Without strengthening democracy and eradicating poverty, we cannot expect to have peace.

ough inspections. In return, the United States should provide security assurances and lift economic sanctions on the North Korean economy. This can be realized through an improvement in U.S.-North Korean relations and a resumption of the Six-Party Talks and their real success. The issue of the Korean Peninsula goes beyond inter-Korean relations. It is an issue that concerns the whole of Asia and the world. Moreover, peace on the Peninsula is not just limited to the military level, but directly linked to economic prosperity, human rights and democracy.

Back in 1971, when I was the main opposition party’s presidential candidate, I proposed that the four surrounding powers – the U.S., Soviet Union, China and Japan – should guarantee peace on the Korean Peninsula. My suggestion was to encourage the four powers to deter any chance of war and guarantee security. It was a realistic goal that sought not only to end the state of war, but also to eliminate the undemocratic structure of South Korean society at the time, because Cold War logic and the inter-Korean confrontation justified the existence of an authoritarian dictatorship.

The members of the current Six-Party Talks are the same four powers that I proposed at that time, plus the two Koreas. I believe the Six-Party framework should not restrict itself to being just a temporary meeting to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. I believe it should develop into a permanent multilateral organization for the promotion of peace and democracy on the Korean Peninsula and in East Asia. Such an idea was reflected in the “Gwangju Declaration” announced on June 17, 2006 as a result of the 2006 Gwangju Summit of Nobel Peace Laureates held in Gwangju June 15-17. Significantly, the summit was held on the occasion of the sixth anniversary of the June 15 South-North Joint Declaration. The Nobel Peace Prize winning individuals and organizations that participated came to a consensus on the issues of democracy, human rights, poverty reduction, and peace in Asia. Their agreement was reflected in the Declaration.

There is no reason to be pessimistic about the future of democracy and peace in Asia and the establishment of an East Asian community. Though many obstacles still exist, efforts from each country will help brighten the future of Asia. This is a region rich in diversity and high standards of culture; it is a vast area where the experiences of self-achieved, successful democratization are spreading; and where the development of information technology and common economic benefits are helping to hasten the integration of Asia and bring lasting peace. East Asia can also be a shining example for the rest of the world as a place where various great religions and cultures – Confucianism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam – coexist and cooperate. In light of the clash of civilizations happening in other parts of the world, this remains a source of great hope for Asian integration.

Dr. Kim Dae-jung is the former President of the Republic of Korea and 2000 Nobel peace laureate.

In 1991, after the failure of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to come up with a better international trading regime, Malaysia suggested the formation of an East Asia Economic Group (EAEG).

The members of this group would be the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the three Northeast Asian countries – namely, Japan, South Korea and China.

Although Malaysia never clarified what the Group was all about, we had in mind only a forum at the level of heads of governments, where common economic and trading problems could be discussed and resolved or a common stand decided for the Group when discussing international trade regimes with other regions. Of course, we knew this proposal could be modified when ASEAN meetings considered it.

We felt such an East Asian group was necessary because the smaller countries of Southeast Asia, even when we acted as the ASEAN Group, were no match for the European Union and the countries of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) when negotiating trade and other economic matters. Together with the three Northeast Asian countries, however, the small economies of Southeast Asia would have sufficient clout to get a fair deal from Europe and North America.

But for reasons we could not understand, the U.S. objected strongly to the EAEG. James Baker, who was then the U.S. Secretary of State, visited South Korea and Japan and told them not to have anything to do with the proposal. Certain ASEAN countries were also advised not to support EAEG. It would seem in the U.S. view that while European countries could get together, and Canada, the U.S. and Mexico could form NAFTA, East Asian countries were not even to be allowed to talk to each other.

What is the difference between these Asian countries and the countries of Europe and North America? One does not like to accuse anyone of
The overbearing attitude of ethnic Europeans is reflected in the moral high ground that Australia takes. This contrasts with the avoidance of preaching on the part of even the most powerful Asian countries. For all these reasons, Australia and New Zealand cannot be regarded as Asians and cannot be members of the East Asian grouping.

racism, but the obvious difference is that the Asian countries are not ethnic European, while the European Union and the three North American countries are essentially ethnic Europeans. Even after he ceased to be the U.S. Secretary of State, Mr. Baker went to Japan and summoned Japanese business leaders to tell them not to support the EAEG. And so, for several years, the EAEG idea remained dormant.

Then, President Kim Dae-jung of South Korea proposed that as dialogue partners of ASEAN, the three Northeast Asian countries should talk with ASEAN together. President Kim avoided mention of an East Asian grouping, but referred to the get together as “ASEAN Plus Three.” Of course, it was, in effect, a revival of the EAEG. Soon, the U.S. and its supporters began to pressure the group to include Australia and New Zealand, two ethnic European countries. And in 2006, this new grouping met in Kuala Lumpur. It was supposed to be the East Asian grouping, but it really was not. The inclusion of Australia and New Zealand made it an East Asia Oceania group, or East Asia Australasia group, almost like the existing Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Asians apparently cannot be allowed to talk to each other without the presence of ethnic Europeans. Why should Australia and New Zealand not be considered as part of East Asia? Geographically, they may be in the East, but even maps of the world never place them together with other Asian countries. They belong to Australasia or Oceania. But, more importantly, their people are largely ethnic Europeans; they are culturally European and are ethnic Europeans in their worldview, sympathies and political affiliations. The two countries have always been quick to respond to political developments, and even the wars, of the ethnic Europeans. In fact, Australia considers itself the deputy-sheriff of the ethnically European United States.

The overbearing attitude of ethnic Europeans is reflected in the moral high ground that Australia takes. This contrasts with the avoidance of preaching on the part of even the most powerful Asian countries. For all these reasons, Australia and New Zealand cannot be regarded as Asians and cannot be members of the East Asian grouping.

Why is there a need for an East Asian regional group? Economically, culturally and ideologically, the world is still Eurocentric. This is not necessarily bad. The Europeans have contributed much toward improving governance and formalising international relations so that all the countries of the world practise certain standards and procedures in domestic and international affairs.

But on the other hand, Europeans have not been tolerant of any differences in the ways of others. For example, Europeans think their culture of competition, in which the winner takes all, is the only way to settle problems. The idea of a win-win formula where everyone benefits is not acceptable. The Europeans have contributed much toward improving governance and formalising international relations so that all the countries of the world practise certain standards and procedures in domestic and international affairs.

But on the other hand, Europeans have not been tolerant of any differences in the ways of others. For example, Europeans think their culture of competition, in which the winner takes all, is the only way to settle problems. The idea of a win-win formula where everyone benefits is not favoured by them. As a result, conflicts between nations are endemic and often lead to wars.

An East Asian regional organisation where the members would be entirely Asian would help promote Asian tolerance and belief in non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries. Japan, South Korea and even China have helped Southeast Asian countries with investments, technology and markets to enable them to develop and prosper. An East Asian regional grouping would certainly strengthen the bargaining clout of all the countries within it, small and big.

This has become even more necessary now, because countries can no longer isolate and insulate themselves from the rest of the world. Outside forces threaten to overwhelm them and take away their freedom to retain their competitive advantages. Removal of protective barriers simply means increasing the competitive advantage of the rich. The World Trade Organization (WTO), for example, is dedicated to opening markets for the powerful to compete with the weak. The small economies of Southeast Asia would be totally dominated by the ethnic European nations and their regional organisations.

It is an accepted principle that competition must be fair. It is not just a question of level playing fields, but also the class of players competing. Competition between midgets and giants would not be fair.

But an East Asian group would be more evenly matched when competing with the European Union and NAFTA. It is for this reason that East Asian regionalism should be promoted.

But an East Asia regional group should not try to dominate either Asia or the world. Instead, it should work towards strong cooperation with other Asian countries and regional groups and take a keen interest in the economic development of all the disadvantaged countries of the world. It should always regard itself as a regional member of the world community and work towards a better world.

Dr. Mahathir Mohamad is the former Prime Minister of Malaysia.
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