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The Coming East Asia Summit: A Thirty-Point Agenda

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ON 14 December 2005, representatives from sixteen nations will gather in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, for the inaugural session of the East Asia Summit (EAS). Participants to that first meeting will comprise the ten ASEAN members, China, Japan and South Korea, as well as Australia, New Zealand and India. The inclusion of the two primary engines of economic growth in Asia – China and India – within the EAS immediately raises the profile of the Summit. The event promises to be an historic and timely gathering.

East Asia today is characterized by a combustible mix of old and new challenges. At no time in its history has the region been confronted, all at once, with a host of complex strategic and non-traditional security challenges as those which confront it today. This is where the East Asia Summit comes in. As Singapore's Foreign Minister George Yeo intimated at a forum on global leadership this past September, the EAS represents a crucial part of the region's "collective response to the dramatic changes taking place in the world – globalisation, the re-emergence of China and India, the challenge of international terrorism and the revolutionary impact of new technologies". The Summit offers therefore an opportunity to shape the East Asian region in ways that will best maintain its economic dynamism, enhance regional security and preserve peace and stability amongst Summit members.

What might we expect of this incipient East Asia Summit? Recent developments offer some clues. For more than a decade, multilateral cooperation in Asia – whether in the form of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or most recently the ASEAN+3 (ASEAN plus China, Japan and South Korea) – has been driven by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The Association looks set to assume the leadership of this latest institutional form. The *modus operandi* of the EAS will therefore likely be similar to those of other ASEAN-led institutions.

No More "Business as Usual"?

But will the so-called "ASEAN Way" of consensus, informality and minimalism, which had worked relatively well for Southeast Asia in the past, be sufficient for present-day East Asia? Unlikely so – as we and some of our colleagues argue in a newly released policy study, *An Agenda for the East Asia Summit* – because the many challenges confronting the East Asian region require EAS members to "think out of the ASEAN box". Current efforts at conferring a legal personality on ASEAN through a charter may mean that the ASEAN Way could soon become a relic of the past.

An Agenda for the East Asia Summit sees the EAS neither as a replacement for the APEC,

ARF or ASEAN+3, nor as a surrogate for the host of functional mechanisms provided for under these regional frameworks. Rather, the Summit complements these arrangements. Moreover, the EAS is a new grouping of sixteen members distinct from the ASEAN+3 and other institutional expressions in the region.

It remains unclear to many what exactly the strategic purpose of the Summit is – as understood by East Asian leaders themselves. Arguably, the EAS can be viewed not only as a confidence building enterprise – a central feature of all extant forms of East Asian regionalism – but also as a future venue for substantive cooperation. To that end, *An Agenda* introduces thirty policy recommendations for regional collaboration that we believe are essential if the EAS is to graduate from a nascent institution for addressing broad concerns and generalized confidence building, to a regional mechanism armed with a thematic and problem-oriented agenda.

Confidence and Institution Building

It is imperative that members of the EAS establish a level of comfort amongst themselves. While the ASEAN countries have had almost four decades of collective experience in regional reconciliation, this experience is new for the Northeast Asian members of the EAS, whose relations with each other have largely been confined to bilateral ties and the Six Party Talks, an *ad hoc* forum with a highly focused objective. Similarly, Australia and India also require time to establish confidence with their counterparts from East Asia. *An Agenda* therefore recommends that Summit participants treat the upcoming inaugural session in December 2005 as essentially a confidence building exercise.

But as the experience of Asian regionalism has taught us, institutions with no other aim except confidence building do not go far. It is imperative that the EAS move forward in due course to substantive collaboration on the complex issues and challenges that affect the region. *An Agenda* therefore urges the adoption by EAS members of a thematic and problem-oriented approach to regional challenges through functional cooperation on various issues, which we have divided into two time-sensitive “baskets” according to consensus and capabilities.

For the immediate term, *An Agenda* envisages a series of plausible cooperative efforts in dealing with terrorism, piracy and maritime security as well as health security. Among other recommendations, we encourage EAS members to devise a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy comprising operational, ideological and functional objectives. We recommend the creation of joint cooperation zones and more accurate assessments of the piracy and maritime terrorism situation in the Malacca Straits. We advocate developing a disease-surveillance control mechanism for the East Asian region as well as strengthening cooperation among health agencies at both interstate and intrastate levels to better deal with pandemics.

For the medium to long term, *An Agenda* also offers policy recommendations for tackling economic and energy challenges, human security concerns, forms of transnational crime and the like. For instance, we see the EAS as an alternative venue – in conjunction with the APEC and ASEAN+3 – for initiating informal discussions on the realisation of the East Asian Free Trade Area and issuing calls for the successful completion of the Doha Development Round. We urge Summit members to consider creating a regional fund for poverty reduction and developing regional agreements on disaster management and emergency responses. Finally, we argue that regional law enforcement and legal cooperation

against illegal money-laundering and trafficking in humans and narcotics can and should be enhanced through the EAS framework.

“Getting the DNA Right”

In conclusion, we see confidence building as an ongoing objective of the Summit, upon which different layers of functional cooperation can be added at various stages. Mindful of the many reasons that stand in the way of meaningful cooperation at the regional level, the recommendations from *An Agenda* ought to be seen as proposals which could be taken up as and when the Summit is ready to proceed beyond mere confidence building. Proposals for functional cooperation do not imply that we see the EAS as a replacement for existing regional institutions. Rather, the Summit complements such arrangements.

In George Yeo’s words, “getting the DNA right” is crucial when it comes to designing regional institutions. Getting the East Asia Summit’s “DNA” right will therefore be critical for EAS members. Otherwise, failure to make the Summit relevant may well result in dire region-wide consequences should East Asia experience anew the various crises which recently jolted the region, be they man-made or natural. The peoples of East Asia deserve better.

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