

First East Asian Summit  
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## **ASEAN retains 'centrality' at first East Asia Summit**

**by Willem van der Geest from Kuala Lumpur**

Two questions have pre-occupied the corridors of the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre, where a unique series of ASEAN summits culminates in the first ever East Asia Summit starting later today. First, could a Summit which will include ASEAN+3 as well as Australia, India and New Zealand, still be considered to be East Asian?

Second, would the emerging East Asia, however its new geography be defined, become a vehicle for the projection of ever increasing Chinese soft power both in the region and globally?

In his characteristic style, former Malaysian PM Mahathir Mohammed provoked the debate with his direct statements that 'we are getting on fine as ASEAN+3' and his dismissal that "we are not getting an East Asia Summit, but an East Asia-AustralAsia Summit". But the three newcomers have been careful and nuanced in their responses, not taking the bait.

Alexander Downer, Australia's Foreign Minister, speaking in Malaysia on the occasion of signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, pointed to the high degree of integration between Australia, ASEAN and North-East Asia. He went on to say that he hoped that "the initiative will make a contribution in achieving a better lifestyle for people in the region".

He was dismissive of politicians scoring points about who would be driver's seat and dismissed as "puerile" a question of an Asian journalist about Australia's role as deputy sheriff of the US referring to an image that the former Malaysian PM had used regarding Australia's role in the region.

In the same vain, Ms Helen Clark, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, was quick to point out that what truly mattered was that New Zealand was part of this historic Summit and that procedural details were not ultimately relevant. An Indian diplomat too dismissed the relevance of the remarks of the former PM, noting that what mattered was that the East Asia Summit had welcomed India's participation. Malaysian analysts were rather more direct, saying that in Malaysia nobody listened anymore to the former PM.

Speaking off the record, a Japanese government source said that the Japanese vision for the East Asia Summit was that it should have three pillars:

First and foremost, it was to be an open engagement with all members truly committed.

Second, it was to engage in areas of functional cooperation, starting from Avian flu and the economic fields, but also to include non-traditional security issues.

Third, the East Asia Summit was to be based on shared values, in particular, democracy, human rights and market economy.

Referring to the "dichotomy" between Japan and China, it was reiterated that China's development was not a threat to Japan, but rather an opportunity. It was also obliquely pointed out that the visits to the

Yakusuni shrine were not government policy, but personal visits, and that Japan does not glorify war, nor does its Prime Minister endorse the classification of A-class war criminals by the shrine's Museum.

Apprehensions and fears that the East Asia Summit might go the "Chinese way" were pre-empted by the statement of the Malaysia's Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi that "no Summit replaces another" and that the East Asia Summit will be held "every time anywhere an ASEAN Summit" will take place. Hence, it was clarified that the next Summit will be in Manila during 2006 and that the EAS will be complementary to the ASEAN+3 Summits.

Analysts which had anticipated that the next Summit would be held in China and that therewith China was placing itself in the fundamental "core group" of the East Asian integration process were found to have jumped to conclusions prematurely.

For now, ASEAN has retained its centrality and China's projection of soft power through the EAS will have to wait its time. The informal enlargement to ASEAN+3 is thrust onto the path of formalization, particularly through the Kuala Lumpur declaration (see this site). As this phase of ASEAN enlargement nears completion, after an inter-regional courtship of some eight years, new members of the extended family are being recognized. But the mother of the family is still believed to hail from ASEAN.

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[Note: Dr van der Geest is in Kuala Lumpur to observe the Summits on the kind invitation of the Malaysian Institute for Strategic and International Studies].