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How the East Asia Summit Can Achieve its Potential

*By Nick Bisley and Malcolm Cook**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The leaders-level East Asia Summit (EAS) has yet to develop a clear identity or meaningful policy traction and risks marginalization in the region's expanding architecture.
- ASEAN, with Malaysia as chair, will undertake a 10-year review of the East Asia Summit in 2015 and a growing number of EAS members are pushing for the Summit to become a more "important integral component of the regional architecture."
- The EAS needs to be clearly identified as the peak forum on East Asian regionalism focusing on strategic issues and should establish clear links to other components of the regional architecture that can operationalize the agreed vision.
- Greater institutional support is needed to ensure the EAS maintains momentum between Summits and has the means to develop and coordinate policy initiatives.

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WHAT THE PROBLEM IS

The regional security environment in Asia is presently at its most complex since the normalization of Sino-American relations in the 1970s. More effective and inclusive regional security cooperation is vital to manage this challenging context; and the East Asia Summit (EAS) is well placed to provide this necessary public good. It is the only leaders-level regional grouping that involves all the key major and middle ranking powers in the region; it reflects ASEAN centrality; and from its inception in 2005 has had the mandate from ASEAN to be “a forum for dialogue on broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest and concern with the aim of promoting peace, stability and economic prosperity in East Asia.”

However, the EAS has so far failed to deliver on this potential. In its first ten years, the EAS failed to become the premier regional forum. As Chu Shulong warned in 2007, if the Summit continues as it was then, “then most likely it will not develop into anything more than just a ‘talk shop,’ and it will be neither as productive as ASEAN Plus Three nor as prestigious as APEC.”¹ Even its most basic appeal, as a regular gathering of the region’s leaders, may fade.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE

ASEAN’s plans for a 10-year review of the EAS provides an ideal opportunity to revisit its role and position. Given the proliferation of ASEAN-based, functionally-oriented regional processes of cooperation as well as those that are separate from ASEAN, it is vital that the Summit develop a clear and distinctive role for itself. Equally important, it needs to determine how it should relate to those other mechanisms and processes. This should be a priority task of the 2015 review. To enhance this sense of purpose, and to minimize agenda drift and the chances of entanglement with these processes – two problems facing all inter-state bodies in East Asia – the EAS’ existing priority areas of action should be revised and narrowed. Also, the EAS should bolster its institutional support by establishing a dedicated Track Two network. The network could help develop policy ideas and manage the complex diplomacy around collaborative leadership in the region. It would benefit from the lessons learnt from existing Track Two processes affiliated with ASEAN-led institutions and APEC.

¹ Shulong Chu, “The East Asia Summit: Looking for an Identity”, *Brookings East Asia Commentary No. 6*, November 2007; <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2007/02/northeastasia-chu> Backing up Chu’s point about comparative prestige, China’s President attends APEC while China’s Premier attends the EAS.

UNSTABLE ORDER

The global security order is experiencing a structural transformation centred on East Asia (as defined by the membership of the East Asia Summit). This involves the diffusion of economic and strategic power globally with the re-emergence of China and India; the decline of Japan and Europe; and the challenge to US strategic primacy in the region. The Cold War provided a stable and simple bipolar global structure within which East Asian states organized their security and foreign policies. ASEAN's membership reflected the Cold War division of Southeast Asia while the lack of effective regional forums in East Asia resulted from the powerful disincentives against inclusive regional security cooperation of those times.

The end of the Cold War removed this adversarial but stable global order while the shift of global economic and strategic power now means that how East Asian states organize their strategic affairs will increasingly shape global security. These changes are creating a complex array of forces, some of which are driving a more unstable context while others are more conducive toward the kind of inclusive security cooperation on which a stable regional order can be built.

Destabilisers

- As anticipated by theorists,² the speed and scope of the power transition centred on East Asia is transforming relations between the rising major powers, China and India, and the previously more powerful ones, the United States and Japan. India's growing capacity, its ambition and increasing interest in East Asia have deepened and diversified India's strategic relations with the United States and Japan. The opposite is largely true when it comes to China's strategic relations with the United States and Japan.

The US has been the region's pre-eminent power for decades, and has a wide range of alliance and security partners who depend on it for their security. The speed and scale of China's rise, its ambition and authoritarian political system and its economic ties to so many mean that the US-China strategic relationship is the most important facet of the power transition process. The stability of US-China relations during the second half of the Cold War was crucial to Asia's stability. Now an increasing number in East Asia fear the opposite. High-level voices in Beijing regularly describe the US alliance system in the region as a Cold War anachronism. Washington in turn is rebalancing its strategic policy toward Asia with a focus on strengthening and expanding this network. This is indicative of the increasingly competitive basis of current US-China strategic relations and their regional ramifications.

- East Asia's long-standing territorial disputes are flaring up and becoming a more central part of bilateral and regional relations in the region. This is a symptom of an increasingly competitive region and is fuelling a sense of regional insecurity. With the

² A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Steve Chan, *China, the US and the Power-Transition Theory: A Critique* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

modernization and expansion of its white hull and grey hull fleets and its more assertive defence of its sovereign claims, China is the focus of much of the concern. Yet, Japan's disputes with South Korea and to a lesser extent Russia have also flared up with corresponding policy responses. The China-Japan dispute is the most threatening. Both are major powers with advanced war fighting capabilities and Japan's administration of the disputed islands draws the US into the strategic calculus because of the US-Japan security treaty.

Stabilisers

- Non-military threats to national and regional security are a growing focus of regional states' strategic and defence policy and of defence force deployment nationally and regionally. These non-traditional security issues range are diverse and range across many ministerial portfolios, and tend to require inter-state cooperation to be addressed. Indeed, the line between traditional and non-military security threats is becoming increasingly blurred. These shared interests provide a promising basis for cooperation even when relations among like-affected states are riven by traditional security concerns. South Korea's quick and significant contribution to Japan's triple disaster in March 2011 and China's membership in the Japanese-led ReCAAP³ grouping for regional coast guard cooperation are two examples of this.
- While the strategic environment is more unstable than during the Cold War, the region's high level of economic integration and interdependence and broader social connections among almost all East Asian states, and most particularly major powers, are stabilizing forces. There is no existential ideological battle among East Asian states and major powers nor are relations in the region being used as proxies in any global competition or conflict. East Asian states are freer now to develop a regional security order and have greater incentives to try to ensure that does not become an adversarial one.

EAS AND REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE

This combination of factors has sparked a sustained institution-building boom in East Asia. During the Cold War, this landscape was basically barren whereas today it is crowded with new institutions being built or planned almost annually with different mandates and memberships.⁴ ASEAN, in fulfilling its member-states' commitment to enhancing ASEAN centrality and connecting its individual dialogue partner relations, has been a lead developer. This started in 1994 with the foreign minister-level ASEAN Regional Forum focused on regional security cooperation and confidence-building.

It was followed in 1997 by the economically-focused ASEAN+3 process and then by the broader East Asia Summit founded some eight years later. More recently, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Plus process and senior official-level Expanded ASEAN Maritime

³ ReCAAP stands for The Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia. <http://www.recaap.org/>

⁴ See Nick Bisley, *Building Asia's Security* (London: Routledge for IISS, 2009, Adelphi No. 408).

Forum were established. Beyond ASEAN, APEC, ReCAAP, the Proliferation Security Initiative and China's promotion of CICA⁵ are responding to these factors in different ways.

The expansion of the EAS in 2011 to include the United States and Russia gives it the best chance to become the lead institution in the East Asian skyline. It was established to reconcile ASEAN's aims to remain central to Asia's multilateralism and the broader need to involve the region's major powers in institutional efforts to shape the post-Cold War East Asian order. Yet from its very inception, the EAS has been constrained in its influence because of the bargain struck between ASEAN centrality and major power involvement.

Birth pains

Growing Japan-China competition shaped the nature and functioning of the EAS from its very beginning. China favoured a smaller leaders-level summit featuring only the 10 ASEAN member-states and China, Japan and South Korea brought together by the ASEAN+3 process. Japan pushed for a wider forum including India, Australia and New Zealand with scope for further expansion.⁶ ASEAN member-states were split between these two membership options with the one supported by Japan adopted due to concerns about Chinese predominance in the smaller forum. At the time of the formation of the EAS, the ASEAN+3 process was identified by its members as the 'main vehicle' for East Asian community-building. The Summit's place in the expanding regional architecture and its relation with the ASEAN+3 process as well as other mechanisms like APEC has been uncertain, to say the least. The fact that the key component of the EAS, the summit itself, is limited to one afternoon and is largely taken up by set-piece speeches by each member-state the contents of which are primarily directed at domestic audiences, has not helped overcome this foundational problem.

Identity Questions

Further aggravating the situation, the role of the EAS has not been clearly defined operationally leading to the dual problems of agenda drift and overlap with other institutions both new and old. The EAS presently has an uneasy existence as a forum for leaders' discussion of strategic issues, as well as a body driving a growing array of functional areas of cooperation. It has established working groups and projects linked to six disparate priority areas – regional economic and financial integration, education, regional disaster response, energy and environment, health and connectivity – spanning the divide between economics and security understood in the non-military sense. Individual EAS summits have further complicated the picture by making declarations and launching initiatives beyond the six priority areas on issues like food security and development. All this overlaps in a messy and uncoordinated fashion with non-EAS

⁵ CICA stands for the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia. <http://www.cica-china.org/eng/>

⁶ Australia, New Zealand and Singapore are not members of the CICA, while the United States, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines are only observers. (http://www.cica-china.org/eng/gyyx_1/yxcyg/)

processes including the ASEAN Regional Forum and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum's focus on disaster response and the well-advanced ASEAN+3 cooperation on regional financial integration.

Being Uninstitutionalized

The EAS is very weakly institutionalized, particularly when it comes to its ability to address regional strategic and security concerns. The Summit has no Secretariat (not even within the ASEAN Secretariat), no annual budget, or membership fees to support its expanding agenda and to help ensure coherence and continuity. Predominantly funded by Japan's Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry, the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) provides an effective and permanent policy support role for the regional economic and financial integration pillar and has set up a network of research institutes among the 16 original EAS members. ERIA tilts the EAS towards a functional focus on regional economic issues where APEC, the ASEAN+3 process and the ASEAN-based RCEP and US-led TPP trade negotiations are already much more advanced than the EAS' policy efforts in this area. With the exception of ERIA, the EAS is under-institutionalized even if it served simply as originally intended as a regional forum to discuss strategic issues.

REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS

There is clear interest across the region to renew the EAS. ASEAN's decision to initiate a 10-year EAS review in 2015, Malaysia's proposal for the EAS to focus more on Search and Rescue⁷, and Prime Minister Abe's call for a permanent committee to renew the vitality of the Summit itself and link it to the ARF and ADMM⁸ are some of the high profile examples of member-states seeing the need for the EAS to live up to its founding mandate. There is clearly an appetite among many EAS members for a more effective peak regional forum. There are four reforms in particular that should inform efforts to revitalize the EAS over the next year.

- Reaffirm the EAS' role as the ASEAN-based leaders' forum to discuss regional issues of strategic importance. In this spirit, leaders at the EAS can provide clear guidance for priorities, direction and monitoring of the ASEAN-led functional bodies at a lower level than the EAS such as the ADMM+ process, the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum and, with sensitivity towards its larger membership, the ARF. ReCAAP and other non-ASEAN-based organizations led by EAS members could equally be brought under EAS guidance as well. This would entrench a role for the EAS appropriate to its level of membership and help address the worsening overlap among regional institutions.

⁷ Prime Minister Najib Razak, Speech at the National Colloquium on Malaysian Chairmanship of ASEAN 2015, Doubletree by Hilton Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, 8 April 2014.

⁸ Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Shangri-La Dialogue 2014 Keynote Address, Singapore, 30 May 2014.

- As the primary regional leaders' forum, the EAS should develop a series of priority issues on which to focus collaborative efforts. In the first instance, energy security and maritime security (including issues broader than disaster relief) show the most promise. Energy security is an area on which the EAS has focused since its inception, which is of vital interest to all EAS members and one where other regional bodies have little track record. Maritime security would allow the EAS to shape a vital area of concern for the region given the importance to all of maritime trade of goods and energy. It would also provide a structure to manage its relations with the ADMM+ process and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum reflecting the leaders-level qualities of the EAS, the ADMM+ as a ministerial grouping and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum as a senior official-level one. Governments are organized hierarchically with leaders at the top, so regional organizations should follow the same basic logic. A focus on maritime security would also allow the EAS to address the core issue of precluding the establishment of a stable cooperative regional order where member-states invest in new military and proto-military capabilities in ways that suggest the development of a China-centred security complex.⁹
- To support the development of policy initiatives in line with these two focus areas, and to help manage the diplomatic challenges of leadership within a leaders' level forum, the EAS should consider establishing a Track Two network linked to the Summit process. The initiative would, benefitting from the experience of CSCAP's work¹⁰ with the ASEAN Regional Forum as well as ERIA's relative success, help the EAS advance work in these two central policy areas in between leaders meetings. An effective way of doing this would be to establish a network of research institutes among the 18 EAS member-states focusing on these two non-traditional security areas that would convene high-level working groups to provide intellectual input into the annual Summits and establish an underlying structure of support for the work of the EAS while avoiding the more cumbersome qualities of international bureaucracies. The network could be formally linked to a permanent committee of the kind suggested by Prime Minister Abe.
- Given that eight of the eighteen EAS members are not members of ASEAN, including all the region's major powers, ASEAN centrality could be creatively reinterpreted to facilitate a more dynamic policy environment. This has worked in the past with CSCAP and more recently with the cooperative exercises in the ADMM+ process and the ARF. EAS membership is very intimately bound up with ASEAN's processes and values – only ASEAN dialogue partners and states that have signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation can be invited by the ASEAN foreign ministers to the EAS. Shinzo Abe's idea of establishing a permanent committee of the 18 members' representatives to ASEAN that is linked to the summit could help ease this limitation and strengthen non-ASEAN member commitment to the EAS. A second way to do this is to establish

⁹ On the concept of security complex see Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ CSCAP stands for the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific.

<http://www.cscap.org/>

a practice of 'co-sponsorship' of EAS initiatives by an ASEAN member-state and non-ASEAN members.

Rivalry among the major powers is becoming ever more pronounced. Long-standing territorial disputes are becoming increasingly militarized, defence expenditure is on the rise and non-traditional security concerns such as terrorism continue to worry states and peoples. East Asia needs improved collaboration among all its states and this is plainly recognized by the calls for reform and revitalization made across the EAS membership. The Summit has remarkable potential, but its ability to live up to this is dependent on the EAS developing a sharper sense of purpose; maintaining a clear division of labour with the other elements of the regional security architecture; and establishing the means to develop policy initiatives and political momentum between the actual summits.

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