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REINVIGORATING THE EAST ASIA SUMMIT

By R. M. Michael Tene

SYNOPSIS

The strategic environment in East Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region has changed significantly since the establishment of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005. The changes have posed growing challenges to the EAS. In this context, ASEAN leaders may wish to reinvigorate the EAS as it approaches its 20th Anniversary in 2025 to better respond to the strategic landscape. Reviewing the agendas, priorities and structure of the EAS, aligning it with the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific, and strengthening relevant instruments to promote peace and security in the region may be useful in this respect.

COMMENTARY

Next year, 2025, will mark the 20th Anniversary of the East Asia Summit. When the EAS was established in 2005 and enlarged in 2011, the strategic environment in East Asia was marked by relatively benign relationships between the US, China, and Russia.

Since then, and especially after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and the increasing trade frictions between the US and China, the relationships have deteriorated. Fault lines have hardened, and efforts by these powers to extend their respective spheres of influence in the region have intensified. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea has resulted in increased freedom of navigation operations by the US and its allies leading to more tensions.

This uncertain environment poses rising challenges to the effectiveness of the EAS, a leaders-led mechanism in East Asia aimed at promoting peace, stability and economic prosperity in the region.

In the past, the EAS has been successful in promoting cooperation on “soft issues” in six areas: the environment and energy, education, finance, global health and pandemics, natural disaster management, and ASEAN Connectivity. It also serves as an important forum for leaders of EAS member countries to discuss global and regional security issues.

However, as the global and regional political, security and economic environments deteriorate, there are growing expectations for the EAS to play a more significant role in mitigating such developments and continuing to realise its primary aim of promoting peace, stability and prosperity in the region.

The wider Indo-Pacific region has recently seen the establishment of several multilateral partnerships, notably QUAD 2.0 and AUKUS. The emergence of such arrangements has led some quarters to question the relevance of EAS and other ASEAN-led regional mechanisms. In reality, QUAD and AUKUS cannot replace the ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the EAS, which are inclusive and not exclusive.

Nonetheless, the emergence of such arrangements reflects the fact that some important security interests cannot be accommodated in the EAS framework. Given this background, how can we reinvigorate the EAS to meet the new challenges?

Mitigating the Impact of Global Issues

It is inevitable that global issues need to be discussed at the EAS since they will significantly impact peace and prosperity in the region. However, it should be understood that the EAS is not the forum to resolve these global issues, as other multilateral or bilateral fora exist specifically designed to address and find solutions to them. Instead, these global issues should be addressed by EAS with the view of finding ways to mitigate their adverse impact on the region.

ASEAN could help by exploring ways in which “hard security” issues affecting the region and impinging on EAS members can be discussed constructively under the EAS framework to prevent regional conflicts. For instance, establishing an informal track 1.5 for symposiums on security in the Indo-Pacific could be a start. Strengthening the mandate of the EAS Ambassadors in Jakarta to promote peace and security could also be considered.

Widening EAS Strategic Landscape

Increasingly, the strategic landscape of Southeast Asia is no longer dominated by the East Asia and Asia Pacific perspectives. Instead, Southeast Asia is now seen as the centre of the strategic construct of the Indo-Pacific, given its geographical location at the meeting point of the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean.

The various regional mechanisms developed by ASEAN have also served as the main regional mechanisms that brought together all the relevant Indo-Pacific countries. Some of these ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the EAS and the ASEAN Regional Forum, are suitable for serving as regional mechanisms for the Indo-Pacific. As the EAS already consists of all the major powers in the Indo-Pacific, widening the strategic

landscape of the EAS from East Asia to the wider Indo-Pacific arena will further enhance the strategic role of the EAS and ASEAN.

The Indo-Pacific construct will further entrench ASEAN as the centre and driver of regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. In this regard, as also alluded to in the AOIP, ASEAN could consider institutionalising the participation of some key regional organisations in the Indo-Pacific into the EAS. For instance, ASEAN could provide “Observer status” in the EAS for organisations such as the Pacific Islands Forum, the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific

The AOIP is ASEAN’s strategic document on the Indo-Pacific. While other ASEAN Dialogue Partners, including some EAS members, have issued their respective Indo-Pacific strategies, it should be noted that the AOIP is the only Indo-Pacific strategy that has received the support of all EAS members.

Therefore, the AOIP is the only viable strategic document that can serve as the basis for EAS cooperation in the wider Indo-Pacific. More importantly, amid a strategic environment marked by rivalries and tensions, the AOIP underlines the *narrative of cooperation*, which should be the main narrative in reinvigorating the EAS.

To strengthen ASEAN Centrality in the EAS and the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN may want to consider further aligning the respective principles, objectives and priorities of the AOIP and EAS. Periodically, the priorities of the AOIP and EAS could be reviewed and aligned to ensure that those priorities remain *the priorities*, allowing AOIP priorities to be carried out under the EAS framework and vice versa. Thus, the AOIP can underpin the EAS as the primary ASEAN-led regional mechanism in the Indo-Pacific.

“The Holy Grail”

In 2011, EAS participating countries issued the Declaration of the East Asia Summit on the Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations. This is an important document in which all EAS countries declared that they will be guided by, among others, the following principles:

- Enhancement of mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity.
- Respect for international law.
- Renunciation of the threat or use of force against another state, consistent with the UN Charter.
- Settlement of differences and disputes by peaceful means.

Considering the current geopolitical climate in the Indo-Pacific and in pursuit of reinvigorating the EAS and boosting confidence and strategic trust, ASEAN and other EAS participating countries may wish to reiterate their commitment to the principles in the Declaration.

As the Declaration is a non-binding document, one way to strengthen EAS’

commitment to the principles is to craft a legally binding treaty containing the principles or some of the most pertinent principles in the Declaration. This is akin to developing a Treaty of Amity and Cooperation type of legal instrument for a wider Indo-Pacific geographical footprint.

This proposal is not new; it was first mooted years ago by the former Foreign Minister of Indonesia, Marty Natalegawa. While this idea might be a tall order at the moment, reviving discussions on the issue may be worthwhile as part of efforts promoting peace and security in the region and reinvigorating the EAS.

Conclusion

Considering the growing geopolitical-economic challenges in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN may wish to reinvigorate the East Asia Summit as the primary leaders-led regional mechanism, not only in East Asia but also in the Indo-Pacific. Further aligning the AOIP and the EAS will strengthen the EAS in the Indo-Pacific context and entrench ASEAN's central role in this region.

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