



## **The First East Asia Summit** by Ron Huisken

The first East Asia Summit (EAS) did what it could and, in all the circumstances, it did pretty well. There is little doubt that the initiative ran off the rails and that the process of getting it back on the tracks – although probably not the tracks originally envisaged – was incomplete when the date for the first meeting came around.

The main sponsors, Malaysia and China, appear to have had in mind relabeling the existing summit-level forum, the ASEAN Plus Three (A+3), as the East Asia Summit. This seemingly cosmetic change made sense in that East Asia had set itself an important new objective, namely, the aspiration to develop into a genuine “community” of states, even if this aspiration remained wholly undefined. This cosmetic change would also give East Asia a forum that matched in stature the peak body of other groupings around the world, especially, perhaps, the G8. This ambition was denied by a determined effort on the part of Japan, Indonesia, and Singapore, in particular, to secure wider participation in the development of East Asia’s political, economic and security architecture. Hence the invitations extended to India, Australia, and New Zealand.

The biggest unresolved issue in Kuala Lumpur was how the EAS would mesh with the existing A+3 process. It remains unresolved. Having been persuaded to abandon the narrow definition of “East Asia,” those still attracted to a forum only for East Asians have switched to supporting still wider participation in the EAS. This is a time-honored tactic to lessen the likelihood that the new forum will achieve genuine cohesion and clout. It seems very likely, therefore, that Russia’s request to join will be endorsed before the next summit. Since the KL Declaration specifies that the EAS will be “an open, inclusive” forum, others may follow.

Protecting the primacy of the A+3 was also the reasoning, I believe, behind the observation in the Chairman’s Statement (as distinct from the formal KL Declaration) that it was agreed that the EAS would be a “leaders-led” summit. This seems to be code for discouraging the EAS from spawning a sub-structure of ministerial and official meetings both to prepare for and to follow up the leaders meetings. The A+3 has such a sub-structure. Nor will the EAS have a dedicated Secretariat. To the extent it is deemed necessary, this function will fall to officials in participating states and to the ASEAN Secretariat.

In a sense, it is great pity that the designers of the EAS had to contend with this quite fundamental split in aspirations. It means that the region has yet another forum that is not quite there in terms of focus and authority. Moreover, it is in the nature of these processes that they are very difficult to kill off and almost as difficult to transform once under way.

On a brighter note, there is no trace in the KL Declaration or in the Chairman’s Statement of two classes of participants, that is, East Asian and other. Furthermore, the EAS comes pretty close to meeting a conspicuous gap in the region’s multilateral architecture – a leader’s forum with a leader’s agenda. The EAS has given itself the mandate to address the “broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest.” APEC has no such authority: non-economic issues have had to be pressed onto the agenda on an ad hoc basis. Nor has the A+3 endeavored to cast its remit so broadly. To my mind, this is the crucial advance made in Kuala Lumpur. It remains to be seen whether the leaders will be prepared to exploit this new forum to the full or remain inclined to confine doing substantive business only to the forums they prefer. The widely publicized unwillingness of China, Japan, and South Korea to have their usual trilateral in KL is a bad omen but the clearest indication one could wish for of a strategic issue of common interest that the EAS could try to ameliorate.

As a general rule, competition is a healthy phenomenon. Competition for the time and attention of heads of government is probably an exception. If different but overlapping groups of leaders endeavor to put one forum ahead of another, it is likely that the performance of all the forums will suffer. Working out a clear and sensible division of labor between the EAS and the A+3 (and perhaps APEC) is now an obvious priority for all the governments with a major interest in how our broader region manages its affairs.

*Dr. Ron Huisken [ron.huisken@anu.edu.au] is a Senior Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at Australian National University.*