



East Asia Summit: The Path from Base Camp

by Matthew P. Goodman

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Fresh off his reelection to a second term as US president, Barack Obama sets out this month on a trip to Southeast Asia that will include a historic visit to Myanmar (Burma). While that stop will understandably get most of the attention, the two days in Cambodia bear watching as well. After meeting with the leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Phnom Penh on Nov. 19, the president will attend his second East Asia Summit (EAS) the following day. This event is central to the strategy he articulated one year ago of “rebalancing” US foreign policy toward the vital Asia-Pacific region. Unlike last year, when just showing up was accomplishment enough, the measure of success at this year’s EAS will be the president’s ability to nudge forward a concrete, if modest, agenda that demonstrates the US commitment to institution-building in Asia and advances US interests there.

The EAS is the outermost ring of a complex Venn diagram of “ASEAN-plus” institutions, which bring together the 10 countries of the strategically important Southeast Asian region with other Asia-Pacific powers, including China, Japan, India, and the United States. The EAS was first convened in 2005 following a tussle between China, which favored the existing ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, Korea) formulation as the locus for regional cooperation, and Japan, which wanted to mute Chinese influence in Asia-Pacific institution building by bringing other major democracies – India, Australia, and New Zealand – into a broader regional conversation. Japan won that debate, and the EAS was formed as a de facto ASEAN+6. The United States and Russia were invited to join the group in 2010, and President Obama attended his first EAS in Bali, Indonesia, in November 2011.

The EAS mission can be politely described as “indistinct.” The formal agenda consists of a smorgasbord of relatively noncontroversial issues on which the participants, in the “ASEAN way,” seek to promote greater cooperation. Five topics are on the main menu: education, energy and environment, disaster management, pandemic diseases, and finance. In addition, over the past several summits, the group has had side conversations on trade integration and “connectivity” – ASEAN’s aspiration to tie together its expansive region via transportation, communications, and other links.

Last year’s decision by the Obama administration to commit the president to regularly attending another Asian

“talk shop” was not taken lightly. The White House had a lengthy debate over the merits of adding a second Asian trip to the president’s annual calendar, in addition to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) gathering that presidents have attended since 1993. But in the end a strategic calculation was made that participation in this embryonic institution would send a strong message of US commitment to the Asia-Pacific region. It would also fill a gap in the regional architecture, allowing for leader-level discussion of key political and security challenges in the region – something that was effectively impossible without the United States in the room.

In the run-up to Bali, the administration worked to shape the agenda, first by offering US experience and capabilities to beef up the forum’s existing work on disaster response. Washington adopted a position of “benign neglect” toward most of the other items on the EAS agenda, notably finance and trade. It then proposed two new items for the EAS agenda: nonproliferation and maritime security. It argued that these were the kinds of high-priority regional challenges that all EAS members shared an interest in working cooperatively to address. Despite some resistance from China and others, Washington was successful in getting those issues on the agenda at Bali. Indeed, at the summit itself, 16 of the 18 leaders around the table resoundingly reaffirmed the importance of international norms such as freedom of navigation, respect for international law, and peaceful resolution of disputes; even Chinese premier Wen Jiabao was forced to join the chorus after nearly every other leader had voiced his support.

The path to this year’s summit will be steeper. Against the backdrop of tensions in both the East and South China Seas, and a disastrous ASEAN Ministerial Meeting last summer at which the group failed for the first time to reach consensus on a joint communique, Cambodia’s ability to engineer a productive EAS meeting this month is uncertain. And there may be awkward moments for President Obama in Phnom Penh, including a final encounter with outgoing Premier Wen and the launch of a new “Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership” (RCEP) by the ASEAN+6 countries i.e., everyone present except the United States and Russia.

But the trip also presents the Obama administration with a number of opportunities: to show the love to ASEAN, to reprise last year’s discussion in Bali about international norms, and, critically, to put flesh on the bones of its strategy of rebalancing to Asia. Partners in the region are looking for Washington to demonstrate the sustainability of the “pivot” through not only words but actions – and not just in the military realm but across the breadth of US political, security, and economic interests in the region.

To this end, the administration should seek agreement on a number of concrete steps that build on the achievements at

last year's EAS. In the security realm, it should continue to press China and ASEAN to make progress toward a formal code of conduct for the South China Sea. It should propose new training and capacity-building efforts to enhance maritime domain awareness, counter piracy and illicit trafficking, and improve disaster response capabilities in the region. And it should urge more Asian countries to sign the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)'s Additional Protocol to strengthen nonproliferation safeguards.

On economic issues, while US interests are better served for now through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and APEC than through the more amorphous RCEP, the administration should find other tangible ways to contribute to the regional impulse for deeper economic integration. It should work via the EAS to infuse ASEAN-based trade initiatives with the high standard disciplines it is pursuing in TPP. It should also propose joint work on a narrow but important part of the financial integration agenda – say, strengthening domestic bond markets.

The areas of focus matter less than taking modest but measurable steps toward higher-level objectives such as reinforcing international security norms or liberalizing trade. This will kill several birds with one stone: giving substance to the rhetoric of rebalancing; promoting a more stable and prosperous Asia; enhancing the credibility of the EAS – and, by dint of all that, sustaining White House interest in the forum and Asian institution-building more broadly.

These are things that Washington's Asian partners want too. Their aversion to the kind of specificity and "edginess" Americans typically bring to regional policy discussions can be overstated. Yes, the administration must be careful not to force Asians to choose between China and the United States – but an even worse choice for them would be between an America that wants to help shape regional affairs and one that cannot be bothered.

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