

PERSPECTIVE

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Is the East Asia Summit Suffering Erosion?

*Hoang Thi Ha and Malcolm Cook**



Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (top 2nd R) addresses his counterparts at the ASEAN-East Asia (EAS) Summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit being held online in Hanoi on 14 November 2020. Photo: Nhac NGUYEN, AFP

** Hoang Thi Ha is ISEAS Fellow and Lead Researcher for Political-Security Affairs in the ASEAN Studies Centre, and Malcolm Cook is ISEAS Visiting Senior Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Over the last decade, the East Asia Summit has established itself at the peak of the ASEAN-led regional architecture and key to ASEAN's broader centrality aspirations.
- ASEAN has however had difficulties improving the institutional efficacy of the EAS and lifting it out of its default 'talk shop' mode.
- ASEAN dialogue partner developments also pose an EAS erosion threat. These include the deterioration in China's relations with the Quad members, and the recent elevation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue to a regular leaders-level forum.
- Leveraging the EAS to address the aftermath of the Myanmar coup and to engage with the Quad Vaccine Partnership could help the EAS bolster its ability to deliver concrete results on pressing Southeast Asian issues.

INTRODUCTION

All inter-state organisations are shaped and challenged by the changing engagement of their major stakeholders, the difficulties associated with consensus-based reform and consolidation, the inevitable gap between expectations and feasible delivery, and the evolving strategic environment within which they exist.

Where ASEAN is concerned, the mutually reinforcing effects of such challenges will test the East Asia Summit (EAS) and threaten its peak position in the ASEAN-led regional architecture in the coming years. How ASEAN member states and ASEAN itself respond will help determine the EAS' future status.

Three developments illuminate these more challenging times. On 12 March, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) was elevated from an informal discussion forum among the US, Japan, India and Australia to the inaugural Quad leaders' summit; this presents a direct challenge to the EAS' peak position. If the second Quad leaders' summit that is to be held in-person by the end of 2021 takes place, likely before the EAS, this challenge will become clearer.¹

Second, the 1 February military coup in Myanmar and its bloody aftermath are being viewed by many as an "existential crisis" for ASEAN intramurally and for ASEAN's broader agenda.² ASEAN-led mechanisms that include Myanmar junta representatives could lead to some dialogue partners choosing to stay away or to use their presence to call for an immediate return to democracy in Myanmar.

Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic that continues to spread in many ASEAN member states has shown the EAS' functional limitations. The smaller, more established and more functionally-oriented ASEAN+3 mechanism has been much more active and effective in addressing the pandemic in Southeast Asia.³ The Quad may achieve the same with the launch of the Quad Vaccine Partnership at its inaugural summit.⁴ Over the last decade, the EAS, by default and by ASEAN's design, has been the peak mechanism in the ASEAN-led regional architecture. Keeping it so will not be easy.

EAS IDENTITY ISSUES

For all the acclaim of its premier status in the ASEAN-led regional architecture, the EAS has not yet settled on its own identity. It has its genesis in the ASEAN+3 process and the latter's goal of building an East Asian community *for East Asians*. In its 2002 report assessing the establishing an EAS, the East Asia Study Group emphasised the "need for clarity of objectives and issues which the EAS should pursue."⁵ Yet, much of the diplomatic wrangling leading to the EAS' inaugural meeting in 2005 was about which ASEAN dialogue partners to invite, and not.⁶ The EAS did not become an "ASEAN+3 transformed". The EAS' broader original membership and subsequent addition of the US and Russia in 2011 give it a more "open, outward-looking and inclusive"⁷ character. Neither were its objectives or its path forward clearly defined, making it "unclear to most what exactly the *raison d'être* for the inaugural meeting of the EAS was."⁸

This continuing lack of a clear purpose is reflected in the mismatch between the broad strategic agenda at the leaders-level and the evolving seven priority areas of EAS cooperation involving

multiple government ministries, namely energy, education, finance, global health including pandemics, environment and disaster management, ASEAN Connectivity and maritime cooperation. On the one hand, this Janus-faced identity allows for flexibility. China and its like-minded EAS partners can promote functional and development cooperation, while the US and its partners can raise traditional security issues including the South China Sea disputes and the Korean Peninsula. Individual EAS leaders have the prerogative to raise any issue of specific interest or concern to them.

On the other hand, it creates the dilemma of preserving the broad, free-flowing and informal nature of the leaders' dialogue while enhancing the EAS' institutional capacity to deliver concrete results. Last year, the EAS was almost invisible in initiating any specific collective action to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, despite "global health including pandemics" being a priority area for cooperation.

The EAS Leaders issued their Statement on Strengthening Collective Capacity in Epidemics Prevention and Response only in November 2020,⁹ and no concrete action to implement the statement under the EAS framework has been reported since then. Instead, the region is witnessing vaccine nationalism and competitive vaccine diplomacy among the major powers who are EAS members. This is not unexpected, as Southeast Asia is a frontline region for China's vaccine diplomacy,¹⁰ and the focus for the Quad Vaccine Partnership.¹¹ However, it shows that while the EAS assembles the main characters, the real action is elsewhere.

There has been no shortage of effort to strengthen the EAS' efficacy and efficiency over the past 15 years, especially around milestone anniversaries. During the EAS' tenth anniversary year in 2015, there was a major stock-taking and review of the EAS with active participation. Of innovative inputs coming from the EAS' dialogue partner members, only a few of have been implemented, such as the establishment of the EAS Unit within the ASEAN Secretariat¹² and the EAS Ambassadors Meeting in Jakarta (EAMJ)¹³ to facilitate coordination within the EAS on a regular basis. Other efforts to strengthen the EAS' institutional capacity include the setting up of the EAS Foreign Ministers Meeting and EAS ministerial mechanisms in the economic, finance, energy, environment and education sectors.

However, these institutional reinforcements have had little impact in lifting the EAS out of its default leader-level 'talk shop' mode. So far, there has been no serious attempt to overhaul the EAS structure to preserve its "Leaders-led" nature and to manage overlaps with other ASEAN-led mechanisms in functional cooperation, including the ASEAN+3, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus).

As the only multilateral platform that brings together the leaders of Southeast Asian countries and other major powers to discuss issues of strategic significance to the region, the EAS' leaders-led nature is highly prized by all of its members. However, while EAS leaders' discussions can be frank and heated at times, it is also true that the leaders often read their set-piece talking points and hardly engage in interactive dialogue. Related to this is the persistent concern on a yearly basis over the attendance of the US president at the EAS. Washington's presence adds critical strategic weight to the forum, but US presidents' sporadic engagement has time and again raised legitimate questions about US commitment to ASEAN multilateralism and doubts about the relevance and credibility of the EAS itself.

DIALOGUE PARTNER DEVELOPMENTS

President Donald Trump's decision not to attend any EAS plenary session deepened these latter concerns over the last four years. White House confirmation that President Joe Biden will attend the 2021 EAS would be most welcome. The almost complete absence of Russia's and China's top leaders¹⁴ from the EAS has not triggered such criticism and concern, suggesting either the paramount importance of the US to the EAS or what increasingly looks like a double standard on the part of ASEAN with regard to these major powers.

Under President Vladimir Putin and President Xi Jinping, political power in Russia and China has become increasingly personalised, and each leader looks likely to remain in their current positions for the foreseeable future. Hence, the Russian prime minister/foreign minister and Chinese premier are increasingly less suitable representatives at the "leaders-level" EAS. Putin and Xi's continued absence, combined with their regular participation in APEC Economic Leaders Meetings and G-20 Summits, threatens to erode ASEAN centrality claims and the EAS' peak position in the regional strategic architecture.

The changing nature of relations between ASEAN dialogue partners in the EAS pose two more concerns that challenge both faces of the EAS' identity. Relations between the US, Russia and China are increasingly defined by contestation and confrontation, not cooperation, as are China's relations with Japan, India, and Australia. At the same time, relations between Russia and China have become more defined by cooperation in their overlapping rivalries with the US specifically, and with "the West" more generally.¹⁵

This greater Russia-China cooperation and China's more confrontational relations with the US, Japan, India and Australia are already undermining the ASEAN-led architecture with the EAS at the peak along with its constituent units. In 2015, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Plus, a ministerial-level structure in the ASEAN-led regional architecture with the same membership as the EAS, failed to release its planned joint statement due to US-China disagreements over the mention of South China Sea disputes.¹⁶ In 2020, Russia and China's opposition to the term "Indo-Pacific" – including even reference to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) – was a key stumbling block in the drafting of the Hanoi Declaration on the 15th Anniversary of the EAS.

Putin and Xi's respective hold on political power in Russia and China, and deepening public concern in the US, Japan, India and Australia with regard to China's international behaviour make this unpeaceful strategic environment likely to persist. ASEAN's commitment to open inclusive regionalism and "neutrality" in the deepening and more active rivalries among ASEAN dialogue partners in the EAS risk the EAS leaders-level meetings becoming more adversarial, and therefore less interactive and cooperative. This would further undermine the EAS' ability to provide concrete outcomes for shared concerns.

These same growing major power rivalries make smaller, more exclusive leaders-level and ministerial-level arrangements among like-minded or like-threatened states more attractive. The revival of the Quad at the senior officials' level in 2017, its elevation to a meeting of foreign ministers in 2019, and its further elevation to the same leaders' summit level as the EAS in 2021 provide the best but not only example of the less inclusive but more responsive diplomatic architecture that is being built and retrofitted outside of the ASEAN-led multilateral one.

Other structures in this alternative architecture include the elevation and broadening of the Five Eyes intelligence sharing network between the US, Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand,¹⁷ and discussions on expanding the Group of Seven (G7) leaders-level forum to include India, Australia and South Korea. The threat posed by Russia and China's more aggressive international behaviour clearly provides many of the building blocks for this emerging architecture that does not include any ASEAN member state. The growing strategic partnership between Russia and China illuminated by the growing interaction between Putin and Xi is another, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that includes Cambodia as a dialogue partner could become one as well.¹⁸ Russia and China's growing rivalries with the US specifically and "the West" more generally provide many of the building blocks for these latter two.

LEADERS-LED TO WHERE?

As the architect and the driver of the EAS, ASEAN needs to face up to the erosion challenges facing this Leaders-led forum position "at the apex of the ASEAN-centred regional architecture".¹⁹ Simply repeating this tired mantra barely helps the EAS respond to the sharpening and broadening geopolitical rivalries among its dialogue partner members and address human security challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. To maintain the EAS' relevance going forward, the EAS' capacity to deliver results through concrete actions needs strengthening. It needs to go beyond being simply "Leaders-led" in order to answer the central question that has dogged it since inception: "Leaders-led to where?"

For this, ASEAN's comprehensive approach to security is instructive. The distinction between political-security and economic-development issues has become less clear-cut as all issues from health security to supply chain resilience, infrastructure development and energy security now affect both political power at home and geopolitical influence abroad. This provides a fitting vista for ASEAN – as the agenda setter – to present a more focused and action-oriented EAS agenda that corresponds to prevailing regional and global challenges. Instead of drafting multiple statements with only aspirational objectives and general prescriptions, ASEAN's diplomatic capital should be better invested in mobilising collective action that delivers regional public goods. One recent example of this capability was the launch of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations at the 7th EAS in November 2012 (although the RCEP is not an EAS process per se, given the absence of the US and Russia, and India at its later stage).

ASEAN should send a strong message to its dialogue partner members – especially the US, China and Russia – that they must live up to their statements of supporting ASEAN's centrality with actions, not simply words. These actions include not only their participation in the annual EAS at the highest level but also their active support for ASEAN initiatives.

The EAS needs to function as an arena where the major powers compete when they must and collaborate when they should and could, especially on shared human security concerns. As such, the next critical test is for ASEAN to leverage the EAS – which comprises all the major powers that have influence on Myanmar, namely China, Russia, India and Japan – to persuade the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's armed forces) to stop violence and resolve the country's political crisis through dialogue and peaceful means.

More ambitiously, ASEAN should engage with the emerging alternative architecture, rather than consider the ASEAN-led architecture in exclusive and solely defensive terms. In 2005, the ASEAN Secretariat signed a memorandum of understanding with the Secretariat of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation despite this body's clearly anti-US potential. ASEAN could likewise engage with the Quad Vaccine Partnership and its strategic perception of Southeast Asia. If ASEAN fails to do so collectively, individual Southeast Asian states should not miss this opportunity to increase their access to badly needed Covid-19 vaccines. This splintering would not bode well for ASEAN centrality and the EAS.

¹ Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: 'The Spirit of the Quad', 13 March 2021,

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<https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2089727/aseans-myanmar-crisis-out-of-control>

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⁴ Quad Summit fact Sheet, 12 March 2021, <https://www.pm.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/quad-summit-fact%20Sheet.pdf>

⁵ Final Report of the East Asia Study Group at the ASEAN+3 Summit, 4 November 2002,

<https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/asean/pmv0211/report.pdf>

⁶ Rodolfo C. Severion, *Southeast Asia in Search of an ASEAN Community: Insights from the former ASEAN Secretary-General*, 2006 Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, pp. 269-273

⁷ Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the East Asia Summit, 14 December 2005,

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⁸ Ralf Emmers, Joseph Chinyong Liow and See Seng Tan, *The East Asia Summit and the Regional Security Architecture*, Maryland Series in Contemporary Asian Studies, Number 3 – 2010 (202),

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⁹ East Asia Summit Leaders' Statement on Strengthening Collective Capacity in Epidemics

Prevention and Response, 14 November 2020, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/11/32-EAS-Leaders-Statement-on-Strengthening-Collective-Capacity-in-Epidemics-Prevention-and-Response-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁰ Koya Jibiki and Tsukasa Hadano, "China pushes 'vaccine diplomacy' in Southeast Asia", *Nikkei Asia Review*, 16 January 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/China-pushes-vaccine-diplomacy-in-Southeast-Asia>

¹¹ US Embassy in Malaysia, Fact Sheet: The Quad Vaccine Partnership, 12 March 2021,

<https://my.usembassy.gov/fact-sheet-the-quad-vaccine-partnership/>

¹² This EAS Unit comprises one Assistant Director (who covers also the ASEAN Plus Three and ASEAN's dialogue relations with the Plus Three countries), two Senior Officers and one Technical Officer, all of whom must be Southeast Asian nationals.

¹³ Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the 10th Anniversary of the East Asia Summit, 22 November 2015,

<http://eastiasummit.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Kuala-Lumpur-Declaration-on-The-Tenth-Anniversary-of-The-East-Asia-Summit.pdf>

¹⁴ The division of labour of Chinese leadership in foreign relations portfolio has the President attend the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting, and the Premier attend ASEAN-related summits. Except in 2018, Russia has never been represented at the EAS at the highest presidential level.

¹⁵ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, "Navigating the deepening Russia-China partnership"

CNAS, January 2021, <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS-Report-Russia-China-Alignment-final-v2.pdf?mtime=20210114133035&focal=none> ; "China-Russia

cooperation has no upper limits", *Global Times*, 22 March 2021,

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1219115.shtml>

¹⁶ “No joint statement as US, China clash over wording on South China Sea”, *Today*, 5 November 2015, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/no-signing-joint-declaration-asean-defense-forum>

¹⁷ Ben Scott, “Five Eyes: Blurring the lines between intelligence and policy”, 27 July 2020, *Lowy Interpreter*, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/five-eyes-blurring-lines-between-intelligence-and-policy>

¹⁸ Alexander Lukin, “Shanghai Cooperation Organization: looking for a new role, Valdai Papers, 9 June 2015, https://valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/valdai_paper_special_issue_shanghai_cooperation_organization_looking_for_a_new_role/

¹⁹ Ha Noi Declaration on the 15th Anniversary of the East Asia Summit, 15 November 2020, <https://asean.org/storage/2020/11/29-Ha-Noi-Declaration-on-the-15th-Anniversary-of-the-EAS-FINAL.pdf>

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