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ASEAN'S Triumph

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Key Points

- With the United States and Russia joining the East Asia Summit this year, ASEAN's claim to its centrality in East Asian and Asia-Pacific regionalism is confirmed.
- The future for formal regional institutions that are not based in and originated from ASEAN is bleak.
- ASEAN's central role as East Asia and the Asia-Pacific's regional convener has not been matched by ASEAN regional leadership.

Introduction

From its inception in 1967 the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has had as one of its guiding, and defensive, principles, that member-states should work more closely together to strengthen their individual abilities to manage their relations with the many extra-regional and interested great powers.

As the organisation's own overview states,

"In the process ASEAN leaders realised that their countries could never attain national stability and socioeconomic development if Southeast Asia - afflicted with strife and Cold War rivalry - remained in political turmoil. The ASEAN member states strove for resilience, both individually as nations and collectively as a subregional grouping, for they knew the association would not amount to much if external powers regularly intervened in Southeast Asian affairs."

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In the post-Cold War era, one of the key ways ASEAN leaders have “strove for collective resilience” has been their collective commitment to ASEAN centrality and their coordinated efforts to ensure that extra-regional powers (great, middle and small) accept it. At the centre of ASEAN centrality is that the Association should be the “driving force” of East Asian and Asia-Pacific regionalism through ASEAN-based regional institutions.

Three factors at least have increased the importance of centrality to ASEAN. First, the post-Cold War shift of the global power from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean is resetting great power relations in the Asia-Pacific and stoking fears in Southeast Asia of great power interference or abandonment.

Second, non-ASEAN states like Australia with similar concerns have been active proponents of Asia-Pacific regionalism in ways that seem threatening to ASEAN and its centrality claim. The Australian-Japan APEC initiative was the region’s first post-Cold War formal regional body and one that does not have its origins in ASEAN and still today does not include all ASEAN members.

Third, the slow and uneven process of intra-ASEAN integration and confidence-building heightens the importance to the Association of being able to show to members its utility in managing relations with extra-regional powers. ASEAN, since the beginning, has been more effective at providing a common diplomatic front than at forging a sense of community within. Yet, as the ASEAN Secretariat warned its members in 2007, “There is no guarantee that it [ASEAN] will continue to be relevant in the coming decades and remain the driving force in regional cooperation.”²

ASEAN’s Triumph

2010 was a banner year for ASEAN centrality. The United States and Russia agreed to join the leaders-level East Asia Summit (EAS) boosting its total membership to 18 states – the 10 ASEAN members, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand and now the United States and Russia. Ironically, in 2011, the same year that the United States hosts the APEC leaders meeting for the second time, President Obama is scheduled right after to fly to his Asian ‘home away from home’, Indonesia, to attend his first EAS meeting.

The leaders meeting and its unique ability annually to bring together the leaders of the major powers in the Asia-Pacific along with key middle and smaller powers is APEC’s jewel in the crown. Yet, from 2011, the EAS will offer the same and more as India is a member of this ASEAN-based organization but not of APEC. Into the future, can the US President overcome the well-known scheduling limitation of only one guaranteed trip to Asia a year in support of regionalism or will the President have to choose. Given that the Chinese, Japanese and South Korean leaders also attend the ASEAN+3 meeting at the same time as the EAS, it seems the EAS has at least two advantages over APEC.

2010 also saw the first ever meeting of the awkwardly named ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting +8 (ADMM+8) with the +8 being a perfect match to the non-ASEAN members of the EAS. ADMM+8 is

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the only official regional meeting of defence ministers that includes all the major powers. Before October last year, the Shangri-la Dialogue, run in Singapore by a British think tank, filled this important gap for dialogue and signaling. Now it has an official, ASEAN-centred alternative. In 2010, China's defence minister did attend the first ADMM+8 but not the Shangri-la Dialogue, a Dialogue that bravely and correctly included participation from Taiwan officials in the past.

Finally, 2010 saw the political death of two nascent regionalism initiatives, one from the Rudd administration in Australia and one from the Hatoyama one in Japan, that were not clearly centred in ASEAN and clearly were conceived outside it. In both cases, the death of the regionalism idea was part and parcel of the death of their respective administrations. Neither Rudd nor Hatoyama's successors, despite being from the same political parties, have chosen to continue with these initiatives. Clearly, in the case of Rudd's stillborn Asia-Pacific Community initiative, sustained collective resistance to it from ASEAN members helped limit its appeal regionally and domestically in Australia.³

Today, all the major powers in the Asia-Pacific accept the principle of ASEAN centrality in terms of formal regionalism and all have signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, a pre-requisite to receiving an ASEAN invitation to the EAS. None is likely to follow in the footsteps of Rudd or Hatoyama and question this acceptance. The EAS, with its expanded membership, now poses a serious challenge to the APEC leaders meeting (a meeting that has yet to have a host beyond 2012). The ADMM+8 process could also in the future could pose as a serious, and less public, alternative to the Shangri-la Dialogue. ASEAN is now the convenor of the most important meeting of East Asian leaders (the ASEAN+3 process) and Asia-Pacific leaders (the EAS that includes India) and, arguably, Asia-Pacific defence ministers (ADMM+8 including China).

ASEAN's Challenges

As ASEAN leaders repeatedly remind themselves and each other, this triumph comes with a serious responsibility; ensuring that the triumph of ASEAN centrality when it comes to formal East Asian and Asia-Pacific regionalism does not seriously undercut the vitality of this very regionalism itself. Answering this challenge is key to ASEAN relevance to the wider region and to its member-states.

ASEAN is clearly, as it claims to be, the 'driving force' behind East Asian and Asia-Pacific formal regionalism. It is still not clear though if it is driving this regionalism with the hand brake on. Rudd's failed initiative itself was 'driven' by the belief that the present formal regional groupings, all ASEAN-based except APEC, were not up to the task of dealing with the rapid and uncertain changes in the regional order. Off the record, many non-ASEAN officials involved in these organizations raise frustrations that ASEAN centrality does not equate or cannot equate to ASEAN leadership.

This background of doubt poses four intertwined challenges to ASEAN centrality. The first could be the most pressing and the most outside ASEAN control. The United States' commit-

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ment to ASEAN centrality and through it the EAS is the least certain as it is the newest and hence least tested. Russia attended the first EAS in 2005 as a guest of the host Malaysia. Moscow signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in November 2004, one year before Australia. The United States only signed (not ratified) this treaty in July 2009, one year after North Korea. 2012 poses a particularly stringent test of American commitment. It is an election year and one that is bound to be fought on domestic economic issues. Yet, the President has the not so attractive options of attending APEC in the Russian Far East (over 10,000 kilometres from the US capital) or the EAS in Cambodia (over 14,000 kilometers away from Washington DC) or both. Can or will the president attend both, particularly as neither host is a close ally or partner of the United States or paragons of liberal values, or potentially neither.

A second, structural challenge to ASEAN centrality leading to ASEAN leadership and effective regionalism is that the EAS, at leaders' level, only meets for an afternoon around a large plenary table with less time than APEC available to leaders for side-line meetings. At the moment, the ADMM+8 is scheduled to meet for one afternoon every three years. It will be interesting to see how many defence ministers remain in 2013 from the 2010 meeting. Neither organization has a strong institutional basis, a basis ASEAN itself is unable to provide and one that ASEAN centrality may make others less willing to provide. While APEC has annual membership dues that help fund the workings of the organization in between leaders meetings, the EAS does not.

This makes the EAS, and the ADMM+8, particularly vulnerable to ineffective meetings and clashes over the agenda, an agenda that ASEAN is formally in charge of. Indonesia, as host of the first expanded EAS is already feeling this challenge as the United States is keen for the EAS to become a more strategically-oriented forum that discusses regional security issues while other powerful and older members are not. The EAS in particular is not set up to deliver concrete outcomes yet arriving at an agenda that all can agree on that is not simply the lowest common denominator of diplomatic nicety is already proving difficult. In a similar vein the United States is keen for the ADMM+8 process to build on its unassuming beginnings and become a more regular and more robust forum. If this does not happen it will likely aggravate the first challenge. If it does happen others, like the People's Republic of China, could be less keen.

The third problem is a logistical one. ASEAN's policy of rotating hosting rights of ASEAN-centred institutions among its members undercuts the predictability of these meetings. We saw in 2006 when the Philippines delayed the EAS and then again in 2008 when Thailand's domestic political troubles precluded an EAS meeting. Burma's membership in ASEAN will inevitably cause a problem on this score when and if Burma is allowed to be the ASEAN host. The small size of Laos and Brunei Darussalam also impinge upon their ability to host such major events effectively.

Finally, ASEAN centrality and formal regionalism is under threat from other less scripted forms of regional interaction that are less weighed down by protocol. It is telling that the Chinese defence minister participated in the Shangri-la Dialogue for the first time in 2011. To help attract the second most important power in the region, the Dialogue over time has watered down Taiwan's participation to where Taiwan non-officials now only participate and they only participate as "invited guests"

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of the host.

On the trade side, the slow bay steps that the EAS and ASEAN+3 have taken towards considering a regional free trade area may be derailed or downgraded by the American embrace of the ministerial-level Trans-Pacific Partnership process and the magnetic effect this could have on Japan, South Korea and other Asian states to join. Vietnam and Australia had already joined the Partnership started by New Zealand, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam and Chile prior to the world's largest economy. The United States is looking forward to being able to announce significant progress in this partnership at the APEC summit in Honolulu.

Conclusion

The future of formal regionalism in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific is now more closely bound through ASEAN centrality to ASEAN regional leadership and capability. At the same time, ASEAN's own relevance to its membership is more closely tied to this same issue. ASEAN's triumph is ASEAN's challenge and a challenge the other members of the EAS and ADMM+8 are bound to watching and judging closely.

References

- 1 Please see <http://www.aseansec.org/92.htm> Viewed 29 May, 2011.
- 2 Please see <http://www.asean.org/19741.htm>. Viewed 29 May, 2011.
- 3 Please see <http://www.siiionline.org/?q=programmes/commentary/the-asia-pacific-community-proposal-community-directorate-or-network> as an example of ASEAN-based criticisms of the Rudd initiative and its lack of adherence to ASEAN centrality. Visited on 31 May, 2011.

IPGRC Research Mission

A primary focus of our research agenda is on political dynamics of governance and institutional innovations in the provision of public goods and regulation especially as it relates to economic and social development in the region.

This will address issues relating to the organisation of markets and politics, and their effectiveness and fairness in addressing complex economic and social problems. It will also include an examination of the transformations of political organisation and authority at various scales – global, national, and regional – which have a bearing on the complex multilevel governance of the delivery of public goods and regulations.

The centre has a particular focus on the global and regional challenges arising from the shifting tectonic plates of economic and political power to the Indo-Pacific region.