



What to Expect at the First East Asia Summit

by Ron Huisken

The East Asia summit (EAS) is something of an enigma. The inaugural session is scheduled to be held in Kuala Lumpur on December 14 but its objectives, agenda, and modalities as well as its origins (which can provide important clues to these questions) are quite difficult to pin down.

We know that the EAS is a development of, but not necessarily a successor to, the ASEAN Plus Three (A+3) which has been for the past seven years the most energetic and productive multilateral forum in the region. ASEAN sought an annual dialogue with Europe in the early 1990's and, doubtless with the encouragement of the Europeans, invited the big states of northeast Asia – China, Japan and South Korea – to participate in the first meeting in 1996. Hence the utilitarian label: ASEAN Plus Three. The financial crisis of 1997, a crisis essentially confined to East Asia, proved to be a decisive experience in terms of accelerating a sense of Asian identity, not least in the sense that the major global institutions designed to ameliorate such events – the IMF and the World Bank – were deemed to have let Asia down.

More or less coincidentally, China had decided that it needed to revamp its external policy settings to convince the region that it intended to be a team player and that its rise in power and influence would be peaceful. And Japan, increasingly conscious of the rise of China, has always looked to multilateral processes to rebuild its acceptance as a key player in the region. For both China and Japan, the key targets of their regional diplomacy are the states of ASEAN.

In other words, the stage was set for a major upgrade in the authority and ambition of regional multilateral processes, and the A+3 selected itself as the most suitable vehicle. In 1997, A+3 meetings were elevated to the leaders level (ie, effectively a summit) and in 2000 it ceased to meet, so to speak, in the margins of the ASEAN-Europe meeting and became a free-standing body with its own sub-structure of ministerial and officials meetings.

In 1998, at the suggestion of South Korea's president, the A+3 established a group of prominent individuals to identify some aspirational objectives for East Asia. This East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) reported at the end of 2001 and recommended aspiring toward an "East Asian Community," a label that, as the authors were certainly aware, conjured up images of earlier manifestations of the European Union. Among the many stepping stones toward this objective, the EAVG recommended that the A+3 forum be allowed to evolve into an East Asia Summit. The EAVG report did not elaborate on this proposal in any way. Nor did it offer any observations on why this development was considered desirable. This suggests that the most obvious explanation is probably close to the truth: a major new regional goal mandated a new

governing body, and a body commensurate in status with its approximate counterparts in other regions. For East Asia, a geographically vast, culturally diverse, geopolitically asymmetric and still a decidedly fractious group of states, the commitment to build a 'community,' even the palest shadow of the EU, would be a bold and courageous step.

So bold, in fact, that it was decided to put the EAVG report through a real world filter in the form of the East Asia Study Group (EASG) made up of senior officials from A+3 states. The EASG, which reported in November 2002, seemed to consciously minimize reference to the 'community' idea, suggesting considerable caution in some political circles about the goal and/or the nature of the developmental process. The latter, of course, could have a profound influence on the shape and character of the former. The EASG did endorse the view that East Asia needed to develop more robust, institutionalized fora and processes to consolidate stability and development and to allow the region to make itself heard on the global stage. It also endorsed the idea of the A+3 evolving into the EAS but cautioned that the rate of evolution should keep pace with political comfort levels within A+3 and the development of a consensus on the nature and membership of the entity that an EAS would seek to build.

Clearly, then, some members of A+3 remained defensive of that body, presumably on the grounds that it could accomplish what they needed and that their influence within it might be degraded in a new forum. Indeed, the EASG report explicitly recorded the apparent majority view that the A+3 remained the "most viable and practical way to move the nascent East Asia process forward".

Just two years later, however, in November 2004, Malaysia's Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, was able to announce that a consensus had been achieved and that the first EAS would be held in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005. One possible reason for this rapid progress might be that, as regional familiarity with multilateral processes has grown, ASEAN has felt obliged to move more quickly to preclude others from launching major initiatives and put at risk its wish to remain in the 'drivers seat' of the region's multilateral processes. To sell this somewhat presumptive claim, ASEAN has carefully protected a Volvo-like image, stressing its credentials as a safe driver over dexterity or speed.

ASEAN sees this prominent role as the key to maintaining good relations with all the major powers, giving each of them a major stake in ASEAN's stability and prosperity, and averting any propensity for these powers to compete for influence in South East Asia to the point of Balkanizing the region. ASEAN's ability to pull this off is linked to the fact that, in sharp contrast to Europe where France and Germany inspired and sustained the process that yielded the EU, Asia's

two major powers – China and Japan – remain reluctant and improbable collaborators.

The consensus that Prime Minister Badawi alluded to in November 2004 was apparently incomplete. Membership of the EAS remained a contentious issue well into 2005 with China (keep it closed) and Japan (open it up) on opposing sides. It has now been settled at 16 countries: ASEAN plus China, Japan, India, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. Indonesian President Yudhoyono resisted the EAS until assured that it would be one-off affair. Indonesia recently initiated a drive within ASEAN to aspire toward a security, economic and cultural community and Yudhoyono apparently believes that ASEAN should make itself more cohesive before engaging the heavyweights in North Asia on what an East Asia community might look like.

More significantly, however, and as recently as May 2005, the primary sponsor of the EAS, Prime Minister Badawi, has endorsed the view that building the East Asia community of peace, prosperity, and progress would remain the responsibility of the A+3 summit. Badawi went on to say that the role of the EAS, which would be a forum rather than an institution, would be to act as a communications channel between East Asia and the rest of world and identify mutually beneficial strategies and policies.

This vision for the EAS clearly does not envisage the absorption of the A+3. It is consistent with the assurance given to Yudhoyono that the EAS, if not a one-off forum, could meet bi-annually or tri-annually. It leaves open the question of why some in ASEAN were determined to see the EAS include countries beyond the A+3. In Badawi's conception, the three additional members – India, Australia and New Zealand – are simply part of the rest of the world that East Asia wants to communicate with. A strong possibility is that some members of ASEAN, with the support of Japan, wanted the peak Asian body to be broadened to dilute the influence of China.

Even if the A+3 and the EAS co-exist for a time, the latter would provide some opportunity to soften or delay initiatives that raise concerns because they appear likely over time to entrench China's dominance. There may also be the hope that, in time, a growing majority will see merit in defining 'East Asia' more broadly, allowing the A+3 to be dispensed with or downgraded relative to the EAS. It is hard to contest the view that a grouping of states that embraces China, India, and Japan, and which succeeds in nudging these giants toward deeper accommodation, will keep everyone's rice bowl full for the remainder of this century.

These substantial gray areas in the EAS proposal make it difficult to anticipate what the first agenda might look like. It seems very likely that defining the relationship between the EAS and the A+3, agreeing on modalities that put ASEAN in the driver's seat, and selecting the host for the second summit (China wants it) will prove more than sufficient to exhaust the time set aside for the event. An overarching question that will be lurking in the back of the mind of every leader will be whether and how the United States could be linked to the EAS. Protecting preferred options on this front will influence positions on modalities and the scope of the agenda that the summit could embrace.

The fact that the summit is happening at all speaks volumes about the perception that a decisive shift in the global balance of power is well under way and irreversible, even if the quantitative indices of power are lagging well behind. Washington, which firmly blocked a 1990/91 Malaysian proposal for an Asia-only economic caucus but seemed indifferent to A+3, has very belatedly signaled that it should have been invited to the EAS, a circumstance essentially without precedent. It is going to be an intense and fascinating exercise in multilateral diplomacy.

The first EAS may well fall short of the advanced billing, but it remains a good prospect to mature into a body that Australia will feel fortunate to be part of.

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