The East Asia Summit (EAS)-Really Towards an East Asian Community (EAC)?

AXEL BERKOFSKY**
The European Policy Centre (EPC) and University of Milan

In December 2005, Malaysia hosted the first East Asia Summit (EAS) bringing together ASEAN+3 as well as India, Australia and New Zealand to make progress on Asian regional integration and discuss the creation of the so-called East Asian Community (EAC). In the run-up to the EAS last year Asian policymakers and scholar were at times ‘selling’ the EAS as the ‘big bang’ of Asian integration at times giving the impression that the summit stands for the beginning of an EU-style ‘Asian Union.’ Realistically, however, the results of the summit must be described as very limited at best with the EAS failing to generate the political will for EU-style integration in Asia. Indeed, it has become clear in Kuala Lumpur that political rhetoric on the East Asian Community has yet to catch up with political reality and the analysis below will explain how and why.

Keywords: Asian integration, East Asia Summit, East Asian Integration, Asian Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

One analyst called the EAS a ‘non-event’ in the history of Asian integration and the Economist concluded that the ‘East Asian Community’ (EAC) which was supposed to emerge from the EAS in Kuala Lumpur last December is ‘Dead on arrival.’

Even if such a harsh assessment of the summit may not necessarily do justice to Asia’s efforts to foster more substantial regional integration, 6 months after the EAS in Kuala Lumpur analysts and policymakers in the 16 countries concerned in East, Southeast and South Asia still wonder what exactly the added value of the one-day long gathering in Malaysia was.

Indeed, political rhetoric has yet to catch up with political reality the EAC was
not the beginning of ‘new era’ of Asian regional integration.

The assessments on the outcome and level of success of the summit differed and while some analysts and commentators focussed on the discords, the concerns about China’s growing economic and military power in the region, Japanese-Chinese tensions, others concluded that the EAS in Kuala Lumpur was an important summit promoting Asian regional integration along the lines of what the literature refers to as ‘open regionalism’ in Asia.

Either way, it was always unrealistic to expect a breakthrough of Asian integration at the EAS inaugural summit with ASEAN+3 (ASEAN plus, Japan China and South Korea), India, Australia and New Zealand discussing the future of regional integration during a three-hour summit.2 Ironically, the summit’s official declaration did not even mention the establishment of an East Asian Community, but limits itself to hoping that the EAS ‘could play a significant role in community-building in the region.’3

II. WHAT ADDED VALUE?

What was the added value of the gathering of 16 heads of governments discussing a wide range of issues supposedly of relevance to security, stability and prosperity in East Asia?

It seem that this too early to say as it is unclear what the main features of the envisioned East Asian Community will or might become in the years to come. An intra-regional free trade zone? A community based on common values or a common identity or even the equivalent of a European Union in Asia?

The summit’s official joint declaration for a start reads like a list of conclusions and statements all participating governments can easily agree on.

More substantial on the other hand was the Chairman’s Statement and the mentioning of a number of issues which could be jointly tackled by EAS summiteers.

The de-nuclearisation of the Korean peninsular, maritime security, terrorism, infectious diseases, sustainable economic development, WTO issues are issues the EAS plans to deal with in the future.

Then again, the statement did not offer any details on what exactly the EAS’s role will be strengthening co-operation on those issues and apart from the ‘Avian Influenza Prevention, Control and Response’, no concrete and tangible initiative emerged from the EAS.4

Besides, many of the above mentioned issues are already being dealt with in other regional and global fora and it is doubtful that discussing the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsular or international terrorism in the EAS framework will

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1 See The Economist (2005).
2 See Fernandez (2006); for a critical assessment see also Cody (2005).