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East Asia Summit 2010: Big Step Forward, or Business-as-Usual?

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Synopsis

The East Asia Summit 2010 has been described as a "significant step forward" following the inclusion of America and Russia. But until deep-seated tensions over perceived Chinese hegemony and doubts about ASEAN centrality are judiciously managed, the Summit will likely stall than flourish.

Commentary

ON 30 October 2010, the East Asia Summit (EAS) met in Hanoi for only the fifth time. The meeting confirmed the entry of Russia and the United States into the EAS – a "significant step forward", according to Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong – thereby enlarging the group from sixteen to eighteen members.

EAFTA or CEPEA?

Calling for a moratorium on expansion and a period of consolidation, Mr. Lee identified the Summit's next crossroads: To establish an East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA) comprising ASEAN plus China, Japan and South Korea, a move favoured by China, or the Comprehensive Economic Partnership for East Asia (CEPEA), a Japan-sponsored idea that links East Asian economies with those of India, Australia and New Zealand? Refusing to see these as either/or options, Mr. Lee, possibly with a nod to simmering differences between Beijing and Tokyo on the shape and substance of East Asian regionalism, urged his fellow EAS leaders to "be ambitious and let both projects advance to maximise benefits".

Ambition indeed. Forging a leaders-led group that boasts the major powers as members is no small achievement. But the roadblocks that stand in the way to meaningful collaboration are not insignificant, and no EAS leader, not least Mr. Lee, is unaware of them. The boldness of his proposal – pursue the EAFTA and CEPEA plans concurrently – implies that he believes those roadblocks are not insurmountable. On the other hand, the proposal is a tacit yet acute reminder of worrisome political dynamics that persist and pervade East Asian affairs. At least two longstanding concerns are noteworthy, both which, if left unattended, could keep the EAS in indefinite limbo or, worse, cause it to regress.

Accommodating China

First, in a critical sense, the EAFTA and CEPEA plans reflect deep tensions in East Asian regionalism. The founding of the EAS in 2005, initially with China's enthusiastic backing, was quickly followed by tense disagreement. On the one hand are the countries that favoured the inclusion of India, Australia and New Zealand. On the other hand, there is China's insistence that membership should be kept to the ASEAN+3 countries (the ASEAN 10 plus China, Japan and South Korea). While China eventually acquiesced to a 16-member EAS, hints abounded that Chinese interest in it had dimmed, a perception further enhanced when the prospect of United States involvement in the Summit was subsequently broached.

Initially, opinion was divided over whether the ASEAN+3 or the EAS was the designated vehicle to fulfilling the shared vision for an East Asian Community. Crucially, at their 2009 Summit at Hua Hin, Thailand, EAS leaders clarified that the ASEAN+3 was to be the "main vehicle" for building the Community, "with ASEAN as the driving force". Yet the concern refused to go away. The EAS continued to run feasibility studies on the CEPEA idea, with at least one report claiming that the GDPs of Summit countries would increase by two percent. Here one might be forgiven for imagining the clarification on the ASEAN+3 at Hua Hin as a possible concession to China in return for the continued emphasis on the CEPEA.

Diplomatic niceties aside, some worry over China's putative dominance of East Asia. According to this logic, the incorporation of India and Australia, and now Russia and the United States, into the EAS would furnish the rest of East Asia with options by which to balance China's enormous economic and diplomatic heft. While there is broad agreement that the CEPEA makes good economic sense – possibly more so than the EAFTA alone – political and strategic considerations also weigh heavily in the overall calculi of countries backing the CEPEA.

Centralising ASEAN

Second, the aura of indispensability that once shrouded ASEAN is today fraying. Harried efforts are being made to reiterate its continued relevance in regional affairs. According to George Yeo, Singapore's foreign minister, big power interest in the EAS is "a triumph of ASEAN diplomacy" because it is an explicit acknowledgement by the powers – which did likewise at the ASEAN Regional Forum in July – of "the centrality of ASEAN" in Asian regionalism. Singapore's chief diplomat could not be clearer: "We [ASEAN] do not want the agenda to be taken out of our hands".

Presumably, the concern to maintain ASEAN as the centre of gravity in regional affairs arose in the light of challenges to its position as the fulcrum of the region's architecture. Proposals from Australia's Kevin Rudd and Japan's Yukio Hatoyama on a new regional vision for Asia raised doubts about an ASEAN-based architecture. Both visions relied instead on various formulations of big-power concert as the preferred foundation on which to build a viable architecture. Unsurprisingly, neither formulation was acceptable to ASEAN.

Serendipitously for ASEAN, both proposals sputtered when their chief backers, Rudd and Hatoyama, lost their premierships. Inherent flaws notwithstanding, the proposals broached a concern shared by many about ASEAN centrality: Is it the means to a more prosperous and secure Asia, or an end in itself? Will an ASEAN-led EAS be the *uber*-institution where pressing regional concerns are seriously addressed, or will it merely serve as a platform for ASEAN to preserve its own primacy, potentially at the expense of broader regional interests?

EAS 2010: Monument or footprint?

There is no question the 2010 Summit constitutes a milestone of sorts. That the world's major powers have seen fit to join the EAS is a good indication that ASEAN, as Singapore's George Yeo put it, is "alive" to the big boys. But if this is as far as the EAS goes, then the maintenance of ASEAN centrality is at best Pyrrhic. As William Faulkner once mused, monuments only say, "At least I got this far", whereas footprints say, "This is where I was when I moved again". The joint pursuit of the EAFTA and the CEPEA – and keeping the eyes of all Summit members on the prize – is a worthwhile step forward not only for the EAS and the region as a whole, but equally for ASEAN in proving itself a regional player of consequence.

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