



The East Asia Summit: Should Washington Be Concerned? by Ralph A. Cossa

The first East Asia Summit (EAS) begins on Wednesday (Dec 14) in Kuala Lumpur. It brings together heads of government from the ten ASEAN countries, their "Plus Three" partners (China, Japan, and South Korea), plus India, Australia, and New Zealand. Russian President Vladimir Putin has also been invited to meet with the group, even though Russia is not yet a member. The U.S., on the other hand, is specifically excluded; should Washington be worried?

The quick answer is "no." In fact, it is not clear that Washington even desires a seat at the EAS table – getting President Bush to two Asian summits in four weeks would have been no mean feat. (He attended the APEC Leaders Meeting in South Korea in mid-November.) Nonetheless, Washington will and should be watching the deliberations closely to see if certain members attempt to move this embryonic organization in a direction that runs contrary to U.S. interests. Washington remains interested in the composition of the group, the criteria for membership, and most importantly (and still largely undefined), its mission, objectives, and priorities.

It is important to put this latest attempt at creating a sense of East Asia regionalism into context. No one seems to be promoting or anticipating a European Union-type arrangement. Attempts by Indonesia over the past two years to make the ten Southeast Asian states that comprise ASEAN into a more coherent community – through the establishment of an ASEAN Security Community, an ASEAN Economic Community, and an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community – have shown just how difficult it is to get these nations (some of whom have been closely aligned for over 30 years) to think and act as one, especially in the security arena.

Developing a lowest common denominator for security cooperation among these ten diverse nations is difficult enough; imagine adding China, Japan, and South Korea – who refuse to even hold a side meeting in Kuala Lumpur – much less the others, to the mix. If current established multilateral community-building mechanisms, such as ASEAN, ASEAN Plus Three (A+3), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) "gathering of economies" are any indication of the willingness of these countries to seriously address issues of East Asia regionalism (and the "interference in one another's internal affairs" that true regional governance requires), one should not expect much progress soon.

Nor is it clear that the EAS is destined to become the foundation upon which an eventual East Asia Community will be built. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, who planted the seeds for this community, has made it clear that he believes that Australia and New Zealand have no place in it

and a debate is currently raging among the participants (to be settled at the inaugural meeting?) as to whether the EAS will be a one-off or at best an every two or three year event, with the more exclusive A+3 gathering providing the real base for the East Asia Community.

Criteria for full participation in the EAS included a willingness to accede to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). This was seen as an effort to keep Washington and Australia out. Canberra unexpectedly announced that it was prepared to join the TAC, causing the others to begrudgingly extend an invitation; the U.S. has not. This leads to the argument (ulterior motives notwithstanding) that Washington was not excluded from the EAS but rather chose to exclude itself.

How an East Asian community relates to the region's other multilateral organizations and initiatives – both institutionalize (like the ARF and APEC) and ad hoc (like the Six-Party Talks and the Proliferation Security Initiative) – will also be a key factor affecting Washington's attitude, as will its adoption of global norms, especially in the areas of counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation, and the promotion of human rights or human security. Will the EAS (or A+3, for that matter) reinforce or dilute these efforts? Will it help regional states more effectively address growing transnational challenges . . . or provide another excuse for avoiding such efforts? The answers to these questions will help determine Washington's attitude toward the EAS and any subsequent East Asian Community.

At present, Washington wisely appears to be taking a "wait and see" approach toward the inaugural EAS to see how it differs from or builds upon the A+3. Much will depend on how (if) the EAS evolves and how it interacts both with the United States and with the institutions that Washington actively participates in and supports. To the extent this new grouping signals its willingness to coexist with Washington, and is not seen as threatening or attempting to undermine Washington's bilateral alliances, its own central role in East Asian security affairs, or the broader Asia-Pacific regional institutions in which it participates, there is little reason to expect objections from Washington or a serious effort to discourage or derail this or any other regional community building efforts.

Serious questions remain about the prospects for (and intentions of) East Asia community-building efforts. How do members of this community – whoever they may be – define the relationship between Asia-only mechanisms such as the EAS or A+3 and broader efforts such as the ARF and APEC? Which type efforts will receive pride of place? Clearly it does not have to be "either-or." But, where will the focus and bulk of the effort be? Will the outcomes and efforts be mutually reinforcing? Will the "Asia for Asians" effort help set the

stage for and supplement (or even advance) the broader dialogue or will it be used as an excuse for inaction? If the former, how does one create avenues of interaction between East Asian and Asia-Pacific mechanisms to enhance their mutually supporting roles?

The other basic shortcoming of current East Asia community building efforts is that they conveniently pretend that the 23 million people of Taiwan do not exist or are not represented by a separate political entity. Even at the non-government, track two level, Taiwan finds itself increasingly marginalized and isolated as Beijing reaches out to opposition leaders but shuns the democratically-elected representatives of the people of Taiwan. Can you have a true East Asian Community when one of the region's most vibrant economics is specifically excluded?

Until the answers to these questions become clear, it will be difficult to determine the prospects for the creation of a genuine East Asia Community and/or Washington's receptivity to this effort. Meanwhile, East Asia community building, with or without Washington, is not going to be easy, witness rising nationalism in Japan, China, and South Korea. Unless and until all three can more effectively channel or control their respective nationalist tendencies, it is difficult to image a true East Asian community taking shape.

Ralph A. Cossa is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS. For more on this topic, see "The Emerging East Asian Community: Should Washington be Concerned?" Issues & Insights No. 9 - 05 (August, 2005), available at www.csis.org/pacfor