East Asian Developments and Contrasting Views among ASEAN Member Nations over East Asian Regionalism

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Certain developments are emerging in East Asia that could accentuate the divisions among ASEAN members over East Asian regionalism. One is the trend toward financial and trade cooperation between ASEAN and Northeast Asian countries that will make it difficult for ASEAN to resist East Asian regionalism. Another is the growing global economic importance of East Asia that can reduce ASEAN’s centrality in this regionalism. These divisions are most pronounced between Malaysia and Indonesia. While Malaysia wants the regional grouping to be a community, Indonesia sees it as basically functional in purpose. Malaysia, unlike Indonesia, sees some economic, especially financial, benefit from the regional grouping. China is not seen by Malaysia as a threat to the region and can best be accommodated in Malaysia’s preferred grouping, the ASEAN Plus Three, while Indonesia favors the East Asia Summit where India can help balance China.

Introduction

East Asian regionalism has had a contradictory effect on ASEAN unity. On one hand it has forced ASEAN to confront the challenges of this regionalism by enhancing its cohesion that will enable it to better face the more politically and economically powerful Northeast Asian “Plus Three” members. For example this can be seen in the proposal at the ASEAN Bali Summit of 2003 where the ASEAN heads were faced with the prospect of the pressure of East Asian regionalism, as well as other challenges, to create a more cohesive ASEAN Community from the existing ASEAN structure by the year 2020, subsequently moved forward to 2015. In addition, to further promote unity, ASEAN was to be given a legal personality in the form of an ASEAN Charter that has since been implemented.

The trend toward further integration of an East Asian community has increasingly brought to the fore divisions among the ASEAN members as to what an East Asian community should be. Such divisions were foreshadowed in the East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG) that then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad first proposed in 1990. The divisions at that time revolved around many issues. They chiefly involved the criteria for membership, and the maintenance of ASEAN identity and unity in a wider grouping that included big powers. On the issue of membership, Mahathir’s proposal excluded the nations with dominant Caucasian populations, such as the

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