

Text of the Speech by Professor ITO Kenichi
at the 6th Asia Economic Forum
on “Maximizing Asia’s Strategic Roles in the World: Asia’s State of Play”

Phnom Penh, Cambodia
20 January, 2010

His Excellency Prime Minister Hun Sen, and good and old friends of mine, Dr. Kao Kim Houorn and Dr. Haruhisa Handa , both of whom happen to be founders and organizers of this Economic Forum, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honor to have a chance to speak to you on the topic of “Maximizing Asia’s Strategic Roles in the World: Asia’s State of Play.” Much has been talked about the historical fact that the center of gravity of the global political and economic activities had moved westward across the Atlantic Ocean from Europe to North America and is now moving further westward across the Pacific Ocean from North America to Asia. This last movement of the center of gravity of the world civilization may well be described as a completion of a cycle around the globe because the human civilization itself was born originally in Asia and was transmitted westward to Europe at a later stage of the human history. As the cycle of the westward movement of civilization is being concluded, we, Asians, must be aware of the historical fact that we have slept long enough and are finally awakened and standing up again. The day before yesterday I had a chance to visit Angkor Wat in Siem Reap and was overwhelmed by the glory of one of the great Asian civilizations in the past. We should be not only proud of, but confident in, the achievements of our ancestors

Here let me turn my attention to the fact that Europeans have been consolidating for the past half a century their basis of economic and political activities in the name of regional integration as exemplified in their efforts to establish the European Union (EU). Even in North America a trend toward regional integration is gaining strength. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) concluded among the United States, Canada and Mexico is rapidly transforming the markets of the three countries into a single market. As for Asia, true, much has been talked about its blueprint for the goal of an East Asian Community building, but little has been achieved so far. I am one of those who have been closely associated with the Network of East Asian Think-tanks (NEAT) since it was established in Beijing in 2003. The NEAT, as a

network of think-tanks in the region, has done a good job in the past 6 years. The NEAT, through its mechanism of Working Groups, has produced a number of policy recommendations intended to strengthen the efforts of community building in East Asia. Those Policy Recommendations that were proposed by the Working Groups and adopted by the Annual Conferences of the NEAT were presented to the ASEAN plus 3 Summit meetings and the Chairman's report of the Summit meetings have always taken note of those Recommendations. So in Asia as well, there is a pulse for the regional integration, but political will for the same is weak, if not absent. The year 2010 seems to be more promising than ever for the community building in East Asia. The financial crisis of 2008 reminded us in the region that we needed stronger cooperation in order to cope with the challenge, as so did that of 1997 a decade ago. Betterment of the relations between the two giants in the region, i.e. Japan and China, as exemplified in the concept of "mutually beneficial strategic relationship" is also promising. For the past years we had heard from our ASEAN friends that they were worried about the confrontation between the two giants in East Asia. But don't worry any more. I am sure that the leaders of the two countries have learned enough from the past experience.

Thank you very much.