

Is the ASEAN Community possible?

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In the significant No.101 issue of our Quarterly Magazine, I expressed the strong wish that the ASEAN Summit Meeting held in Kuala Lumpur in August would conclude successfully with a consensus on establishing the ASEAN Community by the end of this year. To commemorate the establishment of this ASEAN Community, I have decided to make greater efforts to have this short column read by international leaders, academics and experts in specific fields.

I have been writing this column titled “Echo” for the last 10 quarters. Needless to say, the expectation on the part of those who gave the column its name was of a response not only from inside Japan but also from around the world. In fact, however, I have never received any response from outside Japan. One probable reason for this is that the column has been written in Japanese. Therefore, I have decided to write it in English.

Although it has continued to be said that establishing the ASEAN Community would be completed within this year, I doubt this will be possible. First of all, it is far from certain that defense issues can be included in the category of a community. Although in the first announcement, ASEAN said that defense would be included, there has been no substance on this.

Secondly, even in an economic community, the organization that ASEAN is going to establish would at best be a kind of ASEAN Common Market. According to my definition, in order for a group to be called a community it is necessary for each country to concede at least a part of its sovereignty to the headquarters. But ASEAN countries have never declared that they are prepared to concede any sovereignty. Therefore ASEAN cannot be a community.

So what sort of organization is ASEAN going to establish? If such an organization adopts common policies on distribution, financial activities or labor movement, it may be able to be called a common market. The reason why I mention these three functions is just because free movement of goods and services, money and labor are the most important elements of a free enterprise system. Of course, it would be ideal if all of these three conditions were met. Generally speaking, however, if the water is too clean, fish cannot live there. Likewise, if the conditions for countries to join an organization are too severe, they would simply not join. Thus the new organization to be born within ASEAN by the end of this year will be a common market or an ASEAN free trade area, newly including trade in services.