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## What to expect from the ASEAN and East Asia summits

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This is a big week for political manoeuvring in the Asia Pacific. China is hosting APEC (Beijing spent [\\$1 billion](#) preparing for the event), to be followed by the ASEAN and East Asia Summits in Myanmar this week and next weekend's G20 Summit in Brisbane.

Here we'll look at the summitry starting today in the Myanmar capital, Naypyidaw, and round up some matters likely to be on the agenda.



As I noted in a [post on the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting](#) earlier this year, ASEAN-led meetings are generally decent talkshops with no hard policy outcomes. ASEAN is 'not about breakthroughs', as its former Secretary General [reminded us](#) last week. Instead, the bloc

works on an 'incremental basis'. As Satuk Steven Wong [explained](#) earlier this year, 'Asean-ness' is still a long way off.

Yet behind the scenes the summitry could swing some pivotal policy punches.

There will be crucial talks on the ASEAN Economic Community. The AEC, due to be implemented next year, will usher in greater integration in trade and freedom of movement. It is behind schedule and (among other [concerns](#)) many of the specifics are still half-baked.

Economic integration frameworks will be a key component of this week's summitry. For the US, and for the credibility of Obama's Asia pivot, making headway on the TPP will be crucial. Japan remains a big hurdle, but the vast majority of Southeast Asia states are on board. Many Southeast Asia states have joined China's Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank too, but others including Indonesia, Australia, South Korea, Japan and the US have resisted stepping into the murky framework of the Beijing-controlled bank.

President Aquino of the Philippines has said he will speak on China's [activity](#) in the South China Sea. The window for hard talk may have closed, however, with Vietnam's relations with Beijing [improving](#) since [the rig dispute](#) earlier this year. The extension of a runway on Woody Island in the Paracels has many in the region worried that China will attempt to install an Air Defence Identification Zone (or ADIZ, similar to the Senkaku/Diaoyu ADIZ in 2013) over the South China Sea in the near future. A [leaked ASEAN draft statement](#) (which also alluded to a South China Sea ADIZ) expects progress to be made on the negotiations of the South China Sea Code of Conduct during the meetings.

Epidemics may also feature in discussions. While [Ebola fears in the region](#) may push health onto the agenda, this attention should instead be focused on the spread of drug-resistant epidemics such as [malaria](#) and [tuberculosis](#), as well as the worrying increases in [dengue](#).

The Philippines is keen to talk about disaster risk reduction. This is unsurprising given that last week marked the first anniversary of Typhoon Haiyan. 4760 are still living in tents and 19,700 in transitional housing, according to [OCHA](#). This topic will likely have the ears of Thailand and Myanmar, which have required the most aid for disaster relief [this year](#).

According to [one Filipino official](#), ISIS will also be on the minds of most participating countries – and particularly for Manila, which is [upping the ante](#) against the [ISIS-linked](#) Abu Sayyaf Group. Numerous ASEAN member states are dealing with their own fights against ISIS-inspired and other insurgent groups, among them [Singapore](#), [Thailand](#), [Malaysia](#), [Indonesia](#). There have been calls for greater regional cooperation in tackling ISIS, something China would likely support, as it could give Beijing carte blanche in tackling Uighurs in Xinjiang. For ASEAN, numerous plans are already in place – notably the Comprehensive Plan of Action on Counter Terrorism and the Convention on Counter Terrorism — but these could be further strengthened.

On the sidelines, Malaysia may raise some concerns with Thailand over its [arming of civilians](#) in the country's restive south, with worries of these tensions spilling over its borders. Aquino would do well to pull Thia coup leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha aside and

schooling him on how to end a long and deadly insurgent battle through negotiation rather than guns, but that's unlikely.

Obama will earn his keep this week. He missed this summitry last year due to budget wrangling in Congress, and after poor [midterm](#) election results last week his capacity to live up to the Asia pivot (let alone his 'first Pacific president' promise) is in question.

He is running a host of bilateral meetings on the sidelines, including with Xi Jinping, Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi. Myanmar has had one of its worst months since the democratic transition began, increasing the pressure on Obama to talk tough on reforms and to pressure Naypyidaw on constitutional changes to allow Suu Kyi to run in the 2015 elections (though such pressure is unlikely to work). Obama will also have to speak (at least privately) on the situation in Rakhine state that has led to over [250,000](#) people being displaced. Obama has been asked by one activist group to '[just say their name](#)' – Rohingya. In the same breath he could pull Thailand's military government aside for a similar discussion on the importance of upholding human rights. [This](#) Amnesty International report explains why.

One US official spoke to [The Diplomat](#) on the Administration's priorities in Myanmar. The overarching message was "'to come out of this trip with sort of a clear statement of where the Burmese government stands" on a number of important issues.'

The summitry will also be about the posturing of India and Russia, as their own Asia pivots take shape. India, which has emphasised its '[Look East](#)' policy this year, is reengaging with the region; exports to ASEAN are expected to reach [\\$280 billion in the next 10 years](#). As for Russia, months after the MH17 incident, it may get a frosty reception from Malaysia at the EAS, and this may be the location of the much anticipated 'shirtfront' on Putin by Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott. With the timing lost on few, Russia announced last week that it will shortly undertake [live fire drills](#) in the South China Sea.

The timing of the summitry is also significant for Indonesia's new president, Joko Widodo. This week's meetings will be his first big trip since coming to office and will involve meetings with Obama and other key leaders.

As always there will be a lot of cross-over with the two summits. As such, there may also be talk of [how the two summits should work together](#), and how big agendas can be trimmed and ultimately become more efficient. There will be some tired souls come next Monday.