

# The East Asia Summit: On a Road to Somewhere?

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## INTRODUCTION

A multilateral architecture exists today in the Asia-Pacific to address a challenging security environment. It consists of overlapping multilateral bodies and is the result of an incremental process that started in the 1990s. Complementing bilateral strategic ties structured around the United States (US), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its associated fora such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting Plus (ADMM+) provide multilateral venues for regional countries to exchange strategic perspectives and work toward mutual understanding on security issues. The core principles of the Asia-Pacific architecture are based on national sovereignty, non-interference in the affairs of other states, and non-use of force to resolve inter-state differences. In addition, an informal process of interaction defines the norms of behaviour in the multilateral architecture. It includes a high level of informality, dialogue, self-restraint, and consensus building.

This paper examines the ASEAN-led multilateral architecture by focusing on one of its specific cooperative bodies, the East Asia Summit. It first discusses its origins, institutional design, and evolving membership. Attention is also given to its agenda and capacity to influence regional events. The paper then argues that the current challenges faced by the EAS consist of institutional constraints and geopolitical considerations linked to rising great-power competition in the Asia-Pacific. In response, the paper concludes that the EAS should go back to basics and encourage the type of informal rules of diplomatic engagement it was initially meant to promote to enhance peace and stability in the region. They are said to include a balance of influence between the parties involved, a reliance on a cooperative security approach, and more active ASEAN leadership.

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## ORIGINS OF THE EAS

Most analysts refer to the EAS as an extension of the East Asian Economic Group/Caucus (EAEC) concept put forward by then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in 1990. Mahathir's original EAEC concept excluded non-Asian states and his proposal was "wryly known as the 'caucus without Caucasians' for this very reason".<sup>1</sup> The EAEC was first proposed as a response to the "unsatisfactory progress of the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations".<sup>2</sup> The idea was strongly opposed by external powers, especially the United States and Japan, and by some ASEAN members like Indonesia and Singapore. For example, then US Secretary of State James Baker described the EAEC as a "dangerous idea that would draw a line in the Pacific Ocean and split Japan and the US".<sup>3</sup>

The EAEC idea was revived in 1997 amidst the Asian financial crisis and led eventually to the establishment of the ASEAN+3 (APT) summit bringing together the ten ASEAN states, China, Japan, and South Korea. Two separate groups were appointed to revive the regional economy, namely, the East Asian Vision group and the East Asian Study group respectively in 1998 and 2000. The Vision group completed its report in 2001 with 23 suggested measures across multiple sectors while the East Asia Study group submitted its proposals to the APT in 2002. The Study group "strongly urged moves towards institutionalising East Asian cooperation and recommended the setting up of an East Asian Forum".<sup>4</sup> At the second meeting of the East Asia Forum in Kuala Lumpur in 2004, then Malaysia Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi proposed the establishment of an East Asian Community (EAC) driven by an East Asia Summit of regional heads of state and government.

The EAS met for the first time in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005 alongside the annual ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) and included the leaders of the ten ASEAN states, China, Japan, South Korea, as well as India, Australia, and New Zealand. ASEAN was put at the centre of the EAS and was expected to lead the process of community building through its informal diplomatic style based on dialogue and consensus-building – the so-called "ASEAN Way". The EAS was described as an Asian-centric forum concerned with the building of a

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Reilly, "Regionalism and democracy in Asia: The Australia-Malaysia nexus," in *Globalization and Social Transformation in the Asia-Pacific: The Australian and Malaysian experience*, eds. Claudia Tazreiter and Siew Yean Tham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> K. S. Nathan, "Malaysia's approach to Asian regionalism in the context of expanding globalization," in *Globalization and Social Transformation in the Asia-Pacific: The Australian and Malaysian experience*, eds. Claudia Tazreiter and Siew Yean Tham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> S. D. Muni, "East Asia Summit and India," *ISAS Working Paper*, no. 13 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, 2006), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Muni, "East Asia Summit and India," p. 7.

regional community. After initial disagreements over the conditions of membership, ASEAN set three criteria for external powers wanting to be admitted into the EAS. The members had to be Dialogue Partners of ASEAN, have substantial economic relations with the regional entity, and be signatories of ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC).

Japan, Indonesia, and Singapore were of the view that the EAS membership had to be wide and inclusive, while other members, particularly China and Malaysia, felt that the EAS should be limited to the APT countries. The inclusion of three participants located outside the East Asian region was therefore a diplomatic concession to Japan, Indonesia, and Singapore. Both the Koizumi and Abe administrations had played "a pivotal role" in the realisation of the EAS and pushed for a membership inclusive of Australia, New Zealand, and India.<sup>5</sup> New Delhi was motivated to join the EAS for strategic and economic reasons and its participation in 2005 was part of "a wider paradigm shift that characterises India's 'Look East Policy'".<sup>6</sup> In contrast, as a non-signatory to the TAC, the United States was not invited to the inaugural summit despite its membership in the ARF and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

## INSTITUTIONAL EVOLUTION OF THE EAS

A review of the EAS can be divided into two distinct periods: pre-US participation (2005-2010) and post-US participation (2011-present). In its initial phase, the EAS was described not only as a confidence-building mechanism but as a "future venue for substantive cooperation".<sup>7</sup> The creation of the EAS also came at a time when both APEC and the ARF were perceived as having lost momentum. Up to 2005, Beijing had concentrated its diplomatic efforts on the APT process while Washington had been mostly committed to APEC. Bruce Vaughn wrote in a 2005 Congressional Research Report that the EAS could lead to a new regional forum led by China that would, over time, displace APEC and other fora as the leading multilateral institution in Asia.<sup>8</sup> The initial attention given to the EAS thus resulted from the fact that it could form the basis of a future EAC that would exclude the United States. Given

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<sup>5</sup> Takashi Terada, "The United States and East Asian Regionalism: Inclusion-Exclusion Logic and the Role of Japan," in *A Pacific Nation: Perspectives on the U.S. Role in an East Asia Community*, eds. Mark Borthwick and Tadashi Yamamoto (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2011), p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> Arenla, "India and the East Asia Summit," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, 9, no. 4 (2014), p. 390.

<sup>7</sup> Ralf Emmers, Joseph Chinyong Liow, and See Seng Tan, "The East Asia Summit and the regional security architecture," *Maryland Series in Contemporary Asian Studies*, no. 3 (Baltimore: University of Maryland School of Law, 2010), p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Vaughn, "East Asian Summit: Issues for Congress," *CRS Report for Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2005), p. 1.

the ambivalence of the Bush administration towards multilateralism, the creation of the EAS was viewed by some “as evidence that China was taking advantage of regionalism to dominate the region”.<sup>9</sup> In response, commentators felt that the United States had to be a part of the EAS, with Cook remarking, for example, that US participation would “identify the Summit as an Asia-Pacific body” in contrast to an East Asian one dominated by China.<sup>10</sup>

Despite initial enthusiasm, observers assess the early impact of the EAS as limited. Kim notes that it failed during this period to promote a sense of community in East Asia.<sup>11</sup> Reddy asserts that nothing was achieved toward “winning the appreciation of critics of Asian regionalism”<sup>12</sup> while Teh adds that the EAS was “simply another name for an ASEAN+6” meeting.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, China had at first promoted the EAS idea, as it supported the formation of a more permanent institution where it could play a leading role in comparison to the ASEAN-dominated APT.<sup>14</sup> Yet Beijing became less keen as soon as Japan and others pushed for a wider membership that would dilute its own leadership.<sup>15</sup> In response, China placed greater emphasis again on the APT, as illustrated at its 2005 summit when Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao declared that the APT was “of great significance to keeping East Asian cooperation on the right track”.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the participation of other members was underwhelming. Notably, India’s contribution in terms of ideas and initiatives was limited and it only played a small part in the areas of energy, maritime security, and disaster management.

The Obama administration changed the climate of cooperative relations in the Asia-Pacific by adopting a new interest in multilateralism. President Barack Obama ratified the TAC by presidential decree in July 2009 and then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced in January 2010 that the United States intended to par-

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<sup>9</sup> Jae Cheol Kim, “Politics of regionalism in East Asia: The case of the East Asia Summit,” *Asian Perspective*, 34, no. 3 (2010), p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Malcolm Cook, “The United States and the East Asia Summit: Finding the proper home,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 30, no. 2 (2008), p. 293.

<sup>11</sup> Kim, “Politics of regionalism in East Asia,” p. 114.

<sup>12</sup> G. Jayachandra Reddy, “East Asia Summit: Interests and expectations,” *International Journal of Peace and Development Studies*, 1, no. 3 (2010), p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Benny Teh Cheng Guan, “Japan-China rivalry: What roles does the East Asia Summit play?” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 52, no. 3 (2011), p. 350.

<sup>14</sup> Kim, “Politics of regionalism in East Asia,” p. 118.

<sup>15</sup> Dick K. Nanto, “East Asian Regional Architecture: New economic and security arrangements and U.S. policy,” *CRS Report for Congress* (Washington, D.C: Congressional Research Service, 2010), p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> As cited in Kim, “Politics of regionalism in East Asia,” p. 126.

ticipate in the EAS.<sup>17</sup> In October 2010, Clinton commented in a speech in Hawaii that ASEAN would play a central role in US diplomacy and that the EAS would “become a substantive forum for engaging current security and strategic issues such as nuclear non-proliferation, maritime security, and climate change”.<sup>18</sup> Clinton attended the 2010 EAS summit held in Vietnam as a “Guest of the Host”, and, having met all the criteria, the United States subsequently became a member of the EAS in November 2011, together with Russia.

American participation in the EAS led to a new sense of optimism best summed up by former Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr, who claimed that the expansion of the EAS created “an institution with the membership and mandate to help manage an increasingly crowded strategic landscape, ensure outward-looking regionalism that continues as the bedrock of Asia-Pacific integration and foster habits of cooperation”.<sup>19</sup> The EAS had arguably resolved its membership issue by involving all the great powers and relevant middle powers in the Asia-Pacific and this meant that the EAS now represented a large percentage of the world’s population and gross domestic product (GDP). The forum was therefore expected to serve as a diplomatic platform to improve Sino-US relations and socialise the great powers into good international behaviour.

The EAS agenda has continued to widen since 2005 and is now structured around various trade, security, and social issues. The five initial priority areas in the EAS framework were energy, education, finance, health issues, and disaster management. ASEAN connectivity was added as an area of cooperation in 2011 while non-traditional security issues and maritime security were included in recent years. Since the American participation, more attention has also been given to regional strategic flashpoints, ranging from the North Korean nuclear programme to the overlapping claims in the South China Sea, as well as to other matters like climate change and human rights. Members have also openly disagreed on appropriate topics to be included on the agenda with, for example, Beijing protesting that the South

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<sup>17</sup> Hillary Clinton, “Remarks on regional architecture in Asia: Principles and practice,” Imin Center-Jefferson Hall, Honolulu, Hawaii, January 12, 2010. Available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/01/135090.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “The United States, China and Southeast Asia,” in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2011*, ed. Daljit Singh (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), p. 19. For transcript of Clinton’s speech, see <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/11/176999.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Bob Carr, “The East Asia Summit: Building our regional architecture for the 21st Century,” *Strategic Review: The Indonesian Journal of Leadership, Policy and World Affairs* (2012). Available at: [http://foreignminister.gov.au/articles/2012/bc\\_ar\\_120706.html](http://foreignminister.gov.au/articles/2012/bc_ar_120706.html).

China Sea dispute is an issue between China and the Southeast Asian claimants and that it should therefore not be discussed under the EAS framework.<sup>20</sup>

The extensive agenda of the EAS was apparent at the 11th EAS summit held in September 2016 in Vientiane, Laos. The leaders reaffirmed six priority areas: energy, education, finance, global health, environment and disaster management, and ASEAN connectivity. Other areas of cooperation included maritime cooperation, disarmament and non-proliferation, and food security and safety.<sup>21</sup> The 2016 EAS summit also covered an extensive list of regional and international challenges, ranging from the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, terrorism, refugees, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, to wildlife and timber trafficking.

## CURRENT CHALLENGES

### Institutional constraints

The EAS has all the necessary ingredients to be the primary cooperative body in the Asia-Pacific and it remains “the highest institutional recognition of ASEAN centrality”.<sup>22</sup> It brings together the leaders of 18 Asia-Pacific countries and its agenda covers economic, strategic, and social issues. The EAS is therefore “an important vehicle for community and confidence-building”<sup>23</sup> while it preserves the ASEAN centrality in the regional security architecture. Participation by non-ASEAN members is by invitation only and all have to fulfil the three criteria mentioned above. As dialogue partners, Canada and the European Union (EU) have, for years, expressed their sustained interest in being invited to the EAS summits and to, ultimately, become members of the forum. Both partners attended their first East Asia Summit in November 2017 as guests of the ASEAN Chair at the invitation of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Still, while Canada and the EU have arguably met the three criteria mentioned above, there is lingering concern in some Southeast Asian capitals that a further expansion in membership would further complicate the decision-making process in the EAS and reopen debates on the trajectory of the regional architecture.

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<sup>20</sup> Chien-peng Chung, “China and Japan in ‘ASEAN Plus’ multilateral arrangements: Raining on the other guy’s parade,” *Asian Survey*, 53, no. 5 (2013), p. 815.

<sup>21</sup> *Turning Vision into Reality for a Dynamic ASEAN Community*, Chairman’s Statement of the 11th East Asia Summit, 8 September 2016, Vientiane, Lao PDR, pp. 2-4. Available at <http://asean.org/chairmans-statement-of-the-11th-east-asia-summit/>.

<sup>22</sup> Malcolm Cook and Nick Bisley, “Contested Asia and the East Asia Summit,” *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 46 (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016), p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Singapore Institute of International Affairs, “Rethinking the East Asia Summit: Purpose, processes, and agenda,” *Policy brief* (Singapore: Singapore Institute of International Affairs, 2014), p. 10.

Nevertheless, even with only 18 members, the cooperative process in the EAS has mostly been restricted to dialogue and joint declarations with limited tangible outcomes and there have been repeated demands for a more focused and structured agenda. Various commentators have argued that the EAS has failed thus far to deliver concrete policy outcomes and to become the primary regional forum. For example, Bisley and Cook assert that the EAS has “been constrained in its influence because of the bargain struck between ASEAN centrality and major power involvement”.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Akhir and Sudo write that the “process of community-building lags behind with no clear blueprint as yet for the actions and steps needed in achieving an ultimate aim”.<sup>25</sup> The EAS has thus not yet demonstrated an ability to shape regional events.

ASEAN has attempted to deepen cooperation through a 10th-year review of the EAS in 2015. It resulted in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration that reaffirmed that the EAS would operate as a leaders-led forum for dialogue on broad strategic, political, and economic issues with the aim of promoting peace, stability, and economic prosperity in East Asia. The leaders also outlined initiatives to strengthen the EAS institutionally, including the creation of a dedicated unit within the ASEAN Secretariat, periodic reviews of areas of cooperation, and by enhancing the role of the annual Chair.<sup>26</sup> However, few concrete results have been achieved so far.

The absence of material outcomes derives partly from the institutional format of the EAS. The latter is under-institutionalised, as it has no secretariat, budget, or membership fees to support its agenda.<sup>27</sup> Institutional support on economic matters has instead been provided by the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), predominantly funded by the Japanese trade ministry, while a small unit within the ASEAN secretariat has been created to support the EAS administratively. The under-institutionalised nature of the EAS has prevented it from moving beyond rhetorical statements. Bisley and Cook remark that this is not helped by the fact that “the key component of the EAS, the summit itself, is limited to one afternoon and is largely taken up by set-piece speeches by each member-

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<sup>24</sup> Nick Bisley and Malcolm Cook, “How the East Asia Summit can achieve its potential,” *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 56 (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2014), p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Md Nasrudin Md Akhir and Suet Sudo, “The institutionalization of ‘East Asian’ regionalism: the critical cases of ASEAN Plus Three and East Asia Summit,” in *Institutionalizing East Asia: Mapping and reconfiguring regional cooperation*, eds. Alice D. Ba, Cheng-Chwee Kuik, and Suet Sudo (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> East Asia Summit, *Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Tenth Anniversary of the East Asia Summit*, 22 November, 2015. Available at <http://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/10th-EAS-Outcome/KL%20Declaration%20on%2010th%20Anniversary%20of%20the%20EAS.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Bisley and Cook, “How the East Asia Summit can achieve its potential,” p. 6.

state”.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, leaders have “few chances to actually communicate with one another,”<sup>29</sup> as the APT and EAS summits are scheduled back to back with the ASEAN and the ASEAN+1 summits.

Another institutional constraint is that the EAS operates in a region that is already teeming with multilateral bodies. Given the duplication of members and issues discussed in each of them, the EAS often comes across as redundant despite its leaders-led status. For example, the APT, EAS, ARF, and ADMM+ deal with non-traditional security issues, making “regional cooperation more encumbering, confusing, and difficult”.<sup>30</sup> Attempts at building a hierarchy among the different bodies and reducing the duplication of functions have been opposed by ASEAN, which fears losing its centrality in the overall security architecture.

ASEAN’s limitations constitute another constraint for the EAS. ASEAN has developed a diplomatic culture based on a specific set of norms and principles and encouraged an informal code of conduct to regulate Southeast Asian relations. Yet, even within Southeast Asia, its mode of conflict management has been restricted to the shelving of inter-state tensions and it has failed to conduct conflict resolution effectively despite the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC) initiative. The tendency to engage in conflict avoidance is a resulting feature of the ASEAN way and not a principle of the security architecture. In other words, ASEAN does not have the capacity to address controversial issues where clashes of interest are to be expected despite conflict resolution being a key component of the ASEAN Security Community. When transferred to the Asia-Pacific, there is an on-going debate as to whether the ASEAN cooperative model and its so-called centrality truly matter in the wider security architecture.<sup>31</sup> In particular, there are concerns over its leadership role in the EAS and its ability in “facilitating conversations among non-ASEAN members”.<sup>32</sup> As such, the EAS is unlikely to be able to manage inter-state relations effectively among its members in cases of conflict given ASEAN’s own inability to do so.

## Great-power dynamics

The greatest challenge to the EAS is arguably the rise of great-power competition in the Asia-Pacific. The security environment has been transformed by the economic development and military modernisation of China. Washington has in recent years

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<sup>28</sup> Bisley and Cook, “How the East Asia Summit can achieve its potential,” p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ki-Hyun Bae, “ASEAN as a community of managerial practices,” *Global Governance*, 23 (2017), p. 252.

<sup>30</sup> Chung, “China and Japan in ‘ASEAN Plus’ multilateral arrangements,” p. 821.

<sup>31</sup> Kai He, “Facing the challenges: ASEAN’s institutional responses to China’s rise,” *Issues & Studies*, 50, no. 3 (2014), p. 143.

<sup>32</sup> Bae, “ASEAN as a community of managerial practices,” p. 250.



become increasingly concerned over Chinese military capabilities while Beijing has been critical of the US alliance system and regards the allocation of additional US military might to the region as part of a containment strategy. The competition for influence between China and Japan has been another source of regional instability. Tokyo has deepened its military alliance with Washington and stepped up maritime and defence cooperation with various Southeast Asian states in an attempt at balancing Chinese power. All these geopolitical transformations have escalated a series of security flashpoints in the Asia-Pacific. The North Korean and the Taiwan issues are tangled with broader Sino-US relations while tensions in both the East and South China Seas have been escalating since the early 2010s.

While relations between the great powers have become more competitive in recent years, ASEAN is ill-equipped to address such geopolitical concerns. The Southeast Asian states have attempted to negotiate a code of conduct for the South China Sea with Beijing but this has, in part, been complicated by increased Sino-US competition. China is especially concerned that the United States is interfering in the South China Sea issue to contain its rise and threaten its national interests. Great-power rivalry has also been part of EAS dynamics, as shown, for example, in the context of Sino-Japanese relations. ASEAN has been unable thus far, as the central driver of the EAS, to manage inter-state competition. Ho notes that ASEAN's role has been that of a "neutral platform" for major powers to meet but he questions if the neutrality can be sustained in light of the evolving dynamics between the United States and China.<sup>33</sup> Such developments undermine ASEAN centrality in the security architecture and the relevance of the EAS in influencing regional relations.

Furthermore, the United States and China have adopted lukewarm and contradictory approaches toward the EAS. The US interest in the forum has varied across administrations. When the EAS was formed, the Bush administration was deeply involved in the Middle East and criticised for paying insufficient attention to Southeast Asia. Moreover, Washington then opted to signal its support for APEC instead of the EAS for being "by far the most robust, multilateral grouping in Asia".<sup>34</sup> The decision by the Obama administration to re-engage with Asia arose from the rise of China and the signing of free trade agreements in the region.<sup>35</sup> Obama subsequently attended the EAS summits, with the exception of the 2013 edition due to domestic priorities. However, the Trump administration is likely to be less engaged with the EAS. In addition to its "America First" approach, Limaye explains that

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin Ho Tze Ern, "ASEAN centrality in a rising Asia," *The Journal of Defence and Security*, 4, no. 2 (2013), p. 146.

<sup>34</sup> Vaughn, "East Asian Summit: Issues for Congress," p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Terada, "The United States and East Asian Regionalism," p. 135.

Trump's presidency is sceptical toward multilateral groupings and that it adopts a deal-making approach to foreign policy.<sup>36</sup>

President Trump's tepid approach towards the EAS is best exemplified in his vacillating decision to attend and his early exit at the 2017 EAS. While visiting the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta in April 2017, US Vice President Mike Pence announced that President Donald Trump would attend the EAS, APEC, and ASEAN-US summits to be held in November 2017. In October, about 3 weeks before the summit, the White House announced that Trump would not attend the EAS and would leave Manila on November 13. The only reason given was that the US President would not travel the additional 84 kilometres to Angeles where the summit was being held the next day. The following week, before setting off on his 12-day tour of Asia, Trump announced that he would now attend the EAS. On the day itself, Trump was expected to attend the main session of the summit but instead left for the United States after a lunch with the other state leaders where he delivered his prepared remarks. His early exit was purportedly due to a delay in the meeting schedule. Then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson subsequently sat in for Trump at the summit. As a result, the President's actions have cast doubts over US commitment to multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific.

China's interest in the EAS has mostly declined since its early days. In the 2000s, Beijing had relied on regional groupings, viewing multilateralism as the safest strategy to expand its "international influence and protect its national interests".<sup>37</sup> China also supported the EAS as part of its "strategy to limit, if not replace, American strategic preponderance in the region".<sup>38</sup> Yet Beijing lost its enthusiasm for the EAS once its membership went beyond the immediate East Asian region. China did not oppose the subsequent entry of the United States but instead refocused its efforts on the APT and later announced its own multilateral initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative. In short, given China's lukewarm approach to the EAS, Kim posits that the forum has "little chance of reaching its potential of replacing the APT and laying the foundation for the EAC".<sup>39</sup>

Among the great powers, Japan has been the strongest supporter of the EAS since its inception. Cook refers to Japan as a "major force" behind the EAS, as its trade ministry, trade organisations, and relevant think tanks have provided assistance to the forum. In response to China's political manoeuvring to favour the

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<sup>36</sup> Satu Limaye, "Signs are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign': The Trump administration and Southeast Asia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 39, no. 1 (2017), pp. 18-19.

<sup>37</sup> Zhao Hong, "India and China: Rivals or partners in Southeast Asia?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 29, no. 1 (2007), p. 136.

<sup>38</sup> Kim, "Politics of regionalism in East Asia," p. 119.

<sup>39</sup> Kim, "Politics of regionalism in East Asia," p. 127.

APT, Japan has actively supported the EAS framework as the main regional body. Since 2011, the forum has allowed Japan to act within an open regional framework that includes the United States. Tokyo has encouraged functional cooperation and the promotion of universal values, like democracy and human rights, subjects that “China does not wish to address”.<sup>40</sup> While aware of the lack of progress, Japan has so far expressed its satisfaction with the EAS and with the institutional review conducted by ASEAN in 2015.<sup>41</sup>

## RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The EAS has not yet met its potential to become the primary cooperative body in the Asia-Pacific due to institutional constraints, great-power competition, and the divergent views that the United States, China, and Japan have of the forum. The prospect for the EAS to promote regional peace and stability is limited as the great powers compete for influence and ASEAN is incapable of managing inter-state competition among EAS members. Still, the EAS can play a small part in stabilising great-power relations in the midst of shifts in the regional distribution of power. In particular, it can help institutionalise great-power dynamics by promoting diplomatic rules of engagement acceptable to all. If observed, rules of engagement can contribute to the preservation of a stable and peaceful regional order. The EAS should emphasise three informal rules that have defined security multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific since the 1990s. These are: a balance of influence between the involved parties, a reliance on a cooperative security approach, and active ASEAN leadership.

First, preserving a balance of influence between the involved parties is critical to the stability of the overall multilateral architecture. The EAS should continue to lock in the United States, China, India, Japan, as well as a series of middle powers like Australia, Indonesia, and South Korea to the multilateral security architecture. At present, the EAS already has all the important players at the table but this should not be taken for granted as great-power interest in the EAS may waver as a result of increased regional rivalry and/or domestic factors. The EAS should aim therefore to secure long-term American and Chinese engagement irrespective of rising bilateral competition and domestic developments linked to the Trump administration and Chinese party politics. By bringing all the key players to the table, the EAS can help in guaranteeing the sovereign rights of all its members. In particular, the small and middle powers in the Asia-Pacific have an interest in strengthening the multilateral

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<sup>40</sup> Kim, “Politics of regionalism in East Asia,” p. 131.

<sup>41</sup> Kei Koga, “Japan’s ‘strategic coordination’ in 2015: ASEAN, Southeast Asia, and Abe’s diplomatic agenda,” in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2016*, eds. Malcolm Cook and Daljit Singh (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016), p. 69.

architecture to multiply their influence and prevent the emergence of a bipolar or concert system that would exclude them.

Second, and despite the change in geopolitics, the EAS should continue to adopt a cooperative approach to security management and promote standard international norms and principles. Based on the notion of inclusiveness, the cooperative security model focuses on dialogue and confidence-building measures to improve the climate of relations. Fora like the EAS do not try to replace military alliances and partnerships but rather co-exist with them in the promotion of security.

Finally, ASEAN should continue to lead the EAS in light of its own institutional experience and the lack of an alternative leader acceptable to all participants. ASEAN has driven multilateral security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific since the early 1990s and it has established and operated a variety of overlapping security fora. The latter have incorporated economic-security linkages as part of their cooperative structures and taken on new security issues ranging from terrorism to health concerns. The United States, China, and Japan have so far not questioned ASEAN's managerial role in the cooperative process. Still, there is a need for ASEAN to better implement and coordinate its initiatives. The regional body has to demonstrate the substance of its centrality so that the EAS can be more effective and outcome-driven. A particular challenge for ASEAN is to strengthen the conflict management capabilities of the multilateral security architecture, as it remains too weak in its ability to prevent and resolve disputes before they escalate into open conflicts.

The Southeast Asian states have long realised the need to rely on cooperative security mechanisms to maintain their relevance and avoid being excluded from a strategic landscape dictated solely by the great powers. Likewise, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand have advocated the benefits of Asia-Pacific multilateralism. Despite all its shortcomings, the EAS brings together the leaders of 18 Asia-Pacific countries and therefore remains the best platform to discuss contrasting views on security and lessen overall mistrust.

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