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Toward a Principled Integration of East Asia: Concept of an East Asian Community (3)

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Politics and Security

From the political and security perspective, East Asia today has not achieved a level of commonality comparable to that of Western Europe in the 1950s. Those nations at that time all embraced the political principles of liberal democracy, and had a collective security system in NATO. In present-day East Asia, there is nothing yet that can be called a common set of political principles. Many countries have problems in governance, and much greater efforts are needed for democratization, to strengthen the rule of law, protect human rights, prevent corruption, and improve administrative efficiency. These problematic political conditions stand in stark contrast to the thriving East Asian economies.

There have been certain signs of progress recently, however. Over the past two years democratic elections have been held in several ASEAN countries, and in some of them leaders were replaced. This would have been unimaginable only ten years ago. Prominent references to democracy and other universal values have been incorporated in documents issued at recent regional summit meetings, such as the Asia–Africa Summit Declaration issued in April 2005, the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II in October 2003, and the Japan–ASEAN Tokyo Declaration in December 2003.

East Asia's emerging new middle class, moreover, is the globalization generation, and when they come of age as leaders in their societies, those universal values will become much more deeply rooted there. We should encourage this kind of forward-looking transformation and strive to create conditions where universal values like democracy are respected and can flourish throughout the entire region.

Many argue that one reason European integration took place so rapidly after the second world war was the establishment of NATO, backed by the huge military power of the United States. The presence of NATO helped to create a strategic environment that acted to deter conflict between major European countries, notably France and Germany. That environment of security

was an essential factor in the success of regional integration.

East Asia's security foundation, in contrast, is fragile and is a significant problem for the region. First, there is no collective regional security system comparable to NATO. Given the diversity of national security policies, it is not likely that a NATO-like system will be established in East Asia in the near future. The American military presence in Asia, contingent upon the Japan–U.S. security arrangements, and collaboration and cooperation among the countries concerned will most likely continue to serve as the basis for regional peace and security for the foreseeable future.

Under such circumstances, a major security-related issue for East Asia is to ensure greater transparency regarding the defense policies and military capabilities of the separate nations and to emphasize confidence-building measures. The U.S. Defense Department's annual report to Congress on China's military strength issued in July 2005 caused a stir worldwide. Views and assessments of the report vary, but it aroused considerable concern. Some people have expressed worry that countries in the region cannot get sufficient information either on military buildup operations by regional powers or on the defense strategies they are formulating that guide their military preparations. This situation must be improved; unless we do, we cannot promote mutual trust and confidence among the region's countries, and a regional community cannot be built without trust and confidence in each other.

Although I do not go into these points at length here, when analyzing the present political and security situation in East Asia, two more important factors should be considered: (i) the recent rise of nationalism in Northeast Asian nations, and (ii) the impact of the economic emergence of China and India on the power balance in the region and the world as a whole.

In sum, East Asia faces an array of political and security issues. For the sake of future generations, it is incumbent upon us to continue our steadfast cooperative efforts to overcome, one by one, these political and security issues in order to ensure a more stable and prosperous region.

Principled Integration

The current situation in East Asia is, then, a complex mixture of positive elements, particularly in the economic and sociocultural realms, and negative elements, mainly in the political and security realms, but the region is moving ahead and is on the verge of creating a new environment for itself. It is no easy task to foresee in what direction such historical transformations could lead. As I stated in the introduction, East Asia now stands at a historical crossroads. At this juncture, it is more important than ever that countries in the region continue their collaborative efforts to move the region toward strength and solidarity in the future,

promoting the positive elements of changes currently underway, while mitigating the negative ones.

In my view, the most valuable role a “concept of an East Asian community” could play would be to motivate people and be a central vision or idea to give structure and direction to the joint efforts of the region’s countries. The actual creation of an East Asian community will undoubtedly take considerable time. What is important now is to share the common goal of building a regional community in the future and to facilitate the process of mobilizing and consolidating collaborative efforts to that end. Such a process will help the countries in the region reconcile diverging interests and policy that irritate relations among them.

Let me stress, furthermore, that in pushing joint efforts, East Asian leaders must establish valid and sound principles and methods for integration, and make them clear and evident to all concerned. The region today is a delicate and complex mixture of challenges and opportunities. Promoting integration without principles would, in such an environment, probably stir up more apprehension than hope. The region’s leaders need to be aware that the international community is giving its most focused attention to East Asia. What the region is trying to achieve and under what principles it is trying to do so must be made evident. East Asia must present in very clear terms what I am calling its “principled integration”—that is the task with which the region is now faced.

(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.”)