

A Testing Time for Discussions on an East Asian Community

By ISHIGAKI Yasuji

Towards the end of the year 2009, we have seen convened a series of such important official fora on regional cooperation in East Asia as ASEAN Summit, ASEAN+3 Summit, East Asia Summit, APEC Summit, etc., just as in the previous years. In the wake of those events, universities, think-tanks, newspapers have been holding seminars and symposiums to discuss afresh numerous topics related to regional cooperation in the region. Here, let me make some notes in retrospect.

First of all, discussions on an East Asian community have regained wide attention both at home and abroad, to a large extent, because an East Asian community building is counted among the main pillars of Japan's foreign policies launched by the Hatoyama Administration. It is worth noting that, as a consequence, a great number of intellectuals, politicians, academics, and journalists not only in Japan but also in Europe, the U.S. and other Asian countries, many of whom had paid little attention to movements of regional integration in East Asia and Asian-Pacific region, have come to join and get actively involved in the discussions. Some newcomers are prone to neglect what have already achieved or thoroughly discussed on this topic and hasten to draw such conclusions as "under the current situation, there is no point of discussing a community building in this region, because it is a totally unrealistic concept." Therefore, in a sense a gap between proponents and opponents might have even widened.

Secondly, there has already been a consensus among the governments of ASEAN Plus Three countries that, in pursuit of a community building in East Asia, ASEAN Plus Three process will continue to be the main vehicle, while the framework of East Asian Summit including Australia, India, and New Zealand, should also be considered as a significant alternative. The recent discussions, however, point to the geographical scope of the community building expanding beyond East Asia in a strict sense to a broader area of entire Asia-Pacific region, spurred by a suggestion repeatedly made by Prime Minister Hatoyama that engagement of the U.S. in the community building should be necessary or an idea of "Asia-Pacific Community" pushed for by Prime Minister Rudd of Australia.

Thirdly, with the expansion of the geographical scope as mentioned above, it would become practically impossible to achieve the realization of such an East Asian

community, with substantial tight-knit regional integration institution as those proponents visualize. Hence in such case an East Asian community might end up following in the footsteps of APEC and become a merely nominal community as a loose regional cooperation framework.

Fourthly, while the efforts in pursuit of an East Asian community building were initiated by a small number of intellectuals called the "East Asia Vision Group (EAVG)," hereafter the Track-one diplomatic talks and negotiations among the governments concerned in the region will become increasingly important. Nevertheless, the Track-two discussions and exchange of views will remain as important as before as arena to promote and give directions to those talks and negotiations. To sum up, the efforts and discussion for "an East Asian community" are now facing a critical testing time that have never been experienced before.

(This is the English translation of an article written as personal view 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 December 3, 2009.)