

East Asia Summit: Keeping the momentum going
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THE inaugural East Asia Summit (EAS) has come and gone. Already, some have described the EAS as a mere talk shop and another regional process heading nowhere. Others see the EAS as a constructive venture that could lead to a new process and even a grouping in the future which may rival Apec or even the Asean Plus Three process.

The question on everyone's mind is where do we go from here and how can we ensure the EAS finds a niche for itself in the web of regional and multilateral processes spun by Asean?

One cannot ignore the excitement and interest the EAS has aroused in the region and beyond. This reflects its potential force in world politics and economics if all its gears click into place.

This is especially so since the EAS countries collectively constitute half of the world's population, account for one-third of the global GDP, and hold half the world's foreign exchange reserves.

One message that came out clearly from the frank and candid discussion of the leaders at the EAS was that common concerns and the sense of a shared future are motivating the participating countries to work together.

The stability and prosperity of the region - and common challenges such as trans-boundary infectious diseases, terrorism and energy insecurity - provide a common platform for all to coalesce and cooperate.

There is a palpable need for a forum for the leaders of the participating countries to socialise with one another in a manner not possible in bilateral or localised contexts. As a result, they agreed to meet annually following the Asean Summit. They tasked their officials and the Asean Secretariat with looking at the next steps to substantiate the EAS.

In looking at the next steps, Asean will have to keep a number of things in mind:

- First, the EAS is a dialogue between Asean as a bloc and the other participants in the EAS. As such, it is a meeting of seven parties and not 16 countries. Therefore, consolidating the Asean Community will be a key factor.

The fundamental point is that any cooperation undertaken under the EAS umbrella should not dilute Asean integration and community-building but must complement and reinforce it.

- Second, the EAS will have to co-exist and complement the Asean Plus Three process, which has increased the comfort level among the Asean Plus Three countries - beside the Asean 10, China, Japan and South Korea.

Despite the tense relations between China and Japan, this process has brought about mutually beneficial cooperation in the last nine years.

The two tracks can develop in parallel. Just as connecting light bulbs in a parallel circuit will produce brighter light than a serial connection, EAS and Asean Plus Three developing side by side will reinforce East Asia's community-building efforts.

- Third, the EAS is not going to displace Apec and the Asean Plus One process with Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand.

Apec continues to be an important forum, enabling the US to be engaged with the region. Besides, US presidents have used the Apec Leaders' Summit to meet and conduct essential business with leaders from the region.

The Asean Plus One process with the Dialogue Partners has yielded good dividends for Asean, particularly in trade and investment liberalisation. Asean is developing free trade agreements with China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. By 2015, all these could facilitate the realisation of a giant free trade area in East Asia.

Since the EAS is not expected to produce any institutional mechanism as yet, implementation of substantive measures pertaining to the EAS will have to rely on mechanisms in the Asean Plus One process.

- Fourth, Asean should ensure that it stays the driving force behind the EAS, now and in the future. This means Asean will have to plan, initiate and coordinate the EAS process, in partnership with other EAS participants.

In doing so, it must balance the interests of all participants, while keeping a clear focus on tackling common issues and regional community building efforts, ensuring that the other regional processes remain viable and non-duplicative and that the EAS stays open and outward-looking.

Asean will have to ensure that the EAS does not become an Asean Plus Six or an Asean Plus Three Plus Three process as it will create a tiered structure. This will certainly be a disinvestment for the Plus Three countries as well as Australia, India and New Zealand, for the key factor of 'shared ownership' for cranking the EAS will be missing.

- Fifth, Asean has to maintain the EAS as a top-down process that leaders expressly desire. They would like to use the EAS as a brainstorming forum for coming up

with fresh and bold initiatives. However, setting up some form of mechanism to help coordinate and pursue the initiatives of the leaders is inevitable.

While EAS cooperative initiatives could be implemented using existing Asean Plus Three and Asean Plus One mechanisms, there should be a mechanism under the EAS to ensure overall coordination.

The leaders have mentioned the role the Asean Secretariat could play in coordinating the cooperative initiatives of the EAS, since Asean is the driving force of the EAS.

- Finally, on the issue of participation, Asean and the EAS participants should use the three criteria established by Asean for future participation in the EAS. These are: dialogue partnership with Asean; accession to Asean's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South-east Asia; and substantive relations between Asean and the interested country. In this regard, Russia's participation in future EAS sessions will have to be considered.

The EAS has been established with the successful summit in Kuala Lumpur. However, whether the EAS becomes part of the overall regional architecture will depend on what course of action Asean, together with the other EAS participants, takes.

Ultimately, the EAS should be seen as an endeavour of seven parties, driven by Asean, working collectively to define a shared future based on common interests.

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