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East Asian Institutionalism: Where do we go now?

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THE inaugural meeting of the East Asia Summit (EAS) is an important event for the region. As a new grouping of 16 members, the EAS is a distinct institutional expression that may complement the activities of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN+3 (APT). Besides its *raison d'etre* and its potential relevance in the coming years, the creation of a new regional arrangement forces us to reflect on the kind of institutional architecture being developed in East Asia today.

Trends in East Asian Institutionalism

Some trends characterize the East Asian multilateral architecture when examined from a security perspective.

First, the region now accommodates a great variety of security structures, ranging from bilateral to multilateral arrangements. The nature of such arrangements varies from military alliances to institutional expressions of cooperative and comprehensive security.

Second, East Asia has seen the emergence of new multilateral institutions since the end of the Cold War, such as APEC, the ARF and the EAS, as well as groupings operating at track two levels like the Shangri-La Dialogue and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP). East Asia has therefore moved from being dangerously under-institutionalized, as famously argued by Aaron L. Friedberg in his *International Security* article, to having a variety of overlapping multilateral structures.

Third, particularly since the Asian financial crisis, there has been a growing recognition of the close relationship between economics and security. The APT has sought to incorporate economic-security linkages as part of its cooperative structures. ASEAN perceives the construction of security and economic communities in Southeast Asia as complementary and mutually reinforcing. The objective is to move towards deeper economic integration while developing a region free from military conflict.

Fourth, existing institutions in East Asia have taken on 'new' security roles since 9/11 and the 2002 Bali bombings. ASEAN, the ARF and even APEC, originally formed to encourage trade and investment liberalization, have been accorded a role in the campaign against terrorism. Health concerns, transnational crimes and other issues are also increasingly discussed at the multilateral level.

Finally, despite the presence of a growing number of overlapping structures, institutionalism in East Asia continues to suffer from weak structural capacities that limit their ability to respond to security challenges. The ARF has enjoyed some success in confidence-building but it is questionable whether it will succeed in moving toward preventive diplomacy. The APT does not have the capabilities to address security challenges and the complex relations between China and Japan should continue to undermine its effectiveness. The EAS should in the short to medium term be expected to be another confidence-building exercise in the region.

Driving Forces in East Asian Institutionalism

In light of these trends, what will be the driving forces for change in East Asian institutionalism in the coming years? Institution building in the region should continue to be influenced by three primary factors: US participation, the nature of China's involvement and regionalism in Southeast Asia.

The United States has generally been supportive of multilateral initiatives in East Asia. The long-term relevance of multilateral structures may be undermined however by unilateralism in US foreign policy. The Bush administration has repeatedly indicated its preference for flexibility over institutionalized arrangements. A disinterested US participation would most likely weaken the multilateral architecture. The negative impact on the ARF of a non-active US involvement was already sensed when US Secretary of State, Dr Condoleezza Rice, decided not to attend the ministerial meeting in Vientiane in July 2005. East Asian institutionalism would certainly benefit from an active US participation that looks beyond the issues of terrorism and maritime security.

China has added a new diplomatic activism to its growing economic and military growth. The Chinese 'charm offensive' toward Southeast Asia, including its offer of a free trade area with ASEAN and its support for the EAS, is in contrast to China's previous suspicion of multilateralism. Still, will China continue to be an accommodating power or might it adopt a more assertive position in regional arrangements in the coming years? Assertiveness could consist of Beijing pressing for change in the norms of cooperation, adopting a restrictive position on the agenda setting, and/or pushing for a more exclusive approach in terms of membership.

The United States would most likely refuse to be excluded from regional institution-building. Washington has already indicated its concern about the exclusive model of the EAS. The Southeast Asian countries would be particularly uncomfortable with an assertive Chinese leadership. An ongoing accommodative Chinese participation would on the contrary contribute to the development of an institutional framework where multilateral arrangements complement one another in the promotion of peace and stability.

Finally, the future of East Asian institutionalism will be influenced by the strength of regionalism in Southeast Asia. For more than a decade, ASEAN has been driving multilateral cooperation in East Asia – whether in the form of the ARF, the APT and now the EAS. ASEAN's assigned managerial role derives as much from its unparalleled institutional experience in East Asia as from the lack of an alternative source of leadership acceptable to all. As long as it succeeds in being innovative, ASEAN should play a leading role in institution-building in East Asia. Whether ASEAN moves toward a new era of legalization

and regionalism as suggested by recent initiatives (ASEAN Communities and Charter) will therefore have an impact on East Asian institutionalism.

Strong regionalism in Southeast Asia combined with an active US participation and an accommodative Chinese foreign policy would constitute the best possible scenario for East Asian institutionalism. It could lead to a stronger ARF and APEC complemented by arrangements more limited in their participation and geographical scope like ASEAN, the APT and the EAS. The region should also be aware however of the consequences of less beneficial scenarios where regional institutions might compete and cancel each other out.

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