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Some Reflections on Aborted Summit in Pattaya

By ISHIGAKI Yasuji

Last April, the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit and the East Asian Summit (EAS) and other ASEAN related summit meetings were all cancelled in spite of the arrival of all the leaders of participating countries at a conference venue in Pattaya, Thailand, after repeated postponements since they were first deferred in December 2008. The cancellation was forced after the anti-government protesters stormed the venue: a happening unprecedented in the whole history of ASEAN. Nevertheless, Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit Meeting alone was held at a different location, which was felt as a sole source of consolation over the events. Certainly, the turmoil in Pattaya was of a nature of force majeure caused by the domestic political developments of Thailand. However, they took place against the background of prior events: the ASEAN Charter's coming into effect which the ASEAN originally planned to celebrate at its Summit to be held in Thailand in December 2008 was instead celebrated at a Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Jakarta that month. The ASEAN Summit itself was held at the end of February and issued on 1 March "the Cha Am-Hua Hin Declaration on the Roadmap for the ASEAN Community (2009-2015)."

The Thai government spared no effort to work on rescheduling and relocation of APT Summit, EAS and other meetings, but has not been very successful in her attempts. It must be admitted that the momentum of East Asian community building within APT and ASEAN Plus Six framework has unfortunately been stalled to some extent. Moreover, pursuant to the provision of ASEAN Charter, starting this year, ASEAN Chair's term-in-office has been changed to run on a calendar year basis. Therefore, the Thai government is to keep the Chair position, handed over from Singapore last year, for an 18-month long term through December 2009. This means that the timing or the prospect of holding successfully the ASEAN Summit, ASEAN +3 Summit and the East Asia Summit are very closely linked to the domestic political developments of Thailand.

Under those circumstances, it was quite natural that there arose from among key members of ASEAN, such as Indonesia, the seat of ASEAN Secretariat, which has a particular interest and feels responsible for the fate of ASEAN organization, some concern that the holding of ASEAN related summit meetings should not be at the mercy of political turmoil of the current Chair Thailand, and some flexibility might be required to change the venue, as necessary, to Jakarta, for example, where

the ASEAN Secretariat is located. However, the ASEAN, as of now, rules out that option.

In the region, a consensus view has been formed that ASEAN should sit in the "driver's seat" in community building efforts. But the recent developments might warrant a review of such a view. In the meantime, the First Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit was successfully held in Fukuoka in December 2008, outside of ASEAN summit framework. as a notable instance of a dialogue towards regional cooperation pursued independently of ASEAN.

On April 27, Nakasone Hirofumi, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, invited all the ambassadors of the participating states of EAS to a reception in Tokyo, where he explained Prime Minister Aso Taro's policy speech, originally prepared for Pattaya Summit, on the subject of "Japan's contribution to Asia affected by current global economic and financial crisis". At the annual meeting of the Trilateral Commission recently held in Tokyo, a Chinese delegate is said to have indicated a new trend of thought by referring to the importance of strengthening regional cooperation among ASEAN Plus Six countries. In the U.S., Kurt M. Campbell was nominated to be Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, signaling a new U.S. diplomatic lineup and fresh consideration for East Asian initiatives. In this way, a variety of moves are in progress while regional cooperation among ASEAN countries seems to be somewhat at a standstill. It is very much hoped all the more in a situation like this that government officials, intellectuals and business leaders of ASEAN Pus Six countries, U.S. and other interested states, in their respective capacity, explore new initiatives for regional cooperation, and come up with fresh ideas through frank exchange of views.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Mr. ISHIGAKI Yasuji, Delegate for Japan to AALCO and Former Professor of Tokai University, which originally appeared on the BBS "Hyakka-Somei" of CEAC on May 1, 2009.)