

“ASEAN+3”: A Rising Actor to Frame the Asian Involvement in Global Environmental Governance

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Abstract: It is a fact that, in the East Asian area, there still lacks of a EU-like supranational agency to coordinate the regional environmental cooperation and as a legitimate representative to participate in the emerging global environmental governance. However, based upon a detailed investigation into the origin and up-to-date development of the “ASEAN+3” cooperation, this article argues that the “ASEAN+3” is rising as the leading player to frame the East Asian environmental cooperation and coordination or to create a “regional environmental governance”.

Key words: “ASEAN+3”, Global environmental governance, East Asia

In the East Asian area, there still lacks of a EU-like supranational agency to coordinate the regional environmental cooperation and as a recognized representative to participate in the emerging global environmental governance. An interesting question arisen from this fact, however, is that from where such a kind of institutional actor will probably come. To shed some light on this question, this article will offer a detailed investigation into the origin and up-to-date development of the “ASEAN+3” cooperation, one of the most ambitious players who are trying to provide an institutional framework for environmental cooperation and coordination in this region, and argues that it has the potential to rise as an influential actor in the evolution of global environmental governance.

This article consists of three parts. In part one, it will give a short review on formation and development of the “ASEAN+3”, which was originated from a proposal in 1990 suggesting to strengthen economic as well as social cooperation in the East Asian region and established in 1997 with a strong stimulus from the Asian Financial Crisis occurred around that time. Section two will focus upon when and how environmental issue was incorporated into the “ASEAN+3” framework, which took its first steps only in late 1990s and has made quite a lot achievements in the recent years. Part three will briefly discuss where and how the “ASEAN+3” may move forward in the coming years with a perspective of inter-regional or global environmental governance, given the suddenly increased pressure of reorientation on it to pay more attention to its social and environmental dimensions in the wake of severe 2004 Tsunami Disaster.

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FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE “ASEAN+3”

East Asia as a geographical concept, in this article at least, refers to the 5 countries of Northeast Asia(China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, and Mongolia) and the 10

countries of Southeast Asia (Brunei, Cambodia, Singapore, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam). For the latter group of countries, a regional cooperation organization called Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in August 1967, enlarging its member states steadily from 5 at that time to 10 since 1999. For the former group, there still does not exist an institutionalized regional organization like the ASEAN, and consequently, the “Big Three” (China, Japan and Republic of Korea) play their own leading roles varying from field to field.

In terms of their policy goals, operational mechanism and organizational structure, regional cooperation organizations in a broad sense can be classified into three patterns. (Lu and Wang 2005) The first category is the institutionalized regional cooperation organization. For them, they have concretely defined short- and long-term policy goals, and the goal with crucial importance is the commitment of member states to move towards a future of regional integration. To achieve their goals, these organizations receive a clear mandate to make legally binding policy decisions at their regular meetings through a rule of consensus-reaching or special majority voting. Moreover, to prepare and implement those policy decisions, they are granted the power to set up permanent internal sub-organizations having their own administration discretions. Both the EU and the ASEAN are appropriate examples here. The second category is the functional regional cooperation mechanism. They are created to play certain kind of supplementary roles to facilitate national governments to address the issues or/and fields that have transnational or international effects. Therefore, these kinds of cooperation mechanisms normally have a very limited mandate or resource to design long-term or comprehensive goals, to make strongly binding decisions and to maintain or develop permanent internal organization structure. Most of the bilateral or multilateral inter-governmental dialogue mechanisms in economic and social fields among nation states such as the EU-China Environmental Dialogue Mechanism belong to this pattern. Of course, there is also a third category of regional cooperation that can be located at somewhere in between. For them, they adopt partly institutional or/and partly functional cooperation approaches.

The first ever regional cooperation body covering the whole area of East Asia is a forum of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) (APEC 2005), which obviously belongs to the third of above-identified groups. It is true that the APEC has been both expanding its “member economies” from 12 in 1989 to 21 at present, and broadening its policy fields by incorporating environmental issue in 1996 (a Chinese center for environmental protection was established in 1997 responding to an initiative from China), women issue in 1999, counter-terrorism issue in 2001 and health security issue in 2003. As far as its primary goals, operational mechanism and organizational framework are concerned, however, there is no substantial change. The fundamental goal for the APEC is to further enhance economic growth and prosperity for the region and to strengthen the Asia-Pacific community. To achieve this, its top priority policy is to realize the free trade and investment throughout this area by the end of 2020 (10 year earlier for the developed member economies), the so-called “Bogor Goals”, which was announced at the Bogor Leaders’ Meeting held in 1994. More interesting for the APEC is that it is the only inter-governmental grouping in the world operating on the basis of non-binding commitments, open dialogue and equal respect for the views of all participants. That means, unlike other multilateral economic bodies such as the WTO, the APEC has no treaty obligations required of its participants. All the decisions made within the APEC are reached by consensus, and commitments are undertaken on a voluntary basis. In addition, though receiving various kinds of technical help from a small-sized Secretariat, the annual Leaders’ Meeting—the only legitimate decision-maker—as well as its policy-making is hosted and managed by one of its member economies that serves as the APEC Chair. It is the Chair member’s responsibility to organize annual Economic Leaders’

Meeting, selected Ministerial Meetings, Senior Officials Meetings, the APEC Business Advisory Council, and the APEC Study Centre Consortium, and also fill the position of Executive Director at the APEC Secretariat. Consequently, there are no permanent internal sub-organizations within the APEC that have enough administrative power and/or clear discretion to promote the implementation of main goals and policy measures, for example, a role like European Commission in the EU.

Thus, the APEC operates mainly as a cooperative, multilateral economic and trade forum. In this respect, one may reasonably claim that a lot of achievements have been made in the past 15 years. As a regional cooperation body, however, the APEC has been demonstrated to be geographically too large and economically and socially too divergent to be able to move towards an institutionalized and regionalist cooperation organization. In this sense, the APEC is—and it probably remains to be in a near future—an organizationally loose multilateral-dialogue- mechanism with only restricted financial resource and action capability. This can explain why, the APEC was unable to play a successful mediation role when the financial crisis hit this region in 1997.

Initiatives for closer cooperation among the East Asian countries came much earlier than its starting year. Former Malaysian Premier Mahathir espoused his idea to set up an East Asian Economic Group(EAEG) as early as in 1990, but it was strongly opposed by the US and Australian governments and failed to make any progress. By the same token, a watered-down plan named Forum of East Asian Economic Caucus(FAEAC) that was put forth in the next year also did not produce any result in the following years. In December 1995, the ASEAN Summit once again reiterated their intention to hold bilateral summits with the leaders of China, Japan and Republic of Korea, but this initiative also did not receive enthusiastic response and substantial support from the “Big Three” countries for different reasons.

It was the Asian Financial Crisis blown in July 1997 that gave the strong enough impetus for the ASEAN and the “Big Three” to take the proposals for an East Asian cooperation organization seriously. Under a new, pro-cooperative atmosphere, the first bilateral gatherings between the ASEAN leaders and their counterparts of China, Japan, and Republic of Korea held on 15 December 1997 in Malaysia. And as a result, the “ASEAN+3” cooperation—the first regional cooperation organization in East Asia—was born.¹

At its very inception, the “ASEAN+3” in many senses looks like a replacement of then disfavoured APEC or a smaller version of the APEC. Similar with the APEC, what it had to deal with first was also economic issues, especially the severe financial crisis that attacked the ASEAN members most. One of the significant achievements made by the “ASEAN+3” in this respect is the *Chiang Mai Initiative* regarding currency exchange reached by the financial ministers meeting in May 2000. Moreover, in terms of its decision-making mechanism and internal organization structure, it also appeared another one of multilateral informal dialogue mechanisms. Unlike the APEC, however, it provided an institutional cooperative framework for the first time in the history that put the ASEAN and the “Big Three” together and soon demonstrated its potential to evolve into a regional cooperation organization.

The turning point came at the third summit held in November 1999 in Manila, Philippines. Political leaders of the “ASEAN+3” member countries reached a comprehensive consensus on the principles, directions and key fields of East Asian cooperation, and issued a *Joint Statement on East Asian*

¹Door of the “ASEAN+3” is open for the other two countries in this area, Mongolia and North Korea, subject to their application. In addition, the leaders of India, Australia and New Zealand are also invited to attend the annual meeting since 2004, but these three countries are not formal members of the “ASEAN+3”.

Cooperation.(ASEAN 2005d)According to this statement, the long-term goal for East Asian cooperation, which was spelled out even clear at the 2002 “ASEAN+3” Summit, is to create an East Asian Free Trade Area(EAFTA) as the first step and an East Asian Community(EAC) as the future. Another milestone is the that, at the 1998 summit, the proposal from former Korean president Kim Dae-jung to set up an East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) for designing the process and goals of the “ASEAN+3” cooperation was adopted.

The commitment to build up an EAC by 2020 clearly shows the “ASEAN+3”’s ambition to be a comprehensive actor beyond the economic field. At the 2003 “ASEAN+3” Summit held in Bali, Indonesia, a couple of significant progresses were made. Among others, China formally joined the *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia* and issued a *Joint Declaration on a Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity* with the ASEAN. At the same time, Japan signed an agreement with the ASEAN on developing a comprehensive economic partnership and laid down the timetable for establishing a free trade area between the ASEAN and Japan, which aims to be concluded by 2012.

All of these measures regarding to create an EAFTA was reaffirmed and more than 30 documents in relation with this target were adopted and assigned at the “ASEAN+3” Summit of 2004 held in Vientiane, Laos. However, the most far-reaching decision made at this meeting is that it decided to formalize the annual gathering of “ASEAN+3” political leaders into an institutionalized arrangement and the first East Asian Summit(EAS) will be hosted by Malaysia in December 2005.

At present, organization structure and decision-making mechanism of the “ASEAN+3” can be described as follows.(ASEAN 2005b) At the highest level, it consists of a “10+3” summit, three “10+1” summits and a summit among the Chinese, Japanese and Korean leaders. At the mediate level, it is the ministerial meetings currently including foreign ministers, financial ministers, economic/trade ministers, agriculture/forestry ministers, labour ministers, tourism ministers, energy ministers, and environmental ministers meetings. And at the further lower layer, it is the various kinds of senior officials meetings. All of these gatherings have been becoming quite regular and formal. Unlike the APEC, the “ASEAN+3” has no formal secretariat. All the gatherings of political leaders and senior officials are coordinated by the host country. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathil had offered to set up an “ASEAN+3” secretariat in Malaysia, but this proposal was not accepted by the ASEAN foreign ministers meeting of July 2002. As a compensation, an “ASEAN+3” Unit was established at the ASEAN Secretariat in December 2003 to assist the “ASEAN+3” co-chairs to coordinate and monitor its cooperation activities. It is noteworthy that, following the establishment of the “ASEAN+3” Directors-General Working Group and the “ASEAN+3” Contact Group in 2005 to take the work formerly undertaken by the “ASEAN+3” Unit within the ASEAN, this situation will be changed very soon.

Though as table 1 shows, the economic center of East Asia is located not in the Southeast but Northeast Asia, with Japan and China producing 84.5% of the GDP in this whole region, it is the Southeast Asian countries having a much better organized sub-regional organization—ASEAN that have thus far played a pivotal role for the initiation and evolution of East Asian cooperation. (Zhai 2004)

Table 1: Main indicators of the “ASEAN 3” Cooperation(2003)

Nations	Population (Thousand)	GDP (Million \$)	Export (Million \$)	Import (Million \$)
Brunei	351	4 715	4 410	1 254
Cambodia	13 172	4 215	1 394	1 844

Indonesia	211 716	208 625	63 450	39 011
Laos	5 530	2 043	359	482
Malaysia	24 305	103 737	105 000	79 289
Myanmar	48 786	9 605	592	373
Philippines	79 944	79 270	34 985	36 100
Singapore	4 164	91 355	157 851	128 528
Thailand	61 613	143 303	78 416	74 214
Vietnam	80 424	39 021	19 500	21 600
ASEAN	530 005	685 891	465 957	382 696
China	1 288 400	1 409 852	438 370	412 840
Japan	127 210	4 326 444	471 934	382 958
South Korea	47 912	605 330	194 325	178 784

Resource: World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects: Trade, Regionalism & Development*, 2004.

The ASEAN, 'Statistics Indicators', <http://www.aseansec.org/13100.htm>, 17 October 2005.

INCORPORATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES INTO THE “ASEAN+3”

As what usually happens with other regional cooperation organization, the “ASEAN+3” soon felt the necessity to learn to deal with non-economic issues while it is striving for making progress in creating an EAFTA. So far, environmental protection has been recognized as one of the 8 fields or 17 policy areas of the “ASEAN+3” with which there are 49 mechanisms to deal.[ASEAN 2005a] The other 7 fields are economic, monetary and finance, political and security, tourism, agriculture, energy, and information and communication technology(ICT).

The 1999 “ASEAN+3” Summits were broadened to include not only heads of government but also their foreign, financial and trade ministers and identified 8 key fields for cooperation. Environmental protection was one of them. The unprecedented statement of 28 November 1999 pledged to enhance the cooperation on economic and social development, politics and security throughout this region. And as a main achievement, the “ASEAN+3” member countries agreed to accelerate the development of regional growth area including the Mekong River Basin, and intensify their coordination and cooperation in various international and regional forums such as the UN, the WTO, the APEC, the ASEM(Asia-Europe Meeting), and the ARF(ASEAN Regional Forum).

In May 2001, the trade ministers meeting at Siem Reap, Cambodia, endorsed 6 fields of future cooperation, and one of them was environmental protection. Under the project of “ASEAN Satellite Image Archive and Environmental Study”, it states:

One of the important challenges facing the region is the impact of rapid modernization and industrialization on the environment in areas such as deforestation, water quality, flooding, longer dry season, and public health. The project will allow countries to share existing resources in remote sensing and satellite image archives to study, manage and resolve these environmental problems.(US-ASEAN 2005)

At this point, two research reports adopted by the “ASEAN+3” Summits in 2001 and 2002 respectively are important. The first one is the final report of the EAVG, and the other is from the East Asia Study Group(EASG)—a following-up group of the EAVG established in 2000.(EAVG 2001; EASG 2002)The EAVG report titled “Towards an East Asian Community: Region of Peace, Prosperity, and Progress” puts

“facilitating regional efforts for environmental protection and good governance” as one of the 5 key goals to seek, while the EASG report contains 17 short-term measures and 9 medium- and long-term measures. All of those recommended measures by these two reports have been carried out or are being implemented. The environmental protection project—one of the 9 medium- and long-term measures proposed by the EASG report, to “promote closer regional marine environmental cooperation for the entire region”, is currently being pursued through the “ASEAN+3” ministers meeting on environment.

To implement the agreement on strengthening the cooperation mechanism building of the “ASEAN+3” reached by political leaders at the 2002 Summit, the second but more formal “ASEAN+3” Environmental Ministers Meeting (EMM), after its first gathering in November 2002 in Vientiane, Laos, took place in December 2003 in Yangon, Myanmar. Subsequently, the third and fourth “ASEAN+3” EMM meetings were hosted by Singapore in October 2004 and Philippines in September 2005 respectively. At these meetings, 10 potential cooperation areas are identified and discussed. They are global environmental issues, land and forest fire and trans-boundary haze pollution, marine and oceanic environment, sustainable forest management, national park and natural conservation zone management, water resources protection, environmentally-friendly and clean production, public awareness and environmental education, urban environment management, environmental data collections and archives building. (SEPEC, 2005)

It is obvious that a clearly defined and institutionalized cooperation system of the “ASEAN+3” on environment is still at its very beginning stage. Nevertheless, some encouraging achievements in this field have thus far been made under its three sub-systems, namely, the “ASEAN+1”, the ASEAN itself and the sub-regional environmental cooperation framework of China, Japan and Republic of Korea.

A good example of the “ASEAN+1” cooperation for environmental protection is that between the ASEAN and China. According to the *ASEAN-China Joint Declaration on a Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity* signed on 8 October 2003, two sides are determined to strengthen their bilateral cooperation in protecting the sub-regional biodiversity through reforesting the belts along the trans-boundary rivers, especially the collaboration in developing Mekong River Basin. As one of the following-up measures, financially supported by the Asian Bank, a “Biodiversity Conservation Action Plan for Great Mekong River Sub-region” is undertaking. This 10-year action plan consists of three stages. At the first stage (2005~2008), it will endeavor to create 9 experimental zones of biodiversity protection chosen from the 6 participating countries, namely, China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. After taking an evaluation of its projects conducted in the first stage, this plan will go ahead into the second stage in 2009 and third stage in 2012.

The ASEAN Agreement on Trans-boundary Haze Pollution, which was signed by all the 10 member states in June 2002 and then entered into force in November 2003, is the first piece of legally binding ASEAN regional environmental accord. This signifies not only the culmination of concerted and intensive regional efforts over the past years to address the trans-boundary haze pollution since the 1997/98 severe haze episodes, but also a starting-point for the ASEAN to play a leading role to tackle transnational environmental problems in this region. Other hallmark events for the ASEAN include the signing of the revised *ASEAN Declaration on Heritage Parks*, the adoption of *the Framework for Environmentally Sustainable Cities in the ASEAN* and *the ASEAN Long-term Strategic Plan for Water Resources Management*. In order to implement these as well as the other programmes, several permanent internal sub-organizations with administrative and monitoring functions such as the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for

Trans-boundary Haze Pollution, the ASEAN Emergency Response and Strategic Planning Institute for Environmental Disaster, and the ASEAN Regional Centre for Biodiversity have been set up.(ASEAN 2005c)

As for the “Big Three” countries in Northeast Asia, namely, China, Japan and Republic of Korea, on the one hand, all of them hold a generally positive position on the ASEAN-led integration process in the Southeast Asia and the ASEAN-sponsored initiatives for a broader and closer cooperation and coordination under the “ASEAN+3” framework. For instance, at the Phnom Penh foreign ministerial meeting of “ASEAN+3” held in June 2003, Chinese foreign minister Zhaoxing Li expressed his full support for expanding East Asian cooperation from the up-to-then economically-dominated areas into other hopeful fields such as fighting against the transnational crimes and controlling the spreading of the SARS. In addition, just before that meeting, foreign ministers of China, Japan and Republic of Korea agreed to suggest their leaders issue a joint declaration in October on strengthening the cooperation among these countries in the fields such as economics, politics, environmental protection, culture and human resource development to show their support for the ASEAN-leading integration process in the whole region.(Xinhua 2003)

On the other hand, under a sub-regional environmental cooperation framework of Northeast Asia created by a series of common statements such as the *Joint Declaration on Promoting the Cooperation among China, Japan and Republic of Korea* issued in October 2003, these countries hold annual environmental ministers meetings since 1999. Currently, they are jointly conducting or participating in many environmental cooperation projects such as “East Asian Sea Action Plan”—one sub-unit of a much broader project, “Northwest Pacific Action Plan” and “Northeast Asian Sandstorms Cooperation Project”. Up to now, they have done a lot of work regarding scientific research, environmental administration and legal system comparison, and policy recommendation.(CED 2004) For instance, in the *China, Japan and Republic of Korea Cooperation Action Strategy* approved by a trilateral committee on 27 November 2004, environmental protection was ranked as the third of key fields for further cooperation.

Generally speaking, the “ASEAN+3” has demonstrated its leading role for environmental protection cooperation in East Asia by providing a common stage or institutional framework —especially through the formalized inter-governmental meetings at different levels—for the 13 member countries to exchange their policy ideas, discuss common concerned issues, and negotiate solutions to certain bilateral and multilateral problems. Yet, partly owing to the time limit, the whole potential of the “ASEAN+3” as a comprehensive regional cooperation organization is still far less realized.

PROSPECTS OF THE “ASEAN+3” AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL PLAYER

The primitive examination into its development and policy expansion process suggests, the “ASEAN+3” as a regional cooperation organization has built up a consolidate basis to evolve into an influential environmental player in terms of the measuring indicators laid out at the beginning: policy goals, operational mechanism, and organizational structure. Comparing with the APEC as well as other trans-regional/inter-regional cooperation organizations, the “ASEAN+3” has elaborated its much ambitious short- and long- term policy goals with a strong commitment to regional integration future and social and environmental dimensions, and much better institutionalized meeting arrangements for governmental officials at the different levels. The weak decision-making power and far less developed internal organization structure of the “ASEAN+3”, however, deny any argument claiming that the “ASEAN+3” has

been grown up to be a regional cooperation organization with its full environmental dimension in East Asia.

In addition, according to Frank Biermann and Steffen Bauer's definition, transnational or international organization actors can be differentiated by identifying how many of the following three roles they are playing: as knowledge-brokers to set the global agenda, as negotiation- facilitators to shape global cooperation, and as capacity-builders to make international cooperation work.(Biermann and Bauer 2005) After making some revisions to this standard, we can draw a theoretical framework for analyzing the functional performances of transnational/international environmental actors, which is composed of promoting regional information exchange, facilitating regional policy initiation and negotiation, and controlling regional policy implementation. (Lieferrink et al. 1993, 2)As far as the "ASEAN+3" is concerned, it is doing quite well in promoting regional information exchange to form common policy goals, but has still not found its own place in making regional policies and controlling their implementation.

Then, if putting the structural and functional measuring dimensions together, the author would argue that the "ASEAN+3" today can only reasonably be located somewhere between the first and second groups of environmental actors(see table 2).

Table 2: The main features of the "ASEAN+3" as an environmental actor

Functional\Structural	Policy goals	Operational mechanism	Organizational structure
Promoting information exchange	+	+	-
Facilitating policy negotiation	+	-/+	-
<u>Controlling policy implementation</u>	-	-	-

*Group 1 with only the first one of organizational and functional features while group 3 with all three of them.

Keeping this general assessment in mind, we can go further to discuss which direction the "ASEAN+3" will probably move forward in the near future. At this point, in the author's point of view, both external impetus for and internal dynamics within it are relevant.

As to the external impetus, the most illustrating one is the severe Tsunami Disaster happened by the end of 2004. The real lesson—further supporting evidence was provided by the South Asian Earthquake in October 2005—for regional cooperation organizations like the "ASEAN+3" is that a single-minded or economic-restricted cooperation approach is no longer inappropriate and will face great challenges or risks in a new millennium of globalizing world.(Pang 2005) On the one hand, the "ASEAN+3" has to develop its security, social and environmental policy dimensions quickly in order to respond to social security crises or natural disasters such as tsunami, earthquake and flood properly. Otherwise, these social crises or natural plagues would bring about much more human casualties and wealth loss to its member countries. One can imagine that if those trans-boundary natural tragedies had occurred in Europe, the EU would definitely play a dominant role in the rescuing and recovering process. On the other hand, the "ASEAN+3" as the primary regional cooperation organization must be more sensitive to the negative effects such as environmental deterioration which economic and trade liberalization especially at its early period would produce.

As a response to the appeals for developing a collective system of natural disaster prevention and mutual assistance in East Asia, China hosted a "China-ASEAN Conference on Tsunami Preventive Caution" on 25~26 January 2005. At this conference and thereafter, Chinese government proposed a series of policy initiatives such as establishing a China-ASEAN Public Health Fund and putting natural disaster prevention and rescue as one of the key areas of the "ASEAN+3" cooperation. It seems that, however, this

“pull impetus” is not strong enough to lead to a re-orientation or organizational reconstruction for the “ASEAN+3”.

As far as the internal dynamics of the “ASEAN+3” is concerned, one can find both positive and negative elements. It is true that two sides of the “Big Three” and the ASEAN hold a generally supporting position on strengthening the cooperation and coordination in the non-economic fields such as environmental protection under the framework of “ASEAN+3”.(ASEAN 2005a) For example, former Chinese deputy foreign minister Wang Yi reconfirmed in late 2004 that it is an explicit and consistent policy for China that the “ASEAN+3” is the main channel for East Asian cooperation.(Wang 2004) However, the main problem, among others, for the “Big Three” and the ASEAN is that both of them are not convinced that it is the time to embark on creating an institutionalized “ASEAN+3” environmental or/and social cooperation mechanism while at the moment constructing an EAFTA is still underway.

To summarize, though the “ASEAN+3” is evolving into an increasingly important regional stage for environmental information and policy idea exchange, main fruitful activities of cooperation and coordination in this field among the “10+3” countries in a foreseeable future will continue to be concentrated at its three sub-levels, namely, the “ASEAN+1”, the ASEAN and the sub-regional cooperation framework of China, Japan and Republic of Korea.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Since its establishment, the “ASEAN+3” has been progressing very well in defining policy goals and institutionalizing operational mechanism. As a result of this steadily expanding and deepening process, it is rising to be a significant regional actor in promoting environmental protection cooperation for East Asia. Nevertheless, there are still a lot of difficulties to overcome for the “ASEAN+3” before to play a leading role like the EU in regional environmental cooperation and coordination.²

In the author’s observation, three factors, among others, are crucial in determining the transformation process of the “ASEAN+3” as an environmental player from an essentially inter-governmental dialogue mechanism to a really regionalist cooperation organization. First of them is that how long time the East Asian countries will take to reorient the regional cooperation under the “ASEAN+3” from an economically dominated process to a comprehensive one. A turning point is unlikely to come until an EAFTA is created around the 2010, but some preparatory measures should/may be taken earlier.³The second factor is that when and how political leaders of the East Asian countries will adopt a regionalist cooperation approach in replacement of the current inter-governmentalist one. The most testing division-line is that these countries finally agree to transfer some of their sovereignty and administrative powers including environmental powers to the “ASEAN+3” and make it to be a transnational/supranational organization. Thirdly, as a by-product of a united process, when and how the “ASEAN+3” will obtain both of its mandate and capacity to undertake environmental decision-making function and monitor the implementation of those decisions. As

²European Commissioner for Environment is now able to discuss the issue of sustainable development and competitiveness in Europe confidently at the European Parliament Conference, while there is no any unitary voice on regional environmental strategy in East Asia. See Stavros Dimas, ‘Sustainable development and competitiveness’. Brussels: The EPC Meeting, 6 October 2005.

³A positive sign for the reorientation of “ASEAN+3” came from the 2004 “ASEAN+3” Summit held in Vientiane. At this meeting, political leaders agreed to issue a second joint statement on East Asian Cooperation on the 10th anniversary of the “ASEAN+3” cooperation in 2007.

one can understand, it is not just a process for the “ASEAN +3” to set up a sub-bureaucracy to deal with various environmental issues, but one process that needs far beyond the capability of the “ASEAN+3” cooperation itself.

To conclude, available evidence suggests that the “ASEAN+3” is rising as a recognized actor in promoting regional environmental cooperation and coordination for East Asia, though it can not be expected to fulfill more important roles before to have made substantial progress in improving its operational mechanism and organizational structure. The journey towards an EAC does have begun (Chalermphanupap 2002), but it would be a long, onerous, and thus both-courage-and-wisdom-requiring one.

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