

PERSPECTIVE

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Contested Asia and the East Asia Summit

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- When the East Asia Summit was formed in 2005, the regional security order was uncertain. The trajectory of relations among major powers, as well as their links with weaker powers, had a range of possibilities.
- Today, the order has become contested. China is in rivalrous relations with the U.S. and Japan and is acting more aggressively in its maritime rights disputes in the East and South China Seas.
- While the uncertain regional order in 2005 favoured ASEAN centrality and the establishment of inclusive regional institutions focussed on security cooperation, contested Asia undermines both.
- The East Asia Summit retains utility in contested Asia by helping to stabilise the strategic order, increase the influence of weaker states, and enhance ASEAN's security influence.
- Expectations of what the East Asia Summit can achieve should be managed to ensure the Summit retains some policy purchase even as states focus more on unilateral and bilateral security cooperation.

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INTRODUCTION

Changes to the Asia-Pacific security order, principally related to China's rise, are increasing the need for effective, inclusive regional security cooperation bodies to manage growing tensions. Yet, these same changes are undercutting both the strategic basis for such cooperation and the effectiveness of existing inclusive regional institutions focussed on security cooperation.

The East Asia Summit (EAS) is at the centre of this paradox. That which makes it appealing - its membership, remit, and leaders' led structure – is precisely that which prevents it from gaining policy traction. The EAS retains considerable potential yet its capacity to shape an increasingly contested security order remains limited.

The growing security tensions in the region in general and between the major powers in particular mean that continued support for these institutions, despite their current limited scope for cooperation, is important as an insurance policy and for them to function as platforms for weaker powers to voice their interests and concerns. These institutions can moderate the regional effects of prolonged contestation, and maintain ASEAN's capacity to influence regional security.

To be sure, the transformation of regional security orders determine the creation and effectiveness of regional bodies much more than these bodies affect the nature of their prevailing security order. The eleven-year history of the EAS testifies to this.

The EAS “is the only leaders-level regional grouping that involves all the key major and middle ranking powers in the region; it reflects ASEAN centrality; and from its inception in 2005 has had the mandate from ASEAN to be ‘a forum for dialogue on broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest and concern with the aim of promoting peace, stability and economic prosperity in East Asia.’”²

These characteristics make the EAS a particularly clear bellwether for how the Asia-Pacific security order is changing and how these changes are affecting the ASEAN-based regional bodies and ASEAN's cherished principle of centrality.

During the EAS' eleven years in existence, the Asia-Pacific security order has changed fundamentally. When it was established, Asia's security future was uncertain with a range of plausible futures and a geostrategic context much more conducive to inclusive regional security bodies organised by non-major powers. Today, the region has a much clearer, if dispiriting, strategic context. Contestation among major powers is and will remain for some time the defining feature of the region. This change from uncertainty to contestation clearly affects what contribution ASEAN-led inclusive regional bodies can make and how individual Asia-Pacific states are likely to pursue their strategic interests.

² Nick Bisley and Malcolm Cook (2014) “How the East Asia Summit Can Achieve its Potential,” *ISEAS Perspective No. 56* (Singapore, ISEAS 28 October), 2. This publication is part of the same project as this *Perspective*, and provides useful background.

UNCERTAIN ASIA

The early post-Cold War era witnessed a burst of ASEAN-led institution building in which the Association sought to leverage its decades-old dialogue partner relations in a range of ways. The burst started with the formation of the most inclusive, broadest and most frequently dismissed of these new bodies, the foreign minister-level ASEAN Regional Forum, which focussed solely on security cooperation.³ The more exclusive and economically-focussed leader-level ASEAN+3 process came next⁴ to be followed eight years later by the formation of the broader (in membership and mandate) EAS⁵, and finally the defence minister-level ADMM+ process with the same membership as the EAS.⁶ Prior to the formation of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994, there were no broader ASEAN-based ‘parts of the regional architecture’ and ASEAN centrality was rarely mentioned.

The creation of these bodies was intended to manage the uncertainty of the post-Cold War regional security and economic orders and the fears and opportunities this created for Southeast Asian states. Relations among the recognised major powers of the Asia-Pacific – the U.S., China and Japan – and their regional interests were far from clear or settled even if their respective power trajectories were. China was rising, Japan was in relative decline, and the U.S. commitment to remaining “constructively engaged in Asia” was questioned at home and in the region. These institutions sought to shape the emerging economic and security orders and bind the major powers into an ASEAN-centric mode of behaviour.⁷ The creation and evolution of the EAS clearly reflected three institutional dynamics of Uncertain Asia:

- *ASEAN centrality*: The EAS is the highest institutional recognition of ASEAN centrality. Non-ASEAN member states have to be invited to participate in the Summit by ASEAN and only if they fulfil three ASEAN centrality-reaffirming conditions – being a dialogue partner; signing the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation; and having substantive ties with the Association. Prior to the recommendation by the ASEAN-established East Asia Vision Group in 2001 for the establishment of the EAS, no dialogue partner had signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. By 2012, all dialogue partners had signed it.⁸ Furthermore, all dialogue

³ For a dismissive Realist take on the ASEAN Regional Forum, see Robyn Lim (2001) “The ASEAN Regional Forum: Building on Sand,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol 20, No.2, 115-136. For a more positive Constructivist take, see Hiro Katsumata, (2006) “Establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum: Constructing a ‘Talking Shop’ or a ‘Norm Brewery’,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 181-198.

⁴ Ali Alatas (2001) “‘ASEAN Plus Three’ Equals Peace and Prosperity,” *ISEAS Trends*, (Singapore, ISEAS).

⁵ Mohan Malik (2006) “The East Asia Summit,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 60, No. 2, 207-211.

⁶ Tan See Seng (2013) “Future of ADMM-Plus: Asia’s Growing Defence Engagements,” *RSIS Commentaries No. 158* (Singapore, RSIS, 26 August).

⁷ Donald E. Weatherbee (2012) “Southeast Asia’s Security and Political Outlook,” in *Regional Outlook Forum 2011-2012* edited by Michael Montesano and Lee Poh Onn (Singapore, ISEAS) 3-5.

⁸ Although the U.S., Australia and others have signed with opt-outs of certain elements.

partners have expressed sustained interest in being invited to the Summit, including Canada and the European Union who have yet to receive an ASEAN invitation.

- *China-Japan competition:* The preparations from 2001 to 2005 for the first EAS meeting served as a preview of the current contested regional order. A diplomatic battle was fought over the scope of non-ASEAN membership with China and with some ASEAN states supporting the institutional elevation of the exclusive ASEAN+3 process. Japan and other ASEAN member-states supported a broader vision of the Summit in which membership would include Australia, New Zealand and India and to which future membership was open to all dialogue partners. The latter proposal won out with the ASEAN+3 process continuing alongside it. The larger construct prevailed due to widespread concerns that China could dominate the exclusive thirteen-member format.⁹
- *U.S. evolution:* The U.S. was the last of the present EAS participants to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2009. While a founding member of the ASEAN Regional Forum and one of the first ASEAN dialogue partners, the U.S. was not considered for initial membership in the EAS and did not show much interest in the new structure. In the first decade of this millennium, the U.S. did not see significant value in ASEAN-led regional institutions either as a key platform or necessary supplement to its bilateral alliance and security partner network.¹⁰ U.S.-China relations were more fluid and many in Washington remained optimistic about the scope for large scale cooperation with Beijing as captured by the Obama administration's 'strategic reassurance' policy at the beginning of his first term. Moreover, the East and South China Seas had not become important arenas for U.S.-China military and strategic competition.

CONTESTED ASIA

Since 2012 it has become clear that great power contestation is a much more important feature of East Asia's strategic order. This is most evident in maritime Southeast Asia where China's growing strategic and military assertiveness has bumped up against the U.S. vision for East Asia's regional order. The People's Liberation Army's nuclear-armed submarines are based at Hainan Island and must navigate the breadth of the South China Sea into the western Pacific before they pose a credible first- or second-strike threat against the U.S. homeland.¹¹ Equally, its island-building programme has challenged American military primacy and the stability of Asia's strategic balance. This contestation has led to significant changes in the three institutional dynamics that are together inimical to the effective

⁹ Shintaro Hamanaka (2010) *Asian Regionalism and Japan: The Politics of Membership in Diplomatic, Financial and Trade Groups* (New York, Routledge) 165.

¹⁰ Dennis .C. Blair and John T. Hartley (2001) "From Wheels to Webs: Reconstructing Asia-Pacific Security Arrangements," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 7-17.

¹¹ Bonnie Glaser and Matthew Funaiolo (2016) "China's 'Boomers': Should America Fear Beijing's Underwater Nukes?" *National Interest*, 10 May.

functioning of ASEAN-led regional bodies with a security component, such as the EAS and ADMM+:

- *U.S. engagement:* Under the Obama administration, the U.S. embraced ASEAN-led regional institutions as a key platform and necessary supplement to its bilateral alliance and security partner network. These are seen as important means for the US to sustain the prevailing regional order balanced in favour of the U.S. and its allies and partners.¹² ASEAN support for this U.S. resolve is reflected in the decision to invite the U.S. to join the EAS in 2011. The first U.S.-ASEAN Summit held in California in February 2016 and instigated by President Obama himself symbolized this shift in the U.S. approach to ASEAN and ASEAN-led bodies. The U.S. has also been a leading dialogue partner voice for the strengthening of the EAS and the ADMM+ and their focus on maritime security.¹³
- *U.S.-China competition:* U.S.-China competition is becoming the central axis of the regional security order. This has supplanted China-Japan competition as the most significant influence on dialogue partner interests in shaping ASEAN-led bodies. A first indicator of this was at the 2nd EAS foreign minister's meeting with visible tensions between Beijing and Washington overshadowing debate, and was perhaps most visible in the failure of the 2015 ADMM+ to issue the joint statement promised by the host, Malaysian defence minister Hishammuddin Hussein. China refused to agree to any statement including reference to China's maritime rights disputes with five ASEAN member states in the South China Sea. The U.S. refused to sign one that excluded the most pressing security issue in the region.¹⁴
- *ASEAN disunity:* The transformation of the South China Sea into the main arena of China's growing strategic and military assertiveness and for U.S.-China strategic and military contestation has seriously undermined ASEAN unity. In 2012 ASEAN foreign ministers, for the first time, failed to issue a joint statement after the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting with Cambodia as chair, refusing to include any language on the South China Sea, and the Philippines in particular, having just been pushed off Scarborough Shoal by China, refusing to support a statement silent on the disputes. 2016, with Laos as chair, has seen a replay of ASEAN disunity and paralysis on this issue with the retraction of an ASEAN statement addressing the South China Sea disputes and the failure of ASEAN to issue a joint

¹² Nick Bisley (2016) 'America's Asian Policy: From Primacy to Contestation' in *Europa Far East and Australiasia 2017* London: Routledge.

¹³ Yann-Huei Song (2016) "The South China Sea Dispute in U.S.-ASEAN Relations", in *The South China Sea Dispute: Navigating Diplomatic and Strategic Tensions*, edited by Ian Storey and Cheng-Yi Lin (Singapore: ISEAS), 257-262.

¹⁴ Yeganeh Torbati and Trinna Leong (2015) "ASEAN Defense Chiefs Fail to Agree on South China Sea Statement," *Reuters*, 4 November.

statement mentioning the 12 July Arbitration ruling on the Philippine case against China's infringements of Philippine maritime rights in the South China Sea.

THE EAS AND CONTESTED ASIA

In contested Asia, ASEAN-led inclusive institutions have a much lower prospect of shaping the overall security and strategic environment. Expectations among members need to be kept in check and efforts to drive security collaboration need to reflect these more limited circumstances. Yet this does not mean that the Summit is little more than a photo-opportunity. The features which give it potential – membership, policy scope and political level – retain their salience. The challenge is to find the best fit for such an organization in a region where major power contestation is one of its most important features.

For ASEAN members, the EAS retains great significance, and not just because of the organization's continued convening power. None of the ASEAN member states is a major military power and the most important multilateral security cooperation processes are neither ASEAN-centric nor do they include any ASEAN members. As Japan, Australia, India, Korea, China, Russia and the U.S. establish various trilateral security partnerships, ASEAN states' capacity to shape security cooperation continues to diminish.¹⁵ In such a context, the EAS provides an important way through which they can retain influence.

Perhaps one of the region's most disconcerting features is the lack of diplomatic processes to manage the growing contestation. The lack of hotlines, crisis management procedures and other elements is striking, particularly given the number of different parties involved and the range of friction points. The EAS provides a crucial platform through which these can be crafted and managed. Also, its very existence provides an important regular mechanism for managing the inevitable crises, diplomatic, strategic or economic, that will occur in such an interdependent region. However, continued investment of political capital in the institution is needed to retain this useful function.

Third, even though the region is increasingly contested, there are stabilising forces which the EAS can promote and enhance. Economic interdependence and a shared basic conception of acceptable international conduct are crucial mechanisms for ensuring that contestation does not lead to conflict. The EAS is well placed to support and enhance both of these.

East Asia remains the world's most dynamic growth region. In the EAS it has a peak institution that can provide both leadership and stabilisation. The institution's core paradox – its membership and scope making it appealing yet fundamentally limiting its capacity – is a function of growing contestation in Asia. Although the institution may be able to contribute to regional security cooperation, it cannot do that at the grand strategic level. And what collaboration it provides will only be one part of a range of security policies pursued by its members. This will, however, be vital in stopping the contestation becoming more

¹⁵ Trilaterals which currently exist include: US-Japan-ROK; China-Japan-ROK; US-Japan-Australia; US-Japan-India; India-Japan-Australia; and Russia-India-China.

acute and in underwriting a future in which the region's peoples can continue to enjoy the prosperity of recent years.

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