

The Strategic Benefits of Turkey's Admission Into East Asian Summit

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Introduction:

The extent to which Turkey can (re)'connect' Europe with other continent(s) depends on the process of regionalization that is happening elsewhere. Such a process has already occurred in East Asia.

On November 20 2007, at the ASEAN Summit in Singapore, several key developments took place. Guided by an ASEAN Charter, member states agreed to form a highly-competitive single market, with a free flow of goods, services and investment, and increased ease of movement for businessmen and workers.

The charter also calls for efforts to reduce poverty and narrow the development gap in the region, boost democracy and good governance, and promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. It also seeks to promote sustainable development, protect the region's environment, and develop its human resources.

ASEAN is aiming for all these goals because it is conscious of the responsibility of driving the East Asian Summit to the full realization of creating one East Asian regional community.

Summary

To fulfill Turkey's mission as a "civilizational connector" between Europe and Asia, Turkey must be a full member of the East Asian Summit. The path towards this goal, among others, requires Turkey to be a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN. Once ASEAN sponsors Turkey's membership in East Asian Summit, Turkey would then be strategically positioned to be a key member with some of the world's most monumental economic and political powers in its midst. Indeed, if Turkey is a member of East Asian Summit, ideally by 2010, Turkey would be in a better position to realize its strategic, civilizational, and historical depth.

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The East Asian Summit:

In December 2005, the first East Asian Summit (EAS) was convened in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Although this event was held back-to-back with the ASEAN Summit and ASEAN Plus 3 Summit – hence reducing the historical significance of EAS as a stand-alone diplomatic event – its immediate strategic importance was not lost on various countries.

After having acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), Australia, New Zealand, Russia and India all claimed their full membership in EAS.

TAC encouraged countries that want to be part of East Asia to respect the importance of friendly relations without recourse to war and the use of force in the resolution of intra-mural conflicts.

President Vladimir Putin, in particular, made the strongest bid to have Russia included in East Asia. To shore up Russia's 'Asian-ness', he brought a contingent of mayors and governors from Russian Far East, including the mayor of Vladivostok, a port that verges on North Pacific. Even France has acceded to TAC in January 2007 in order to be part of EAS.

If Russia, which is an increasingly important strategic partner of Turkey, is able to assert its membership in EAS, together with France, shouldn't Turkey which straddles between the European and the Asian continent writ large, also do the same?

In other words, shouldn't Turkey's foreign policy, which is based on strategic depth and linking continents and civilizations together, also consider being a part of EAS?

Turkey must answer positively and affirmatively on all counts, because EAS is not a geographical expression or concept. Rather, EAS is a strategic reality and manifestation, as East Asia is now comprised of some of the most dynamic economies and militarily powerful countries in the world. The most notable of which are: China, South Korea, Japan, plus all the ten member states of ASEAN i.e. the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

ASEAN Plus 3 or ASEAN Plus 6 as the Basis of East Asian Community?

Although ASEAN is regarded as the prime driver of the EAS, a decision agreed in Kuala Lumpur in 2005, due to the rivalry of Japan and China in the region, there is now a contestation between these two behemoths as to how East Asian community – which is the ultimate goal of EAS – should be formed?

Should East Asian community, which is based on a motley collection of member states that want to be a part of EAS, be first based on ASEAN plus 3; or ASEAN Plus 6? The latter, which includes Australia, India and New Zealand, is the preferred choice of Japan, as they include more geographical scope and vibrant democracies.

In the words of Professor Shunjiro Urata at Waseda University, who is Japan's leading expert on FTA, "when the geographical demarcation is larger, the trade benefits would be larger too."

China, on the other hand, believes that EAS must be built on the basis of feasibility and practicality first.

Having ASEAN Plus 3, which traces its beginnings to 1997 when all the thirteen countries decided to consult with one another to deal with the Asian financial crisis then, the arrangement has spawned various financial and surveillance initiatives that allow the member states to understand the financial strengths and fitness of one another, especially in the balance of payment and currency value. China believes that it is vital to keep the membership manageable before expanding it to something else.

Japan, seeking to enlist other democratic countries and open economy, to constrain the progressive emergence of China, want EAS to be based on ASEAN plus 6.

This is because Australia, India and New Zealand are all democracies that have increasingly strong and stable relationships with Japan. Their inclusion would permit Japan to deal with China within the EAS by also having such democratic partners on board.

At the ASEAN Summit in Singapore, it was agreed that the formation of East Asian Community, and the pursuit of any free trade initiative should, in the interim, be based on ASEAN Plus 3.

Regardless of which formula is used, the fact is EAS is a reality, as is the endeavor to create one East Asian community that can include as many countries as the terms of admission permit in future.

Turkey should participate in this process as early as possible to gain a comparative advantage, indeed, to begin the process of learning from other Asian countries too, so as to permit Turkey the opportunity to benefit from the Asian market of scale, technological inventions, and huge consumer basin that could be as large as 3 billion people if one were to include Australia, China, Japan, Korea, India, and ten member states of Southeast Asia altogether.

Why should Turkey be part of the EAS?

To begin with, becoming a member of EAS carries no cost to what Turkey tries to achieve. First and foremost, Turkey does not have to abandon its goal of becoming a full member of the European Union (EU) by joining EAS.

Indeed, by becoming a member of EAS, Turkey can best play the role of a "continental connector" between Europe and Asia in full.

Secondly, China, Japan, and South Korea are becoming more important economically and strategically. Their economies are also becoming more interdependent. Together, they control or dominate 80 % of the trade in East Asia.

By being in EAS, Turkey can understand how these three countries behave or plan their Asian strategy in East Asia; indeed their global strategy too. Both are crucial to understanding how these Asian countries leverage their strengths in the region and in multilateral institutions.

Thirdly, the heavy proportion of their trade, coupled with their singular commitment to participate actively in EAS, is making Asia more coherent. The role of leading EAS towards the formation of an East Asian Community has been given to ASEAN, which in turn reduces the intra-sub systemic rivalry and leadership between China, Japan and South Korea. Even when China and Japan squabble over the exact formula to build East Asian Community, the disagreement will not lead to any immediate adverse effect. Sino-Japanese trade will continue to boom.

Japanese production networks are also increasingly concentrated in China. In order for Turkey to participate gainfully in Asia, Turkey needs to be in EAS to fully understand the dynamics of Sino-Japanese relations, not separately, but by understanding how these two countries work with others in the region.

Fourthly, with ASEAN at the driving seat, East Asia can become more unified even as different countries struggle with various contentious issues. Contemporary Turkish foreign policy, based on the doctrine of strategic depth, can both contribute and learn from this "deepening and widening process" in East Asia.

It should be mentioned that East Asia once comprised the Southeast Asian region. In the 1960s, it was widely regarded the second Balkans. In the Korean peninsula, divisive ideological politics also pitched North Korea against South Korea and other neighbors.

Yet, within a span of forty years, with the exception of the demilitarized zone across the 38th parallel in the Korean peninsula, the entire geopolitical contour of East Asia has gained in stability and peace. As it seeks to encourage the Middle East to develop a more "pacific perspective" there is much that Turkey can learn from East Asia.

Finally, the member states of ASEAN, through their own maturity, have succeeded at creating a style of diplomacy that is non-intrusive, agreeable, and reassuring. Regardless of its diluted nature or weakness, ASEAN Charter is also on the verge of being formed.

Turkey can point to this success whenever Ankara wants the Middle East and Central Asia to have more security and political dialogues. It is possible for leaders to want to stabilize a whole region first through patient and creative diplomacy to ensure enduring peace. This can help Turkey convince Middle East and Central Asia, even Eurasia, to approach issues on a win-win basis.

At this stage, East Asia is trading more and more with each other. The level of intra regional trade between all member states of ASEAN, plus China, Japan and South Korea, have reached some 49 %, which is only 8 % lower than what has been achieved in the European Union (EU).

East Asia is driven by lots of trading impulse and energy. As a country that wants to be an international trading nation, Turkey must join EA to deal with the East Asian markets.

More importantly, there is another human economic demography angle that Turkey must consider. China and India have a burgeoning middle class. In 2015, 20 % of Chinese in mainland would have the chance of referring to themselves as middle class.

In 2010, India wants to increase its middle class figures to 15 %; up from the current 7 %. India and China combined will therefore create a huge consumer basin.

While these two countries will still trade with the world, they have the critical mass to achieve internal economic combustion within the countries and the region. Their growth may even pose a threat to Turkey's workers interest. Turkey must join EAS to understand how others are economically dealing with China and India.

If Turkey does not participate in EAS, it would lack the indigenous knowledge and insider perspective to truly engage with the region. Indeed, if France, hitherto a European country that has not shown much interest in East Asia in recent memory, has understood the importance of East Asia, Turkey should also be mindful too.

How can Turkey join EAS?

In EAS, the participation of various countries is first mediated through the respective think tanks that serve as the front of the governments.

The Network of East Asian Think Tanks (NEAT I and II), for example, is a good example of how governments in East Asia often pass the responsibility of articulating their positions to the hands of their trusted think tanks. Turkey must form a think tank to participate in NEAT. Such a think tank could be any responsible institution trusted by the government in Ankara.

What suffices in the short run is an accredited analyst that can participate in various NEAT meetings in the region on behalf of the key decision makers in Turkey. Reports from these meetings can then be relayed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and relevant think tanks so that Turkey can take the next step towards playing a more complete role in EAS.

Invariably, such a person must also enjoy the confidence of articulating Turkey's view on foreign policy, especially on such initiatives as the Alliance of Civilizations or Turkey's position in the Middle East and the larger Eurasia.

More has to be done to allow Turkey to augment its position before it can play a stronger and more effective role in EAS. Turkey is not a Dialogue Partner in ASEAN yet; the key institution through which EAS is conceptualized and planned. Turkey must apply for membership in ASEAN as a Dialogue Partner first.

ASEAN Dialogue System:

The ASEAN system of Dialogue Partnerships serves as a channel for ASEAN as a group to forge and develop strong cooperative relationships with major political and trading powers. Starting out as a platform for ASEAN to pry open markets for its products and to obtain development aid for its members, the Dialogue system has developed into a forum for the consideration of security, as well as economic issues.

The anchor of the system is the Post-Ministerial Conferences, in which, on the occasion of the annual ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, ASEAN engages its partners, collectively and individually, in reviewing the state of the relationships and outstanding international and regional issues. Between these ministerial encounters, there are senior officials and working level forums for the pursuit of economic and cultural projects and the discussion of outstanding issues.

The projects largely involve personal exchanges, training, capacity building, studies and the establishment and operation of institutions and processes in many areas, including the environment, energy, cultural exchange, trade and investments, tourism, transport and communications, and information technology.

The above system is kept in place by ASEAN's eleven Dialogue Partners, such as Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Russia, the United States, and the UN Development Program (UNDP). The UNDP however does not take part in the political discussion in the Post Ministerial Conferences.

Although Turkey has unique bilateral relationships with all eleven Dialogue Partners, Turkey's participation in ASEAN Dialogue system can allow Turkey to understand how each of their countries are positioning themselves to gain from EAS.

The sum of all lessons gained from this arena will provide Turkey with an important template to form its East Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, even South Asia strategy.

PECC and ABC:

If Turkey should want to concentrate on trade and economic matters first, then it serves the interest of Turkey to be part of other commercial networks, which are also closely linked with ASEAN, and to a lesser extent at this stage, EAS.

So far, Turkish businesspersons have not fully participated in economic and business networks like the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) or the more influential Asian Business Council (ABC) based in Hong Kong.

Yet, both networks are comprised of the region's leading industrialists and business persons, whose wealth, knowledge and connections are bigger if not stronger than members of TUSIAD or MUSIAD. Thus, Turkey should work closely with key industrialists to position them to be involved in both.

Conclusion:

In all, Turkey should participate in EAS as the process of de facto integration is already occurring in East Asia. The numbers cited earlier show an East Asia that is fast on the move. Unless and until Turkey is able to participate actively in the Track 1 and Track 2 channels that proliferate throughout East Asia, it may find itself unable to fully appreciate the importance of various issues. This would leave Turkey 'out' of East Asia, even as the region is gaining in growth trajectory. Turkey must join East Asia by 2010. But the process to achieve the goal must start now. When Turkey is in EAS, its foreign policy to connect Europe with Asia would make more sense than ever, thereby strengthening Turkey's strategic depth by many measures.