

NEAT MEMORANDUM No.20

NETWORK OF EAST ASIA THINK-TANKS (NEAT)

I. INTRODUCTION

As a track two process of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the Network of East Asia Think Tanks (NEAT) provides intellectual support for East Asia cooperation. NEAT reaffirms that the goal of community building in East Asia is to promote the well-being of the people and realize the East Asian Vision of Peace, Prosperity and Progress. Community building should be based on universal values, including good governance, the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and international law and norms.

II. NEAT ACTIVITIES IN 2023

This year NEAT has virtually organized its core activities as follows:

1. NEAT Country Coordinators' Meeting (CCM)

The 37th and 38th NEAT CCMs were held on 31 March 2023 and 17 July 2023 respectively via Zoom platform under the host of NEAT-China. These meetings were participated by NEAT Country Coordinators with their delegations.

2. NEAT Working Group (WG) Meetings

In addition, 3 WGs were organized under the following themes in 2023:

- 1) Belt and Road Initiative: Partnership for Enhancing Regional Connectivity (13 June by NEAT-Laos)
- 2) Toward Enhancing Food Security in the East Asia (21 June by NEAT-Japan)
- 3) The Revitalization of ASEAN Plus Three: Towards Stronger Functional Cooperation and Greater Visibility (23 June by NEAT-Korea and NEAT-Indonesia)

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the outcomes of NEAT activities in 2023, NEAT submits key recommendations in three following areas to the APT leaders for consideration.

1. Belt and Road Initiative: Partnership for Enhancing Regional Connectivity

Since its inception, the BRI initiative has made positive contributions on socio-economic development of the BRI participating countries. However, there are certain challenges to be

addressed. These include a growing competition among existing and emerging cooperation mechanisms and initiatives in the Mekong Sub-region, inadequate infrastructure, skilled labour and lack of production capacity in some participating countries as well as displacement, social disruption and environmental issues. Therefore, in order to make the BRI more impactful and ensure that the benefits are maximized, recommendations are put forward as follow:

- 1) There is a need for high-level political will, trust and commitment to ensure the successful implementation of projects under the BRI initiatives qualitatively and efficiently by improving legal frameworks, judicial system and law enforcement capabilities as an effort to create a more favorable environment to build confidence for both domestic and foreign investors.
- 2) The implementation of “open, clean, and green” BRI projects is a shared responsibility between China and the recipient countries. Therefore, BRI projects’ design and implementation should be based on meticulous calculation, detailed planning, and serious commitment by both parties. Responsible agencies from both sides must practice good governance ideals such as transparency, participation, inclusivity and social and environmental accountability to effectively respond to interests and concerns of the local communities.
- 3) Debt sustainability framework should be developed between China and the BRI participating countries, taking into account the national capacities and developmental context of the countries involved to ensure debt sustainability and social and economic growth.
- 4) There should be more production capacity cooperation between the more developed and developing nations. Technological and skill transfer from the advanced to smaller economies should be taken place, so that the small economies will be able to enhance their competitive production capacities, which will, in turn, benefit them economically and increase the promotion of local employment.
- 5) It is equally essential to invest in soft infrastructure development including ICT and trade facilities, including synchronizing standards, rules, regulation, cross-border procedures and customs which will allow goods, services and people to flow more smoothly.
- 6) In addition, there is also a need to explore the possibility of Third-Party Market Cooperation among East Asian economies (10+3) under the BRI framework.
- 7) Lastly, encourage exchange of information and dialogue among cooperation frameworks, with a view to promoting effective synergy among them.

2. Toward Enhancing Food Security in the East Asia

The importance of food security is reminded even in the 21st century. APT Emergency Rice Reserve (APTERR) and ASEAN Food Security Information System (AFSIS) have made great contributions, but many challenges, consolidated with other problems such as poverty, natural disasters and climate change, still remain to be solved. The recommendations are:

- 1) We should make best efforts to raise the public awareness of this problem to wider stakeholders. AFSIS and APTERR should play an important role in this field.

- 2) It is desirable to further enhance the activities of APTERR and AFSIS. The AFSIS should improve its functions for early warning and more accurate statistical information. Utilizing remote sensing data, micro-level information and big data are conducive to accurately serving the concerning stakeholders internationally and domestically. We also recommend the expansion of crop coverage in the Rice Growing Outlook (RGO) report.
- 3) To promote regional cooperation, the three large economies, including Japan, China and Korea, should provide experiences and technical assistance for the design and implementation of right measures for achieving our purpose.
- 4) Taking into consideration of the budget constraint, it is curious to establish links and cooperation with other institutions, such as government agencies, international organizations, research institutes, and key enterprises in the industry.
- 5) Keeping our eyes on the future direction of the organizations involved, we confirmed the importance of strengthening the framework and cooperation with concerned institutions such as APTERR to enhance the sustainability of AFSIS activities in a self-reliant way.

3. The Revitalization of ASEAN Plus Three: Towards Stronger Functional Cooperation and Greater Visibility

The ASEAN Plus Three (APT) has served as a central platform for functional cooperation among East Asian nations across political-security, economic, and socio-cultural domains since its establishment in 1997. However, in recent years, the APT has been faced with multifaceted challenges within and outside the region. Therefore, against this backdrop, to identify current functional challenges and crises that could impact an East Asian community building and explore ways to revitalize the APT, the recommendations are proposed as follow:

- 1) Establish the East Asia Vision Group III to review ASEAN Plus Three cooperation in general and the Work Plan 2023-2027 in particular, as well as to recommend concrete measures and directions for further enhancing, expanding, and deepening ASEAN Plus Three cooperation in the future. This initiative is timely and crucial, considering the evolving regional and global order since the aftermath of COVID-19.
- 2) Prioritize functional cooperation within the APT to address emerging challenges to peace and prosperity, encompassing both traditional and non-traditional security issues such as climate change, digital transformation, cybersecurity, health security, food and energy security, supply chain disruption, financial cooperation, preventive diplomacy, transnational crimes, and trafficking, by maximizing existing mechanisms. This should be facilitated by the engagement of broader stakeholders, including tracks II and III, in the APT's functional cooperation process to make APT Framework be truly people-oriented.
- 3) Integrate ASEAN Plus Three economic cooperation into existing regional architectures, including the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).
- 4) Enhance ASEAN centrality in the regional architecture as well as effective

coordination between ASEAN and the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, and harmonize the ASEAN Plus One initiatives with China, Japan, and Korea, which should serve as building blocks towards revitalizing the APT process.

The detailed recommendations refer to the WG reports in the Annexes.

IV. CONCLUSION

NEAT greatly appreciates serious consideration by the APT SOM, Ministers and Leaders of the recommendations in this Memorandum, and welcomes opportunities to interface further with decision-makers. We reiterate our continued support to build a sounder, healthier and flourishing East Asian Community. We look forward to making further contribution towards the socio-economic development of the community in the region.

V. Annexes