

Regional strategic challenges and East Asia Summit by Dang Cam Tu

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Growing contestation among big powers, mostly between the United States and China, has become a key strategic issue underlining the security environment and architecture in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific. Regional security forums, and the East Asia Summit (EAS) in particular, can help mitigate the negative implications of intensified strategic competition. Its relevance and contribution manifest in three dimensions: for ASEAN, the entire Asia-Pacific region, and for the two major powers, the US and China.

Rising tensions between the US and China pose three sequential challenges for ASEAN. *First*, if the China-US relationship slides into rivalry, ASEAN would be divided and again be put at the forefront of a great power competition with the South China Sea as its setting. This would destroy nearly five decades of ASEAN effort to escape from the shadow of power politics and achieve regional stability. *Second*, if ASEAN's internal cohesion cannot be maintained, then its centrality in regional cooperation and architecture would be endangered. Concerns have already been raised about whether ASEAN can adapt and cope, as major powers become more assertive and active in trying to exert influence over the direction of ASEAN-led multilateral mechanisms, including the EAS. *Third*, in that context, ASEAN faces the challenge of how to balance divergent interests in the region vis-à-vis the EAS while, simultaneously, ensuring the continued interest of the major powers in the EAS. From a strategic perspective, it is better to have them within the EAS framework and engage them based on rules and norms set by ASEAN than to have them outside the framework and beyond ASEAN's capability to manage.

These challenges are testing ASEAN's vitality, but through this test, member countries are finding stronger imperatives for ASEAN to stay resilient and keep its core role in the EAS. ASEAN came into being as an attempt to protect Southeast Asia's autonomy from the unwanted intrusion of major power rivalry in the Cold War. If history is any indication, centrifugal forces in the external environment will serve as a push factor to enhance ASEAN's unity and role. ASEAN countries are well aware of the danger when small states are marginalized and trampled underfoot in the proverbial jungle of fighting elephants. Throughout ASEAN's evolution, they have developed a habit of keeping a flexible balance in their relations with major powers. Establishment of

the ASEAN Community in December 2015 marked ASEAN's greater maturity in preserving internal cohesion and role in regional affairs. At this new height, it will be difficult for member states to let go of the achievements and resilience they have been building for nearly five decades, particularly as ASEAN proves to be serving the interests of its members increasingly well.

ASEAN's resilience has also been prompted by the inability of other key players to provide leadership in regional multilateral mechanisms, which remains the case given strategic competition and mistrust between and among the US, China, Japan, India, and Russia, which prevent any one of them from leading Asia-Pacific region-wide institutions. In other words, ASEAN has benefited from the division of influence and interests among the great powers. In that sense, the power competition supports ASEAN centrality.

In addressing the challenges posed by major power contention, the EAS is important for ASEAN in two aspects. *One* is that the EAS is acknowledged to be among ASEAN's most prominent successes, being the only mechanism that has brought major powers together to discuss common interests and concerns and methods of work set by ASEAN. It is therefore an important manifestation of ASEAN's centrality in the evolving regional architecture. *Second*, the EAS facilitates efforts to promote norms of behavior and a rules-based approach to managing inter-state relations in the region that would contribute to protecting smaller states against the imposition of the "might is right" approach.

In their struggle for influence, both major powers provide regional countries with greater opportunities to promote cooperation through bilateral, unilateral, and multilateral arrangements that they seek to lead. At the same time, however, their strategic competition heightens doubts about the future of the region and erodes strategic trust. There are growing uncertainties about the future of China's development and power projection, about US capability and credibility and, above all, about how the Sino-US relationship is going to evolve. Mutual distrust in the region has risen along with tensions between China and the US, as they are increasingly suspicious of the other's long-term intentions. Being the two dominant players in the region, an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust is growing between them and regional countries, as well as among regional countries, given the fact that countries in the region have different strategic perceptions and policies toward each country.

Growing uncertainty and eroding strategic trust are compelling regional countries to turn more to ASEAN to promote confidence-building mechanisms. The EAS becomes more necessary and relevant as small and medium-sized countries in the region neither wish to see power politics prevail, nor want to have to pick sides with either the US or

China, because doing so would limit their strategic choices and harm their national internal cohesion. Instead, they wish to see a norm-based and rule-based regional order with ASEAN at the center. This is where the EAS stands out, as it is the only mechanism engaging all the major powers and whose members have embraced the goal of using it to promote a rule-based approach to managing interstate relations, build strategic trust, and ensure transparent and predictable behavior. This ambition was reiterated at the Sixth EAS in 2011 in Bali, Indonesia, which adopted the Declaration of the EAS on the Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations (or the “the Bali Principles.”) Against the backdrop of power politics, the convening of the first EAS was considered the result of both power games be played out and a means to manage great power rivalry. In this regards, the EAS can be considered to be a venue to socialize the established power of the US and the rising power of China for the benefit of the whole region, especially when it is led by ASEAN.

For the US and China, in their struggle for strategic interest and influence, the EAS remains relevant. For Washington, the unchanged strategic objective is to preserve US primacy against challenges from a rising China. However, the way the US manages the rising power is through competition and cooperation, which means that the US aims to engage China, giving it a bigger role in the existing regional and international order under US primacy. The EAS provides a venue for such engagement, to develop areas of cooperation between the US and China. For China, East Asia and the Asia-Pacific are the immediate theaters to exert and expand its power and influence. China’s participation in this framework is likely to be emphasized, both to prevent the EAS from being turned into a group under US influence against China and to assert as much influence as possible over the Summit. For both sides, despite intensifying strategic competition, the operationalization of approximately 90 bilateral cooperative mechanisms indicates a shared need to avoid direct military confrontation and conflict. The EAS can provide a venue to build trust and manage their relationship.

In conclusion, tensions are increasing in the region, and states may find unilateral, bilateral, and minilateral ways of addressing their concerns. The EAS is gaining greater relevance because, although ASEAN-centered, it has become a leaders-led forum which can satisfy, more or less, the needs of all countries in the region – whether big, small, or medium-sized. For reasons of convenience – the logic of avoiding transaction costs associated with establishing new regional arrangements – the trust deficit and increasing strategic competition, countries in the Asia-Pacific will find maintaining and improving the EAS better than establishing a new organization. The key question then is how to improve its effectiveness.

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