



## **The East Asia Summit: Much Ado About Something?** by Ralph A. Cossa

Was the inaugural East Asia Summit (EAS), held in Kuala Lumpur on Dec. 14, “much ado about nothing,” as many critics are already claiming, or “a historic event whose future impact is likely to be as significant as the first [1976] ASEAN summit,” as Barry Desker, head of Singapore’s influential Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, argues? [PacNet 55B]

The answer is: it’s too soon to say. While it remains unclear what the EAS will eventually become, it is already quite clear what it will not be: it will not form the base of the much-heralded but still dormant East Asia Community. That role will remain with the more exclusive ASEAN Plus Three (A+3) gathering, comprised of the 10 Southeast Asian states plus China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. It is also highly doubtful that it will, or wants to, pose a threat to U.S. interests.

The EAS host, Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, made it abundantly clear that the 10 ASEAN countries and their Plus Three partners constituted the core, noting that “You are talking about a community of East Asians; I don’t know how the Australians could regard themselves as East Asians, or the New Zealanders for that matter.” “We are not talking about members of the community,” Badawi continued, even though Australia, New Zealand, and “our immediate neighbor” India have “common interests in what is happening in the region.” The architects of East Asia community-building, he clearly inferred, would all be Asians, with the A+3 (vice EAS) participants providing the base. The EAS would provide a vehicle for outsiders to endorse the process; it “could play a significant role,” but would not drive the process.

For his part, Australian Prime Minister John Howard, while noting that the EAS had “exceeded my expectations,” argued that the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum rather than the EAS or A+3 should remain “the premier body.” APEC, he noted, has the “great advantage” of including the United States. I would note that it also includes Taiwan (a.k.a., Chinese Taipei) – another “great advantage” – but excludes several of the lesser developed ASEAN states, including Myanmar (which from Washington’s perspective may be yet another plus).

The Chairman’s Statement underscores, twice, that ASEAN will be the “driving force” behind East Asian community-building. The KL Declaration on the Summit declares that future meetings “will be hosted and chaired by an ASEAN Member Country . . . and be held back-to-back with the annual ASEAN Summit.” Beijing had suggested that it host the second round but ASEAN remains as concerned about sharing driving privileges with its other community members

as it does allowing outsiders a greater say in the community-building process.

The Chairman’s Statement and KL Declaration both acknowledge that building an East Asia community is “a long term goal,” indicating that first priority will go toward building “a strong ASEAN Community which will serve as a solid foundation for our common peace and prosperity.” This should make Indonesia happy – Jakarta, which had previously put forth its own proposals for building an ASEAN Community, had believed that pushing for the EAS was premature. (Prime Minister Badawi had been the primary proponent of the EAS, apparently catching Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (among others) by surprise when he pushed for the EAS at last year’s summit in Vientiane, but that was before Australia and New Zealand were added to the mix, which clearly curbed his enthusiasm.)

In an apparent attempt to address one of Washington’s potential concerns about this new regional grouping, the KL Declaration noted that the EAS would be “an open, inclusive, transparent, and outward-looking forum in which we strive to strengthen global norms and universally recognized values.” Washington’s membership would still require it to accede to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), something the Bush administration (like its predecessors) has been reluctant to do. Observer status appears possible, however (and is more likely to be sought by Washington).

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao seemed to be opening the door for this when he noted that the EAS should “welcome the participation of Russia” – President Putin made an appearance at the summit but Russia membership will not be decided until next year – and that it “should strengthen contact with the United States, the European Union, and other countries.” Wen stressed that the EAS would not be “closed, exclusive, or directed against any particular party.”

Washington had previously warned Beijing that if it wanted to be seen as a “responsible stakeholder,” it should not use its participation in multilateral organizations like the EAS to “maneuver toward a predominance of power” or otherwise be seen as deliberately trying to undercut Washington’s influence or interests. Beijing (and the others) clearly heard this message.

Still undefined is how the EAS (or the A+3, for that matter) will interact with broader regional organizations such as APEC or the ministerial-level ASEAN Regional Forum (which includes Washington and the EU among its members). Hopefully, this will be one of the “modalities” to be addressed by EAS participants when they convene next in December 2006 in Cebu, Philippines.

In the interim, Washington should begin exploring the possibility of seeking observer status – another modality yet to

be defined. It should also be asking itself why it continues to resist acceding to the TAC. The oft-stated contention that this would somehow undercut America's Asian alliances appears unfounded: two of Washington's Asian allies – Thailand and the Philippines – are charter members of ASEAN, while the other three – Australia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea – have now acceded to the TAC without any perceptible impact on Washington's network of bilateral alliances.

As a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Washington has already endorsed the purpose and principles of the TAC “as a code of conduct governing relations between states and a unique diplomatic instrument for regional confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and political and security cooperation.” Perhaps it's time to take the next step, in order to demonstrate its commitment to regional prosperity and stability and to underscore its support for East Asia community-building.

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