

## Why the East Asia Summit Must Return To Its Roots

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Actions and personalities matter in international relations. They shape the tenor of discussions, pace of negotiations, and content of decisions. However, in a region where actions often have to be deduced from the unspoken, perception and perspective form equally important parts of the equation.

Perception, after all, feeds reality. Perspective can either clarify or distort it. Inherently subjective, both can have a significant impact on regional security and stability.

If, from Washington, you gaze across the Pacific, you would be apt to notice not only China's rapid economic and military rise but along with that, its growing show of strength in territorial disputes and behind-the-scenes power play in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

With an 11 per cent hike in China's 2012 defense budget from last year, the launch of a fully functional aircraft carrier, the successful arrested deck landing of its Shenyang J-15 fighter jets, and development of a stealth aircraft prototype, you might be slightly unnerved by the trajectory of your competitor's "peaceful rise" especially when it is also the largest-sized military in the world.

You would also observe – whether as a function of military strength or pure coincidence – a pronounced assertiveness in Chinese claims to disputed areas in its surrounding waters. From Washington, you will ponder how left unchecked, this might affect the freedom of navigation, your treaty alliance obligations in East and Southeast Asia should the worst happen, and the future of the regional frameworks you have now entrenched yourself in.

By contrast, if you were sitting in Beijing, it would be increasingly difficult to brush off suspicions of US containment or encirclement especially with the United States' roaring return to Asia. The superpower has matched policy with action so its pivot or rebalance towards Asia is being translated through a range of diplomatic, economic, and military initiatives. These include revitalization of its alliances and partnerships, institutionalization of its reengagement with ASEAN, push for the Trans-Pacific Partnership and deployment of rotational forces to Australia. Despite US protestations to the contrary, it would seem incredibly naïve to believe that this rebalancing did not include a China calculus.

It bears reminder that the United States' reengagement with Asia is backed by its mighty defence budget of \$740b, dwarfing China's \$100b. And with all that has been written about China's one aircraft carrier, much less has been said about the United States' own fleet of carriers, which makes up slightly more than half of those currently in service in the world today.

Unlike the United States, China has no formal alliances in the region apart from its "blood alliance" with North Korea. Not only does the United States have defence alliances with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, it also enjoys a special relationship with Singapore where it has a naval installation and where it is now looking to station up to four of its Littoral Combat Ships. Over the last couple of years, the United States launched a comprehensive partnership with Indonesia and a strategic partnership with India. Its overtures in the region have also been well-received by countries with which it has traditionally had more contentious or muted ties such as Vietnam and Malaysia. Although it is still too early to tell, a more open Myanmar now also appears to be adopting a more balanced foreign policy between China and the United States. For China, it is starting to look increasingly lonely in its own neighbourhood.

If you were contemplating this contestation in the ASEAN headquarters in Jakarta, you would probably be having a bit of a headache. It is to ASEAN's credit that it has attracted a majority of the world's major players from within and outside the region – from China and the United States, to Russia and Brazil. However, with at least two competing heavyweights intensely focused on the region, a divergence of ten national positions among member states, and a rotational chair, ASEAN must not only drive its own community-building agenda amidst flaring tensions but also retain the long-term interest of these major players without being overwhelmed by them.

This means actually leading, rather than muddling along. It also means that ASEAN will have to adapt and innovate in response to an environment in flux, rather than continuing business as usual. This is a tall order – especially for a grouping like ASEAN that operates on the basis of the lowest common denominator – but not impossible.

How Beijing, Washington, and the ten ASEAN capitals each views developments in the region is a composite picture that is pixelated by national and often competing interests. What ASEAN can do is to offer a point of convergence by distilling perceptions and managing expectations.

It has at its disposal the East Asian Summit, a gathering originally conceived as a forum for strategic dialogue to promote community building in the region. Criticised for its vagueness of substance and seeming lack of direction, the EAS adopted priority areas of functional cooperation as its agenda items along the way. These areas – finance, education, energy, disaster management, pandemics prevention, and connectivity – are important relationship builders. In typical ASEAN fashion, they are also safe and uncontroversial.

While specificity provides purpose and direction, paradoxically it is the EAS' nebulosity – and ASEAN's reputation as a talk shop – that may evolve to be its greater strength. Contrary to the EAS' plenary session which is usually a scripted, ritualistic, and somewhat contrived affair, the leaders retreat session affords space for a candid exchange on pressing regional issues at the highest level. Since the retreat produces no joint statement or public document of its discussion, there is greater opportunity to address complex issues of "common interest and concern" head-on behind closed doors.

The aim is not to add to, internationalize, or even resolve issues within the EAS in the short-term. Rather, it is to allow the EAS to function as it was originally intended – to clarify intentions, allay apprehensions, and build trust and confidence. Ultimately, an annual gathering of leaders from around the most robust region in the world should capitalize on their time together not by rehashing prose but by unraveling (mis)perceptions, perspectives, and hidden hands.

The EAS was envisioned to develop into an "open, inclusive, transparent and outward-looking forum". With much at stake for all sides in the region, it is time the EAS – and ASEAN – came into its own.

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