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US and East Asia Summit: International Security Begins at Home

By Amos Khan and S.R. Joey Long

Synopsis

The political demise of prime ministers Yukio Hatoyama and Kevin Rudd is a reminder that national leaders' capacity to contribute to international security hinges on the stability of their domestic authority. As regional forums expand to include the United States, expect the American president to be occasionally absent from meetings for domestic reasons.

Commentary

TWO PRIME MINISTERS who recently stimulated much debate about the shape of the Asia-Pacific security architecture have been ousted from office. Japanese PM Yukio Hatoyama's East Asia Community proposal and Australian PM Kevin Rudd's Asia-Pacific Community pitch had animated many regional gatherings. Domestic troubles, however, had forced them from office. A funds scandal and failure to resolve the relocation of Futenma base led to Hatoyama's resignation. The shelving of a scheme to cap domestic carbon emissions, meanwhile, sparked a dramatic drop in public confidence that culminated in the ignominious exit of Rudd, once Australia's most popular leader. The nature of their ouster reflects the constraints domestic politics can impose on political leaders who seek to make their mark in international affairs.

Commitments and Priorities

As ASEAN leaders move to expand the membership of the East Asia Summit to include Russia and the United States, the ability of these countries' leaders to consistently attend meetings will be an issue. Indeed, much has been made not only about the American president's ability to engage the region, but also about his capacity to turn up regularly at Asian forums. While a majority of regional states would welcome strong American participation in the gatherings, pressing domestic commitments can compel the US leader to be hesitant about travelling to Asia.

For President Barack Obama, an environmental disaster, gruelling legislative battles, and two difficult wars have intervened to scuttle his planned trips to Asia over the past year. The larger question thus is whether the Asian gatherings, as they evolve, can accommodate the American president's domestic commitments now and in the future.

The issue is not trivial: showing up signals commitment and interest; absence generates negative criticism rather than affection. Yet can compromises be made if domestic exigencies call for leaders to tend their own gardens first?

Engagement and Dialogue

Amid uncertainties surrounding the rise of China, territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and trouble on the Korean Peninsula, regional countries have looked to Washington to provide a moderating influence in Asia. ASEAN states, in particular, seek an engaged America that will act to maintain the regional balance of power and keep the peace. They consequently welcome the Obama administration's repeated pronouncements that the US will stay engaged in Asian affairs.

Indeed, since Obama assumed office, his administration has repeatedly emphasised Asia's strategic importance to the US. In January this year, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had stated that "America's future is linked to the future of the Asia-Pacific region". She further expressed the US government's intention to enhance its participation in the extant regional forums and possibly join the East Asia Summit.

On ASEAN's part, moves have been made to involve the US in the East Asia Summit. At the July 2010 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Hanoi, ASEAN's foreign ministers agreed to recommend to their government leaders that Washington as well as Moscow should be invited to participate in the gathering. As the arrangement is not likely to dilute ASEAN's centrality in the institution, it appears the decision to admit the two will be endorsed at the forthcoming ASEAN Summit in October. Southeast Asian policymakers, then, clearly see the involvement of the US in the region's security forums as important in furthering the dialogue process and stability in Asia.

Politics Begins at Home

Nevertheless, concerns remain over the US president's ability to attend the East Asia Summit regularly. Toward the end of this year alone, a scheduling crunch will converge on November when the G-20 and APEC meetings are convened in Seoul and Yokohama respectively. Hypothetically, if the US had signed up to attend the October East Asia Summit, the travel demands on the president will be considerable. With the US midterm elections scheduled for the first week of November and domestic concerns such as the economy demanding the White House's attention, how the president and his advisers disentangle scheduling conflicts will be interesting to watch. The outbreak of a major domestic or external crisis will certainly complicate matters.

Assuming the US becomes a member of the East Asia Summit, then, it will be rational to think that there will come a time when the president's attendance at the gathering will be regarded by the chief executive and White House aides as the tyranny of the "urgent" and the enemy of the "important". Priorities will be shifted and the president's participation in the gathering may fall victim to domestic concerns.

Here, Asian leaders will need to be understanding and moderate their expectations. For the American leader to make any positive impact on Asian security matters, it will be best if the president can first secure his domestic base. For the chief executive to overcome congressional distaste for more free trade agreements (with Asian states, particularly), it will help if the administration can first sort out the domestic economic morass. Apart from more creative scheduling so that Asian meetings can be held back-to-back, thus reducing travelling commitments, regional leaders should consider cutting the American president some slack. They should understand if the US leader makes diplomatic apologies and misses meetings because of domestic issues that may make or break his presidency. A high-level substitute such as the vice-president could be accepted.

Notwithstanding what Asian leaders could do to accommodate a no-show from the American president, it will be necessary nonetheless for Obama and succeeding presidents to make the commitment to attend Asia's forums. If Washington wants to preserve its influence in Asia, just showing up can be meaningful. As the convenor, conversely, ASEAN needs to continue to furnish the incentive and ensure that the agendas and workings of the East Asia Summit remain dynamic and generate tangible results. If all the key actors in the Asia-Pacific play their roles, security cooperation in the region can be sustained.

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