is taking place as a result of the remarkable expansion of intraregional trade promises to make it flourish even more. Functional cooperation is also increasing in a wide range of areas including economic partnership agreements, finance, and the environment, as well as in counter-terrorism, anti-piracy, human trafficking, and other forms of transnational crime. Another development, more sociocultural than economic, is the emergence of a younger generation known as the “new middle class” that is bound together by common lifestyles and is evolving into the shaper and bearer of new cultural phenomena and values. In this environment of dynamism and progress, the first East Asia Summit will convene in December 2005.

In the political and security aspects, on the other hand, the nations of East Asia remain extremely diverse. While democratization has made some progress in several countries, different types of political systems and principles continue to coexist within the region. The recognition of security threats and development of policies to deal with them also vary from country to country, leaving East Asia unready to create an overarching security framework. In addition, the rise of nationalism, as reflected in recent developments in Japan–China relations, is further complicating the political and security environment in East Asia.

East Asia thus stands at an historical crossroads. From this point forward, what course will the region follow? Will the drive toward economic growth and integration enable it to become a leading region in the world and achieve a high level of wealth and prosperity? Or will it get bogged down trying to deal with the impact of rising nationalism? How can East Asia best use the opportunities provided by today’s unprecedented economic and sociocultural growth and development? How can the region prevent its fragile political and security-related situation and emerging nationalism from upsetting peace and security? The answers to these questions will be determined by the kinds of efforts each country in the region makes in the years to come.

Three Approaches

Diplomatic policies to deal with the current situation in East Asia can be divided into three broad approaches. The countries in the region must promote each of the three approaches so as to enhance the stability, peace, and prosperity of the region.

The first approach is centered on positive ways to meet the critical diplomatic challenges the region faces. These include issues related to North Korea, the Taiwan Straits, the South China Sea, and current Japan–China relations. How these are handled and the outcome in each case will have a profound influence on the future of the region.

The second approach focuses on enhancing and maintaining effective security throughout the region. A strong and reliable deterrence system is vital to ensure that rising nationalism and political differences do not lead to serious conflicts. Already well established and capable of resiliency, the Japan-U.S. security alliance will likely continue to function as the backbone of this deterrence system in East Asia.

The third approach involves the sharing and promotion of a common vision among East Asian nations of the kind of region they hope to see evolve, together with joint efforts to move in that direction. While the importance of the first and second approaches has long been recognized, the third approach has begun to receive serious attention only recently. Its importance will become increasingly obvious as regional interdependence expands and deepens, particularly in the economic and sociocultural dimensions. The main theme of this article, the concept of an East Asian community, is at the core of the third approach.

(This is the text of an article by Mr. YAMADA Takio, Director of Regional Policy Division, Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which originally appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of the English edition of “GAIKO FORUM.”)