

NEAT Working Group on “NEAT: the Next Ten Years”

Report

(Final)

Beijing, China

6 July 2012

Introduction

NEAT Working Group Meeting on “NEAT: the Next Ten Years” was held in Beijing, China on 6 July 2012. Experts from 11 ASEAN Plus Three countries took part in the Meeting. Brunei and Myanmar were absent. The Meeting consists of an opening session, three presentation-and-discussion sessions and a wrap-up session. The topics for discussion include

- 1) a review of development;
- 2) achievements and outstanding issues; and
- 3) future direction.

The discussions were candid and fruitful and many specific and feasible proposals were made. Participants unanimously agreed that NEAT has been a success story, that NEAT should develop strategic thinking on its own development, and that NEAT should build on its good practices to play a greater role in East Asian community building.

1. A Review of Development and Achievements

1.1 Development

In 2001, East Asian Vision Group (EAVG) proposed that a network of East Asian Think-tanks be established to explore long term policy issues of strategic importance to the building of East Asian community. In 2002, East Asian Studies Group (EASG) recommended to the ASEAN Plus Three Summit that 17 short-term measures be taken for closer cooperation among East Asian nations, among which was establishing “Network of East Asian Think-tanks”(NEAT). The Summit adopted the proposal and China volunteered to be the prime mover on NEAT. On 29-30 September 2003, the first Annual Conference—the Inauguration of NEAT—was held in Beijing, China.

In the first ten years, NEAT has witnessed significant institutional development. The Second Annual Conference of NEAT held in Thailand on 16-17 August 2004 adopted the “Basic Rules and Framework of NEAT”, which has served as a NEAT Charter. Since then, NEAT has established and put into practice good working mechanisms, such as Country Coordinators Meeting, Annual Conference, and working group. NEAT launched and developed its own website first in China and then in the Philippines. NEAT has made it a tacit rule of submitting policy recommendations to the APT Summit from the Third Annual Conference held in Tokyo, Japan onward.

In the first ten years, NEAT has made practical contributions to East Asian community building. By 2012, NEAT has held 41 working group meetings and produced 41

working group reports, covering regional architecture building, financial cooperation, investment cooperation, trade and economic integration, cultural exchange, non-traditional security and environmental cooperation, energy security cooperation, migrant workers, food security, disaster management, water resources management, trade and investment facilitation and connectivity, inclusive growth, etc. By 2012, NEAT has conducted 10 Annual Conferences and 17 Country Coordinators Meetings, and submitted 8 NEAT Memos—policy proposal papers—to the APT Summit.

1.2 Achievements

In the first ten years, working hard toward a common goal of promoting community building and providing intellectual support, NEAT has won increasing recognition from Track I. The Chairman’s Statement of the 2011 APT Summit not only noted the NEAT Memo, but also “appreciated” the contribution of NEAT and encouraged relevant APT sectoral bodies to “look into NEAT’s policy recommendations” and “emphasized the need and importance of greater involvement of NEAT” in the APT cooperation.

The achievements of NEAT are very much due to the following practices.

First, seek common ground and nurture the spirit of cooperation. In the past ten years, NEAT has been forging ahead despite all the difficulties and differences. Unremitting efforts have been made by all members to incrementally expand common grounds, maintain the process of cooperation and manage to move on.

Second, strike a balance between what is desirable and what is doable. While holding ambitions, NEAT has been realistic in promoting regional cooperation. NEAT Working Groups are good examples. They study issues that have both significance for regional integration and potential for feasible action so that NEAT policy recommendations can be as relevant as possible, as prominent as possible and as feasible as possible. Such balance between idealism and pragmatism is one of the key reasons for the success of NEAT.

Third, build academic community and nurture shared identity. Through its operation and activities, NEAT has networked scholars and experts who are committed to building an East Asian community of peace, prosperity and progress. Such an epistemic community has not only deepened people-to-people understanding and friendship among APT countries, but also become an advocacy group for greater integration and eventually the “we-feeling” in the region.

2. Outstanding issues

In its practice, NEAT has also been confronted with outstanding issues in the

following four areas.

First, funding for sustained development and participation. Since the very beginning, NEAT members have to raise fund on their own from government, businesses, institutions or others to sustain their activities and researches. Thus, NEAT members who fail to get fund cannot host NEAT conferences or sponsor Working Groups. Hence, without stable financial support, sustainable development of NEAT and full and equal participation of each member could not be guaranteed in the future.

Second, pre-study and follow-up of WG research. Due to the funding constraints of the sponsors, NEAT Working Groups have done limited joint pre-study or follow-up research, which has impaired the quality of the research and the relevance of NEAT policy recommendations.

Third, publicity to increase NEAT influence and enhance public education. NEAT has limited connection with media or the general public. To enhance the educational function of NEAT and increase its influence, more publicity is needed. NEAT website is to be further developed and utilized.

Fourth, vision, roadmap and agenda. NEAT lacks an overall blueprint or strategy for its long-term development. A few questions should be asked. For example, what's NEAT objective in the next ten years? What would increase the relevance of NEAT in evolving regional architecture? To streamline its future efforts, it's high time for NEAT to embrace a long-term vision, a well-designed roadmap and a deliberately-selected agenda.

3. Future Direction: the Next Ten Years

The regional environment for the future development of NEAT shows both encouraging aspects and worrying aspects. Encouraging parts mainly include the progress of regional integration at both regional and sub-regional levels, and the shift of world's gravity to Asia. Worrying parts mainly include territorial disputes, competing initiatives and lack of mutual trust. The evolution of regional order brings about both opportunities and challenges for NEAT in trust-building and strategic-coordination, in agenda-setting and norm-making, and in social networking and identity-building. NEAT should take a progressive approach, keep adapting itself to evolving regional environment, emerging challenges and opportunities and embedding its own development in East Asian community building. Hence, the future direction of NEAT may be defined as follows.

3.1 Vision and principles

In the next ten years, NEAT should fulfill its role as an active builder of an East Asian

community of peace, progress and prosperity, policy entrepreneur for APT development, and bridge between government, academia and society through networking.

The development and activities of NEAT should be guided by the following principles.

First, NEAT should stick to the ASEAN Way of consensus. To maintain the momentum and dynamism of NEAT, we should put into it what is agreed and leave aside for the time being what is not agreed.

Second, NEAT should cherish comfort level of its members. Comfort level is key to enhancing cohesiveness and maintaining the process of cooperation and development.

Third, NEAT should be forward-looking and innovative in promoting norms and agenda for regional cooperation and community-building.

Fourth, NEAT should be as realistic as possible. Rather than planning for things beyond its strength and resources, NEAT should focus on what it will be able to do in the future to become an increasingly relevant player in policy-making of regional cooperation and East Asian community building.

3.2 Roadmap and measures

Specific measures to realize the vision of NEAT development can include the following:

First, develop compatible strategies and agenda with those proposed in EAVGII report. NEAT should bear in mind the visions, strategies and measures provided in the EAVGII report in developing its own so as to increase its relevance in regional processes.

Second, strengthen NEAT Working Group mechanism. NEAT can organize working groups on strategic, political and security issues to explore possible areas for political and security cooperation. NEAT members should be encouraged to continue sponsoring working groups on specific issues in priority areas for APT cooperation. To further improve quality and policy relevance of working group reports, emphasis should be put on pre-meeting and follow-up study.

Third, enhance and expand NEAT networking. Networking has been proven effective in sustaining NEAT, building friendship and promoting the “we-feeling” in the region. NEAT should enhance its networking by encouraging full participation of all members, promoting regular exchange visits of scholars among its members,

expanding its network to emerging think-tanks in the region, and conducting dialogs and build connection with leading think-tanks outside the region. NEAT should also develop networking with general public, and increase its publicity by publications, by web, by lectures and forums, etc.

Fourth, strengthen NEAT linkage with Track I. On the one hand, NEAT should seek representation at important Track I and Track II regional forums, and be strengthened through meetings with Track I, especially in SOM+3 or DG+3, and also through regular discussions with the ASEAN+3 unit at the ASEAN Secretariat. On the other hand, Track I officials should be invited to participate in NEAT meetings and be informed of NEAT activities and working group reports.

Fifth, seek institutionalization. In the long run, NEAT should be institutionalized with a permanent secretariat. At the current stage and in the next ten years, NEAT can explore possibilities of some kind of institutionalization, such as a half-way secretariat, depending on its capabilities and available resources.

Sixth, try to establish a NEAT fund. While continuing to seek financial support from their respective national governments, NEAT members should also try to utilize existing funds at domestic, regional and international levels, and develop partnership with private sector. For instance, NEAT should utilize APT cooperation fund to conduct joint research on strategic issues in East Asian community building. The long-term goal should be a NEAT fund.

Conclusion

In the first ten years, NEAT has made significant contribution to pragmatic functional cooperation in the region while establishing itself as a relevant player in the regional process. Entering into the next ten years, NEAT has to handle well both opportunities and challenges emerging in the evolution of the regional order. Mutual trust and confidence is key to deepening APT cooperation in the complex regional environment. NEAT should facilitate exchanges among stakeholders in the region to channel communications on specific and even sensitive issues, to promote better understanding of each other's intentions, to expand common ground on key agenda, to nurture cooperative culture, and to build friendship, trust and confidence among peoples in the region.