

Remodeling Regional Architecture by Jusuf Wanandi

Jusuf Wanandi is vice chair of the board of trustees, CSIS Foundation, Jakarta (stanis@csis.or.id). This commentary draws from an article that appeared earlier in the Jakarta Post.

The East Asian region is facing big challenges, especially the rise of China and India. The most effective way to maintain peace, stability, and economic dynamism is to establish a regional institution that could accommodate the three big powers – China, India, and Japan – in a kind of concert of power that will be able to maintain future equilibrium in the region, together with the United States.

Therefore, efforts to develop East Asian cooperation and institution building are critical to the future of the region. While ASEAN has a good chance of supporting and even leading the process, ASEAN's limited cohesion has become a limiting factor. Many question if ASEAN can really get its act together to face future challenges (global or regional), for instance on the impact of the financial meltdown and the challenge of competing with China's and India's economic dynamism.

It is also increasingly doubtful whether ASEAN will be able to take the lead in institution building in the East Asia region. ASEAN can only play this role if its members cooperate more closely. But unfortunately, the new ASEAN Charter, which Indonesia recently ratified, is limited in its reach and is not equipped to make ASEAN a credible option for taking a lead role in East Asian regional cooperation.

That is why Indonesia should take the lead, in cooperation with several ASEAN members, Northeast Asia and India, to push for the idea of a new regional institution. This also means that ASEAN will be maintained for good neighborhood relations in the future but will no longer be the cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy. The cornerstone should obviously be Indonesia's national interest.

In the meantime, the regional architecture in East Asia and in the Asia-Pacific needs consolidation. APEC, for instance, should again concentrate on economic cooperation led by the economic ministers. The APEC Leaders Meeting has become a diversion and has in practice become decoupled from APEC. APEC also cannot include strategic and security issues because there are two nonstate members (Taiwan and Hong Kong) while the Latin American members are not interested in East Asian strategic and security issues.

That is why the APEC Leaders Meeting should be abolished and instead the idea of an East Asian one should be entertained. East Asia states also should decide what they want to do with the two East Asian regional organizations: ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and EAS (East Asian Summit). Either the

APT should be absorbed into the EAS or the division of labor between the two should be made very clear. APT should be for functional cooperation including economic cooperation (which it has been doing for more than 10 years) and should be open to the other three members of the EAS, in areas where their involvement is relevant, while the EAS should be a forum for strategic dialogues for the region.

The ASEAN Regional Forum could be maintained for human security (or nontraditional security) cooperation, but to be credible must include defense ministers, have a non-ASEAN co-chair and a secretariat, and become an action-oriented institution (not only a talkshop for confidence-building measures).

But above all there is a need for an East Asian institution as an overarching body for strategic dialogues and for hard traditional security cooperation. Here the United States and Russia should be invited. And it should not be a large group. Based on size, strategic importance and GDP as criteria, the countries to be considered would be Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Russia, and the U.S. ASEAN should be included, represented by the chair and the secretary-general, as an associate member. This could become the future concert of power for East Asia (the G8 for East Asia).

While the EAS will be only for East Asian countries, this G8 for the region would include important strategic countries such as the United States and Russia. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has given a new impetus to the idea of shaping the regional architecture through regionwide discussions at the highest level. It is not likely to lead to a totally new architecture but it will be shaped by the consolidation of existing ones plus, hopefully, a new overarching structure (East Asia's G8).