

“Japan’s move to community”

By KENICHI ITO

Until recently it was said that the idea of regional integration was not applicable to the Middle East and East Asia, given the conflicts and confrontations in the two regions. These days, though, East Asia is increasingly seeing a move toward regional integration. Japan’s economic development in the 1980s as well as China’s in the 1990s have triggered dynamic economic development among the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leading to a mutual dependence in trade and investment that could be called an East Asian economic sphere.

Curiously it was the 1997 Asian economic crisis that led people in the region to look beyond the economic sphere of the regional system. Countries in the region have come to realize that, in time of need, they can rely on their neighbors—not on the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund.

Facing an unprecedented crisis, the summit of the so-called ASEAN-Plus-Three (Japan, China and South Korea) was institutionalized. Participants in this annual summit have started to talk about the prospect of forming an East Asian Community.

On the basis of their proposal, the Network of East Asian Think Tanks (NEAT) was established in Beijing in September. Together with other scholars and researchers, I attended the inaugural meeting because the Japanese government designated the Japan Forum on International Relations, which I head, as “country coordinator” for Japan. I was impressed by the strong determination shared by all participants to create a momentum for regional integration that would not fall behind that of other regions.

The strategic will of China, the organizer of the meeting, to take the initiative was felt in many areas. Tang Jiaxuan, a member of the State Council and former foreign minister, appealed for cooperation not only among governments but also among think tanks. This was needed, he said, to strengthen cooperation in East Asia. He noted that NEAT was created through the ASEAN-Plus-Three process to submit proposals to governments; he called on NEAT to fulfill its expectations. Tang’s appeal reflects the will on the part of China.

As expected and probably because of China carried out well-planned behind-the-scenes lobbying, it was unanimously approved on the last day of the meeting to locate the central secretariat of NEAT in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the “country coordinator” for China.

By contrast, most Japanese participants had been asked by the Japanese government to attend the meeting on short notice and went to Beijing without a prior briefing. I could not help feeling that the meeting proceeded quickly and ended according to a scenario set in advance.

After returning to Japan, I started to convey my concerns about Japan’s stance. A high-ranking official of one ministry responded that he was so preoccupied with bilateral free-trade negotiations that he could not afford to think about things 30 to 40 years in the future. But most of those whom I talked to shared my view that it would be too late for Japan to try to play a meaningful role in the move toward regional integration after 30 or 40 years have passed.

On the basis of this shared view, 10 Japanese think tanks and 30 scholars and researchers are jointly pushing for the establishment of the Council on East Asian Community (CEAC).

If we talk about establishing an East Asian Community, we must take into consideration not only trade, investment, monetary and financial issues but also political, security, social and cultural affairs. There are no forums at present in Japan to discuss such affairs across the board from a long-term perspective. Individuals and groups are studying each aspect separately. Although each study is excellent, it is neither coordinated nor commonly shared as an intellectual asset for all the Japanese.

Even worse, there are no forums in Japan that combine the brain power of experts to discuss Japan's strategic response toward the move to create an East Asian Community. There were no talks to create such forums, until the recent CEAC proposal.

Fortunately, our effort to create such a forum is receiving wide support not only from academic but also from political and business circles. The Japanese government has also indicated its willingness to support. A promotion meeting was held Friday, and if other preparations go well, the inaugural meeting for CEAC will be held May 18.

A serious nationwide debate is called for to discuss how Japan should respond to this nascent but giant move toward regional integration in East Asia and what Japan's basic stance should be toward creation of an East Asia Community, given one argument in Japan that stresses the "threat from China" and another stressing the importance of the alliance with the United States.

-This article was translated from the *Sankei Shimbun's Seiron* column of April 15, 2004-

[This article appeared in the April 16, 2004 issue of *The Japan Times*]