

### Three Minus ASEAN: The Dazaifu Summit

by Donald E. Weatherbee

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On Dec.13, 2008, a landmark tripartite summit meeting of the heads of government of Japan, South Korea, and China took place in Japan at Dazaifu, in Fukuoka Prefecture. Japan's Prime Minister Aso Taro hosted China's Premier Wen Jiabao and South Korea's President Lee Myung-bak for the first stand-alone trilateral summit between the leaders of the three East Asian powers. In the joint statement at the conclusion of the meeting the leaders claimed that they had opened a new era in cooperative relations that would lead to peace and development in the region. Significantly, they agreed to institutionalize the new relationship through annual summits based on the principles of openness, transparency, mutual trust, common benefit, and respect for diverse cultures. A comprehensive action plan was adopted to further functional cooperation at all levels of trilateral interaction. The next summit is to be held in China.

Aso said at the joint press conference, "It's strange that such neighboring countries haven't had a meeting like this before." Japan had proposed holding a tripartite East Asia summit a decade ago but issues that inflamed nationalist sentiments, such as Japan's territorial disputes with China over the Senkaku/Daoyutai islets and with Korea over Takeshima/Dokdo or Japanese unwillingness to accept war guilt, poisoned the political atmosphere. Moreover, there was Chinese reluctance to isolate or marginalize North Korea in East Asia.

Rather than a formal summit process, the three countries practiced informal summitry through the agency of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' ASEAN + 3 (APT) format. ASEAN's annual summit meeting is followed by an APT summit that also provides a venue for the East Asian 3 to meet on the sidelines. That would have been impossible in 2008 as Thailand's domestic problems led to ASEAN disarray and the postponement of the planned Dec. 15 – 17 summit meeting. The transboundary issues that would have been on the table at the APT summit were on the table at the Dazaifu summit – minus ASEAN input – including, for example, collaborative responses to the present financial crisis, reinforcing currency swap arrangements, measures against pandemic avian flu, and natural disaster relief.

The new East Asia trilateralism raises questions about aspects of ASEAN's APT strategy. There had been an ASEAN assumption that the political differences among its East Asian partners were so deep that they could not be

overcome in a cooperative arrangement without the neutral playing field of ASEAN. ASEAN imagined its organizational significance to China, Japan, and South Korea derived in part from what was thought to be its pivotal role in a multilateral framework in which the consensus mechanism was ASEAN's insistence on its central agenda-setting role. This would allow ASEAN to balance and hedge in its own relationships with the East Asian actors in the APT. It now seems clear that the deepening economic ties among, and the common global challenges to, the East Asian economic giants transcend the loose regionalism of the APT, diminishing ASEAN's claim to be an agenda setter or a necessary actor in the management of Japan – China – South Korea relations.

The Dazaifu summit signals a new entry into the already crowded field of East and Southeast Asian regionalist consultative and cooperative frameworks. The multitudes of overlapping agendas and plans of action defy rational programmatic ordering. Somewhere in the mix, ASEAN is attempting to muddle through. It had hoped through its new charter to enhance its relevancy. It has ended up embarrassed. As for the the Dazaifu summit, ASEAN appears to be on the outside looking in at the beginning of a trilateral process that, if successful, would be much more regionally and globally significant than the APT.