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Toward a Principled Integration of East Asia: Concept of an East Asian Community (2)

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Comparison with Europe

East Asia in many respects contains greater diversity than Europe. Given that difference, is it worthwhile for the nations of this region to set their sights on the concept of an East Asian community? Europe is creating a community based on shared religious, historical, and cultural foundations with Christianity and Greco-Roman civilization as the cornerstones. East Asia is incomparably more diverse, historically and culturally.

A more important difference is the groundwork. When European integration began in the 1950s, Western Europe already shared political and economic ideas; they believed in the strength of democratic principles and market economics, and in NATO they had a common security system firmly in place. The Western European countries had also attained roughly similar levels of economic development. Today's East Asia does not have the same kind of commonality.

Such comparisons can be deceptive, however. Consider the period after World War I when Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi was actively enlisting grass-roots participation in the Pan-Europa movement; Europe, then in the grip of a series of serious economic slumps, was the battleground for sharply conflicting beliefs and values, as evidenced by the Franco-German conflict, the Russian revolution, and the rise of fascism. How many people in Europe in that period could have foreseen the progress leading into the European integration of today? Compared to post-World War I Europe, present-day East Asia is far more stable and brimming with energy and enthusiasm for the future. Coexisting within the region are diverse political systems, but a common trend is growing among this group of countries moving toward economic liberalization and greater political stability.

In other words, we should not conclude simply on the basis of a comparison with Europe that East Asian integration is unrealistic. It is instructive to consider comparisons with Europe and other regions, but much more useful is to make a clear-eyed and dispassionate analysis of the current conditions in and unique characteristics of East Asia, with a view to formulating the

most appropriate concepts and methods for integration.

Economy, Society, and Culture

What are the current conditions in and unique characteristics of East Asia? Let us look first at some of the region's economic, social, and cultural features.

We noted earlier that when the European integration process began in the 1950s, those countries were already firmly committed to free market economics. In present-day East Asia, it is apparent that socialism as a set of economic principles is losing the influence it once had and that the principles of market economics are permeating the entire region. China's entry into the WTO and Vietnam's eagerness to pursue WTO accession negotiations are cases in point. Driven by the impetus created by the widening acceptance of free market economic principles, in addition to the efforts many countries are making toward economic liberalization, East Asia enjoys the most dynamic economic growth in the world today. This vigorous growth, moreover, is spurring the process of de facto economic integration. The expanding network of active free trade agreements and economic partnership agreements (FTAs/EPAs) is also pushing regional economic integration. In addition, ongoing intraregional industrial specialization is creating an organic regional economic system unique to East Asia.

This increasing interdependence in East Asia is not limited to business. The region is also seeing the rapid development of functional networks of regional cooperation in a wide range of areas, including IT, the environment, energy, food safety, health care, counter-terrorism, anti-piracy, narcotics, and human trafficking. Many of these networks are built around ASEAN + 3 (Japan, China, and South Korea), but they are also intended to serve as a means for open cooperation involving other partners such as Australia, New Zealand, India, and the United States.

The widening sociocultural exchange within the region has also been remarkable. A common culture is being created that encompasses broadly shared lifestyles whose highlights at present include Japanese music, anime, and cuisine; Hong Kong movies; Korean television dramas; and so on. The standard bearers of this new culture are a relatively young generation—the so-called new middle class—that is emerging in many East Asian countries. As this type of exchange continues and widens, we are beginning to see signs of a closer sociocultural solidarity among countries in the region.

At the same time, many of the region's most difficult, long-standing economic and social issues have by no means disappeared. In particular, despite rapid economic growth in the region as a whole, huge disparities among countries in levels of income and development remain unchanged. Among the most urgent tasks for the region are to remove the disparities and to act on the need for human resources development in the least developed countries.

In addition, insofar as countries negotiate economic partnership agreements separately, differences have arisen in basic elements of the EPA/FTA networks such as stipulations concerning rules of origin. As a result, some observers question whether these networks, which are currently being fashioned piecemeal, will ever become coherent enough to lead to the creation of a free trade area.

Even granting the seriousness and stubbornness of such problems, the emerging dynamism and increasing cooperation and solidarity in the economic, social, and cultural spheres are creating the backbone of a concept of an East Asian community. Whether the region can develop those positive trends further is a vital condition for enhancing regional prosperity and stability, and in the long run, for transforming the concept of an East Asian community into reality.

(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.”)