PacNet
Number 64

Pacific Forum CSIS
Honolulu, Hawaii

November 14, 2011

The United States and the East Asia Summit: A New Beginning? By David Capie and Amitav Acharya

(David Capie [David.Capie@vuw.ac.nz]is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the Victoria University of Wellington, NZ. Amitav Acharya [aacharya@american.edu] is the UNESCO Chair in Transnational Challenges and Governance at American University, Washington, D.C. and Chair of its ASEAN Studies Center.)

This week President Obama will join seventeen other Asian leaders in Bali for the Sixth East Asia Summit (EAS). With a tough economy at home and the decision of the Congressional "super-committee" on the federal budget only days away, this is hardly a good time for a US president to be out of the country. Obama's decision to participate in the EAS for the first time in Bali is therefore a powerful symbol of a shift in American policy towards Asia. It also says much about the evolving nature of regional cooperation.

US participation in the EAS is important for three reasons. First, the Sixth EAS will be the first time all of Asia's great powers will be represented in the same summit-level regional grouping. While the annual Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meetings brought together most heads of government, India was a notable absentee. Despite sporadically engaging security issues, APEC was also focused primarily on an economic and trade agenda. In contrast, the EAS as the Kuala Lumpur Declaration in 2005 put it is a forum for dialogue on "broad strategic, political, and economic issues of common interest and concern." The expanded EAS also underscores that the ASEAN + Eight configuration (also reflected in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus process) has become a crucial pattern for regional cooperation.

Second, US participation in the EAS reflects a significant shift in American policy. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the US view was that Asian multilateralism was inimical to American interests and risked undermining its 'hub and spokes' alliance system. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Solomon famously described proposals for a security dialogue forum as a "solution in search of a problem." This hostility softened during the Clinton administration as the US joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), but under the George W. Bush administration, engagement with Asian institutions was episodic at best. After the EAS was created in 2005, Bush officials dismissed the possibility of US participation, saying they would "hesitate to push for an invitation to an organization when we don't even know what it does."

In contrast, the Obama administration has placed ASEAN-led institutions at the heart of its foreign policy in Asia. In her recent *Foreign Policy* (November 2011) article, Secretary of State Clinton said the US has "emphasized the importance of multilateral cooperation, for we believe that addressing complex transnational challenges of the sort now faced by Asia requires a set of institutions capable of mustering collective action."

Third, heightened US interest comes at a time when China's views of regional multilateralism have become noticeably less positive. Over the last decade and a half Beijing has embraced ASEAN-centered institutions as a key part of its regional "charm offensive" and its engagement with Southeast Asia. However, after the showdown over the South China Sea at the 2010 Hanoi ARF, China increasingly sees institutions as an irritation and a constraint on its power.

But questions remain about what US participation means for the East Asia Summit or broader regional architecture. Some Asian commentators fear Washington will try to force a new EAS agenda focused on geopolitics or that it will seek to do away with ASEAN's central role. Others worry the EAS could become a forum dominated by the US-China rivalry. Both seem unlikely, at least for the time being.

In terms of its agenda, the EAS has historically had five priority areas for cooperation: finance, education, avian flu, disaster management, and climate change. The US will want to add to this agenda and introduce new issues – including maritime security, disaster and humanitarian response, and non-proliferation – but it seems likely to do so in a gradual and evolutionary fashion. Washington is sensitive to the fact that it is a new face at the table. Similarly, while the US sees the EAS as a useful way to counter China's growing influence in the region, it is unlikely to seek a confrontation in Bali. Although the South China Sea will certainly come up, Washington has recently shown a preference for framing this as an issue about principles rather than singling out China for criticism.

There has also been speculation about whether the US and other non-ASEAN EAS members will seek to drop the soft institutional approach of "the ASEAN way" and reduce ASEAN's control over the EAS's agenda and membership. There is no doubt that Washington would prefer to see less scripted interactions at the EAS, where leaders will be freer to raise and discuss issues. The US would also like to see regional groups develop stronger secretariats and become more formally institutionalized over time. But this notwithstanding, the talk out of Washington is about being respectful to ASEAN and proceeding carefully.

It might be tempting to assume that in shaping the expanded EAS the "ASEAN way" has triumphed over the "White House way." However, these are early days and it remains to be seen whether US interest in the EAS is sustainable over time. The EAS is only a summit, not yet a fully-fledged institution. Washington may now be happy to engage with ASEAN and other EAS members to gradually shape the future agenda and priority issues, but the US

preference for a "results-oriented agenda" has not changed. American presidents do not like to fly across the Pacific for photo opportunities, rehearsed speeches, and aspirational statements. As was the case with its participation in the ARF, US frustration may grow in the future if the EAS doesn't start to develop actionable goals and follow up its commitments.

A second issues concerns economics, trade, and finance. Washington has given clear priority to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and APEC, especially in this year when it is serving as APEC chair. Officials argue that they do not see EAS as an appropriate policy space for discussing economic, trade, and finance issues. This attitude may soften once the US is no longer chair of APEC, but it also reflects a deeper, underlying tension, namely whether the most appropriate model for regional integration is on a trans-Pacific or East Asian basis.

Finally, the views of US leadership on the value of Asian multilateralism may also change. Even if President Obama is re-elected in November 2012, it seems likely that two of the key individuals who have shaped the new US policy towards regional institutions – Hilary Clinton and Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell – will not carry on into a second term. Whether their successors will share their positive view of the value of East Asian institutions cannot be taken for granted.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.