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Assessing the Past; Driving Forwards Towards APEC's Destiny

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Submitted by: Prof Lepi Tarmidi

APEC Study Centre, University of Indonesia



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Transparency and Anti-Corruption Movements in APEC: Assessing the Past, Driving Forward Towards APEC's Destiny

APEC will be 18 years old this year, and countless number of Meetings has taken place at various levels, from high officials meetings, ministers' meetings to head of states summit meetings. However, through all these years the positive impact of APEC to the member economies has been meager, if not none, and there are practically no real deliverables to the people. Will we let this process continue on and on or will we end this costly and unfruitful process and make a drastic change to save the APEC process? This has been a cause for concern for many APEC thinkers for many years already. I feel a deep concerns about APEC's future, the destiny and the fate of APEC. If APEC activities continue like this, interests will erode and finally APEC will be dissolved.

The central topic of the APEC Study Centres Conference this year is "Driving Growth – APEC's Destiny". However, the question is: is there a common APEC's destiny after all? We have the APEC vision, the Bogor goals, and the Busan Roadmap. The author believes that the presence of APEC is still relevant and could be beneficial to the economies and the people of the region, but to reach this destination all the members of APEC should decide on a clear common roadmap, to which all members are fully committed. So far progress in the implementation of the Bogor goals has been meager and very slow, although the goals have been reaffirmed every year at Summit Meetings (see Lee and Cheong: 3, 7, 8,30; see also Feinberg: 8).

APEC Visions

According to the First Report of the APEC Eminent Persons Group in 1993, APEC's vision should be working towards an Asia Pacific Community. And in its Second Report in August 1994, the Group showed the way on how to achieve this vision, namely through "free and open trade in the Asia Pacific". This vision was adopted at the Bogor Summit Meeting in November 1994, which became famous as the APEC Bogor goals,

In its First Report in 1993, the Eminent Persons Group of APEC conveyed the hope for the "**creation of a true Asia Pacific Economic Community**" and recommended as one of the strategy to "**set a goal of free trade in the Asia Pacific** to help realize the full economic potential of the region." (APEC, 1993: 8) In the Second Report in 1994, the Group recommended Leaders and Ministers to "**adopt the long-term goal of 'free and open trade and investment in the region'**". This programme should start in the year 2000 and be completed by 2020.. (APEC, 1994: 3, 4) The Report further clarified that this Asia Pacific Community "will noy be a community in the sense of the EC – characterized by acceptance of the transfer of sovereignty, deep integration and extensive institutionalization. It will rather be a community in the popular sense of a 'big family' of like-minded economies – committed to friendship, cooperation and the removal of barriers to economic exchange among its members in the interest of all." (APEC, 1994: 5) The Third and the last Report of the Group in 1995 was about the implementation of the APEC Vision.

To implement the APEC visions, according to Hufbauer, APEC could take at least three different shapes: 1) "... to keep APEC a low-key 'talk show' –a sort of 'OECD-minus' organization.", 2) "... make APEC a more robust organization.", 3) "... add to these functions the goal of ... a long-term agenda of comprehensive liberalization, with the

ultimate goal of free trade and investment throughout the Pacific Basin.” The conflict between these three visions raises the question of “whither APEC?” (Hufbauer: 13).

The general impression is, that APEC is losing track of its destiny. There is no clear roadmap towards APEC’s destiny, because the destiny itself is blurred. The Bogor should be redefined, since we are now approaching the year 2010, which is only three years away from now, and whether the year 2020 is realistic for developing countries? Each year host governments break their heads in finding new themes to attract member countries to come to the Meetings, and to keep the bicycle from falling.

A list APEC Conference central themes is as follows:

Year	Country	Conference Theme
1993	Blake Island, USA	APEC’s vision of “stability, security and prosperity for our people”
1994	Bogor, Indonesia	Bogor goals of “free and open trade and investment in the Asia-Pacific by 2010 for industrialized economies and 2020 for developing economies”
2000	Brunei Darussalam	Delivering to the Community
2001	China	Meeting New Challenges in the New Century: Achieving Common Prosperity Through Participation and Cooperation
2002	Mexico	Expanding the Benefits for Economic Growth and Development – Implementing the Vision
2003	Thailand	A World of Differences: Partnership for the Future
2004	Chile	One Community, Our Future
2005	Korea	Towards One Community: Meet the Challenge and Make the Change
2006	Vietnam	Towards a Dynamic Community for Sustainable Development and Prosperity
2007	Australia	Strengthening Our Community, Building a Sustainable Future

Source: APEC Secretariat. 2003. *APEC, Outcomes and Outlook 2003/2004*.

It can be seen that “The focus of APEC Leaders is on strategic and contemporary issues. ... Privately they complain about lack of focus in Summit discussions. What keeps them meeting is who they will meet.” (Oxley: 4)

It does not make sense at all to organize hundreds of meetings at all government levels and annual Leaders’ Meetings if there are no major breakthroughs and progress in achieving the goals of APEC and if there are no observable deliverables to the people, in particular the poor, in the region. The danger is meeting fatigue, slowly but surely and bit by bit APEC is eroding its vision.

Goals might change over time. It might be that the first set of goals are not realistic or difficult to realize, and cannot accommodate all major aspects and problems that exist in the region. But then, Leaders should take bold measures to agree and decide on a new orientation and work consistently towards its implementation.

The APEC process is a government enterprise without much involvement of the major stakeholder, the people of the region, although governments represent the interests of the people, but they do not touch the interests of the people.

It has already become a fact that lately there evolves a proliferation of regional trading arrangements and bilateral trading agreements in the Asia-Pacific region. This proliferation might be a threat to APEC's existence and erode its process in the long-term if there is no new orientation in APEC itself. We should question these recent trends, because we all agreed to establish APEC in the first place. The first question that comes up is, what is wrong with APEC? Isn't this new trend a sign of erosion of the APEC process? Interests to APEC has dwindled since the Manila Leaders' Meeting in 1996 (Soesastro, 2003: 29). Because probably APEC is not able to fulfill the high expectations of some of its members? Or has APEC becomes too big with 21 economies spanning the Pacific Ocean? Forming strategic new alliances might act as alternatives to some economies, because smaller groups can better accommodate the interests of its members and can work more efficient to achieve its designated goals. Countries form new alliances, because APEC is not effective. Though there is the ASEAN plus Three meetings and the East Asian Summit Meetings (two thus far) (see Soesastro, 2006: 7), both have no formal structure yet and it is also questionable whether they will be able to form a formal group because of the deep differences among the three Northeast Asian countries. Hence they are a threat or an alternative to APEC.

Some Recommendations

To arrive at more effective ways to achieve the APEC goals, the role of the business communities should be emphasized, because they are the direct benefactors and they know best what they need (see Feinberg: 5, 14f). And finally, the sectoral Ministers' Meetings should be the driving force behind the APEC process in working out practical projects and programmes of cooperation in each field that will benefit the economies and the people. APEC for sure cannot revitalise all sectors of the economy, but at least a number of sectors, and the process is not meant to make big strides to increase the welfare of all the members in the region, but rather to make small steps towards the destiny.

The author suggest to find a new format for the APEC process:

- Leaders' Summit Meeting every two year instead of presently every year;
- SOM Meetings at least once a year and should produce concrete deliverables.

If there is no clear-cut goals and destiny, then in the end people would loose interests in the APEC process, and consequently some Leaders would seek excuses to avoid the Meetings. And if there are no interests, then governments would not give financial support for APEC activities, and without sufficient funding an organization cannot work. The worst consequence would be, APEC will be dissolved. And if there are lesser Meetings, especially the Leaders' Meetings, then there would be less costs. The organization could work more effectively. It is also imperative to involve the participation of the main stakeholders in the APEC process: the government, the business community and the intellectuals.

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