



Why the East Asian Summit Matters by Barry Desker

The Kuala Lumpur meeting of regional leaders on Dec. 14 was a historic event whose future impact is likely to be as significant as the first ASEAN Summit held in Bali in February 1976.

The first Bali Summit led to the emergence of a cohesive ASEAN 5 (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) in the aftermath of the emergence of communist regimes in Indo-China. The presence of a rising China and resurgent India in Kuala Lumpur and the absence of the United States, which has played the role of an Asia-Pacific hegemon since the end of the World War II, suggest that we are on the cusp of a new era. The first East Asian Summit (EAS) was held at a time when East Asia demonstrates a new vitality following its recovery from the trauma of the Asian financial meltdown and subsequent economic crisis in 1997-98 while the U.S. is distracted by its commitment in Iraq.

EAS inclusiveness

The Dec. 14 meeting is significant because it went beyond narrow geographical definitions or ethnic/racial identity in attempting to lay the groundwork for a new regional institution. The annual ASEAN Summit, separate meetings of the ASEAN leaders with their counterparts from China, Japan, and South Korea and the holding of the ASEAN Plus Three (A+3) Summit involving the leaders of the 10 ASEAN countries, China, Japan, and South Korea, preceded it. The inclusion of India, Australia, and New Zealand and the presence of Vladimir Putin of Russia demonstrate an outward-looking, inclusive approach to participation in the emerging East Asian regionalism.

This broader inclusive identity is likely to subsume the earlier focus on an East Asia comprising the ASEAN 10 plus China, Japan, and South Korea. Its emergence is somewhat accidental. In Vientiane last year, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi of Malaysia offered to host an East Asian Summit involving the ASEAN 10 Plus Three. Premier Wen Jiabao of China offered to host the second summit. Wen's proposal meant that the center of gravity would move away from Southeast to Northeast Asia, an unwelcome development from an ASEAN perspective. This led to a desire to include other states that had substantial interactions with the region. The participation of India, Australia, and New Zealand was seen as ensuring that ASEAN remained at the center of any emerging East Asian community. India was also perceived as a balance to China. Indonesia, for example, sought to avoid aligning with China while retaining friendly ties to other powers such as the U.S., a classic "hedging" strategy.

Growing Sino-Japanese antagonism

Growing antagonism between China and Japan will make Southeast Asians wary of being enmeshed in a new regional cold war. China continues to remind the region of Japanese expansionism during WWII and the lack of Japanese remorse as evidenced by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's annual visits to Yasukuni Shrine, which includes the remains of 14 Class A war criminals, and the downplaying of Japanese atrocities during the war. Chinese criticism has evoked a strong reaction in Japan. Most worrying is the ultra-nationalistic response of young Japanese and Chinese. We are reminded of these trends by the heightened rhetoric between Chinese and Japanese decision-makers at closed door international and regional conferences, even as substantive economic links between China and Japan increase rapidly.

While ASEAN members have had four decades of institutional experience in regional reconciliation, Northeast Asians have focused on bilateral ties and multilateral forums such as the Six-Party Talks with a specific agenda. The EAS provides an opportunity for informal confidence building and discussions on broad strategic issues that concern the region. But this will take time to develop. China's decision not to proceed with a separate summit of China, Japan, and South Korea in Kuala Lumpur suggests that the ASEAN approach of using such opportunities to maintain informal contact even in the midst of bilateral differences has not yet percolated to Northeast Asians. Nevertheless, Japanese lack of atonement for WWII is an issue that resonates around the region, especially in Korea, and could lead to Japan's isolation.

The U.S.: regaining the initiative

For the U.S., the EAS represents a diplomatic challenge. Although the U.S. is a leading trading partner of all EAS participants and has security relationships with significant players including Japan, the U.S. was not able to participate in the summit, as it was unwilling to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Given current White House priorities, it is also unlikely that the U.S. president could be persuaded to make an annual trans-Pacific visit barely a month after the APEC Leaders' Meeting. The U.S. alliance system, APEC, and the ARF are therefore currently the key institutions for the management of U.S. relations with the region. But a re-assessment of U.S. participation in the EAS is warranted as the EAS will form part of a network of regional institutions.

The U.S. concern with the marginalization of Taiwan had led the U.S. to downplay the significance of China's initiative to organize a meeting of APEC foreign ministers in Santiago in 2004. However, given East Asia's emerging cooperative security architecture, it would be in the U.S. interest to support a larger political and security role for APEC. Such a revitalized APEC need not be competitive with the EAS or

A+3 but would be complementary. The overlapping membership of these institutions includes a core that brings together key hubs in the Asia-Pacific.

While there already are APEC directors responsible for non-traditional security issues such as counterterrorism and infectious diseases, APEC should consider appointing program directors to handle trade-related political, social, and security issues such as supply chain security, maritime security, energy, and the environment. A broader agenda for APEC would be fitting as APEC is the only Asia-Pacific institution that meets at the heads of government level.

U.S. analysts such as John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago fret about the risk of confrontation with a rising China and the desirability of developing relationships with states on the periphery of China that could balance China such as Japan, India, and Vietnam. I would argue that it is probably more important today to develop trans-Pacific institutions that could enmesh China in a web of cooperative relationships in the region. In this context, the decision to engage North Korea through the Six-Party Talks is positive as U.S. leverage on North Korea is much lower than that of traditional allies such as China and Russia.

Similarly, greater attention should be given to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) process. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's decision to skip this year's ARF meeting was a mistake. Although the risks of conflict are greater in East Asia, U.S. policy remains more focused on Europe.

ASEAN: bandwagon or balancing?

During the Cold War, ASEAN was clearly identified with the West although nominally nonaligned. Today, as sophisticated Chinese diplomacy leads to the establishment of multiple regional organizations, ASEAN is developing closer linkages with China. These relationships are perceived as a balance against U.S. unilateralism. Some of the newer members of ASEAN such as Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia have benefited from Chinese largesse and are supportive of Chinese concerns within ASEAN. Older members such as Malaysia and Thailand are beginning to bandwagon with China.

For ASEAN states that prefer a regional balance of power, a regional security architecture that is outward-looking and promotes the observance of international norms and codes of conduct is preferable to one dominated by a single power. An active U.S. presence enables this vision of the region's future to be sustained. In future years, the U.S. should therefore participate in the EAS as it is likely to emerge as the key institution for East Asian community-building.

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