

TOWARDS AN ASIAN COMMUNITY: THE EAST ASIAN SUMMIT, KUALA LUMPUR

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Preoccupied by own continuing introspection and wrangling (the EU Budget negotiations) and in defending in a multilateral context our own privileges (the WTO negotiations in Hong Kong), once again we in Europe have failed to understand the momentous developments in all of Asia. In France, this problem is complicated by an obsession with China seen, mistakenly, as the preeminent actor in Asia, a vision exacerbated by the predominantly Sino-centric focus of journalists and researchers working on Asia. Perhaps the fact that the first East Asian summit was held in the capital of one of the smaller players in Asia, Malaysia, meant that it remained largely unnoticed in the French media. Nevertheless, in my view, it is probable that twenty years from now the Kuala Lumpur Summit will be seen with the Afro-Asian conference of Bandung in 1955 as a critical moment in which Asian leaders attempted to explore a common destiny and take a further step in the creation of an Asian community.

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“One Vision, One Identity, One Community”: the banners adorning the streets of Kuala Lumpur revealed the grandiose ambitions of the Malaysian hosts for the East Asia Summit. They also revealed a great many of the ambiguities... for was the intergovernmental meeting announced that of the ten ASEAN governments? Or that extended into ASEAN +3 (with China, Japan and Korea)? Or the inaugural meeting held on 14th December of an East Asia Summit, an ASEAN + 3... +3 with the invitation to India, Australia and New Zealand? Behind the tedious international relations mathematics lie four questions of importance: Southeast Asia’s cohesiveness and centrality in the construction of an East Asian Community, coping with an increasingly economically powerful and diplomatically assertive China, the “return” of India to Asia and adjusting to the decline of US influence this side of the Pacific. All four questions are interrelated.

The Malaysian Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, ended the meeting having come from under the shadow of his predecessor Mohamed Mahathir, who had remained as PM for twenty-two years, to affirm himself as a leader within ASEAN. The first two days of the ASEAN summit saw the Association as having finally recovered from the economic crisis of 1997 to return to its own internal consolidation. By expressing demands for tangible political reforms in Burma /Myanmar, notably through the release of political detainees including Aung San Sui Kyi, the association broke with its sacrosanct principle of non-interference. Moreover the appointment of an ostensibly liberal-minded group of senior statesmen in an Eminent Persons Group to draft an ASEAN Charter, demonstrated that the association has finally come to grips with establishing rules for club-membership. Perhaps the greatest success for Badawi was to ensure ASEAN’s centrality in the process of regional construction in East Asia. To use the language in the corridors of the summit, ASEAN would remain in the “drivers seat”, and that the future annual East Asian Summits would be held in ASEAN countries “back-to-back” with the Associations annual meetings. In a sense given Sino-Japanese rivalry, and the unwillingness of the governments of either country to accept the leadership of the other, *faute de mieux*, ASEAN remains the least unacceptable alternative as regional coordinator, a view also held by the new invitees, India, Australia and New Zealand.

The holding of the summit itself demonstrates not only the strengthening economic and political relations in East Asia now extended to include India, it also builds on a process

of confidence building through such regular meetings as the ASEAN Regional Forum on security questions that have seen a significant reduction in tensions, for example, over competing territorial claims in the South China Sea. Above all it marks an attempt to engage China and, as in the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung some fifty years previously, ensure that the Middle Empire remains a responsible international and regional actor. For the last ten years Chinese diplomacy has successfully reassured its regional neighbours that its “peaceful rise” would contribute to “Asian resurgence”, to use the official terminology of Beijing. As Prime Minister Wen Jiabao insisted with his hosts, the year 2004 saw a 25% rise in the ASEAN countries exports to China. Nevertheless concerns over this cumbersome neighbour remain and have engendered competing strategies. The summit demonstrated divisions within ASEAN as a regional organization, with the Singaporean, Thai and Indonesian support for enlargement from the ASEAN +3 formula to include India (as well as Australia and New Zealand) being at odds with the more limited role proposed by Malaysia, Cambodia and Vietnam. These cleavages reflect not only geopolitical considerations, but also internal political factors with some ASEAN countries being most favorable to a broad Asia including the three democratic invitees. In the diplomatic formula decided upon in the Summit, a kind of compromise was reached with the East Asian Community being defined in terms of ASEAN +3, with the three new partners seen as sharing common interests in relation to the core community. However at the same time, in the jargon of “inclusiveness” and “openness” the Asian Community could extend to embrace them as well as Russia.

For Manmohan Singh, the Indian Prime Minister, India was simply reaffirming its historic birthright to be part of an Asian community. In his felicitous phrase, “Asia’s future is India’s Past”. After all, was it not Jawarhalal Nehru who organized in 1947 the first Asian Relations Conference in Delhi several months prior to Indian independence and first articulated a vision of an Eastern Federation? India’s contemporary “return to Asia” began with the introduction by Mahmohan Singh, then Finance Minister, of a “Look East” policy of fundamental internal economic reforms designed to transform the world’s largest democracy into a major export-oriented economic power able to rival China. Political leaders in Asia, starting with Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Korean President Roh Moo Hyun, were quick to realize the benefits from having two economically and politically powerful neighbours rather than one. In realpolitik terms by balancing one against the other the interests of third parties could be preserved. Moreover, in the last decades through various official and unofficial initiatives Japan has assiduously encouraged a more active Indian role

in Asia as a useful counterweight to China. Nevertheless, despite the smiles and handshakes at the end of the conference Sino-Japanese tensions were evident during the summit, tensions exacerbated by PM Junichiro Koizumi's continued visits to the Yasukuni shrine.

“Playing the India card”, to use the formula popular in Washington, has the added advantage for Prime Minister Koizumi of ensuring at least the acquiescence of the Bush Administration in the emergence of a new regional club. That this view is echoed in the other anchor of the US alliance system in Asia-Pacific, Australia, is of little surprise. During the summits the United States was in a sense the “ghost at the feast”. While The US remains, for many countries in the region, the only guarantor of regional security, the obsession of the Bush Administration with the war on terror has alienated many of its allies whose overriding concern is with economic development. A US-inspired APEC has lost a great deal of its credibility as a regional instrument for trade facilitation, with both the proliferation of individual bilateral free trade agreements and multilateral involvement in the WTO perceived as being much more promising.

The revenge of history may see an “Asia” extending from Kashmir to the South Island of New Zealand as the culmination of the imaginings of Asia that emerged in Asia with the confrontation with the West that began in the latter part of the 19th century. The Bengali philosopher Rabindranath Tagore's dream, also articulated in Meiji Japan by such writers as Okakura Tenshin and reinforced in the anti-colonial struggle in the writings of Sun Yat Sen, Nehru and Sukarno of an Asia embracing the great civilizations of India and China... and the world between... may finally have come to fruition.

That US commentators should overwhelmingly underplay the importance of the Summit by quite correctly underlining the competing and divergent national agendas and interests of the participants is understandable. After all, a realist view of international relations remains embedded in a State centric conception of competing power. For Europeans there is no such excuse. European experience is after all one involving the interplay between the national and supranational, of resolving, or at least, neutralizing contradictions within a larger regional grouping. In a failure to acknowledge the incremental movements towards consolidation within an Asian community, we have failed once again to

translate Europe's comparative advantage in global governance into, understanding, empathy and influence in THE regional block of the twenty-first century.