

The Singapore Summits and its Implications for an East Asian Community

By ISHIGAKI Yasuji

If we closely read "Second Joint Statement on East Asian Cooperation" issued at the ASEAN+3 Summit of last November in Singapore, we find a number of important developments in regional cooperation in East Asia. It has confirmed the significant progress of regional cooperation over the last decade within the framework of ASEAN+3, which originated in a regional response to the Asian currency crisis in 1997. The Statement declared the determination that cooperation should be more strongly promoted in the next ten years and manifested the expectations for greater progress. Moreover, it stated that regional cooperation within the framework of ASEAN+3 will continue to be the main vehicle toward the building of an East Asian Community.

On the other hand, regarding the East Asian Summit, there has been a concern aired often since its establishment that simply adding three countries, namely, Australia, New Zealand and India, to ASEAN+3 would end up creating another forum where the same topics might be discussed. However, the joint statement issued at this summit clearly showed that it has its own agenda topics such as environment and energy, the effective regional cooperation for which could not be discussed without the participation of those three countries. Thus, it seems to have gradually enhanced its relevance. Furthermore, the complementary relationship among ASEAN+3, the East Asia Summit, and APEC toward an East Asian Community was well acknowledged.

To sum up, in terms of the significance of the series of summit conferences held this time in Singapore, the following three points are worth noting here.

First, even though the building of an East Asian Community still remains a long-term goal, ASEAN, which has been making the most serious and concrete efforts toward community building, has developed and established a clearer idea of what sort of community they are aiming to establish by signing the ASEAN Charter. It is worth noting that though member states are still reluctant to give up any part of their sovereignty, they are now ready to address human rights issues within the region through the establishment of a regional human rights organisation.

Second, the complementary relationship between ASEAN+3 and the East Asia Summit was reaffirmed, while the former was expected to play a leading role.

Finally, increasing cooperation between Japan, South Korea, and China, which ASEAN has long clamoured for, started to be explored. It was agreed that a summit among those three countries will be held independently of ASEAN+3. It can be said that this is an especially important result of summits in Singapore.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Mr. ISHIGAKI Yasuji, Professor of Tokai University Law School, which originally appeared on the BBS "Hyakka-Somei" of CEAC on December 22, 2007.)