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The US Push for a Northeast Asia Forum: Three Ramifications for East Asian Regionalism

Tan See Seng

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America's current effort to convert the ad-hoc Six Party Talks into a permanent security mechanism for Northeast Asia could have interesting implications for the future of regionalism in East Asia, not least a regionalism centred on ASEAN. From ASEAN's perspective, such a mechanism could lead to the sidelining of the ARF – and possibly ASEAN itself – in regional security affairs. ASEAN's apprehensions reflect concern over any impetus for regionalism from sources other than ASEAN itself, particularly from the big powers. That said, the push for a Northeast Asia forum could also serve as the opportunity for ASEAN and other stakeholders to not only assess the state of regionalism in East Asia, but also, importantly, to advance it.

America's current effort to convert an ad-hoc forum grappling with the North Korean nuclear crisis into a permanent security mechanism could have interesting implications for the future of regionalism and regional cooperation in East Asia. At the heart of it rests the fortune of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its future standing as the ostensible hub and driver of East Asian regionalism.

The Americans are pushing for the Six Party Talks (SPT), which includes China, Russia, Japan, the two Koreas and the US, to be transformed into a permanent forum for managing security issues germane to Northeast Asia. Equally important is the apparent support among all prospective presidential candidates – John McCain, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama – for the proposed Northeast Asia forum. While ASEAN officials no doubt welcome the cooperative efforts of the big powers at reining in a recalcitrant North Korea, some officials are allegedly apprehensive over US plans to further institutionalize the SPT. Their concern is two-fold.

Losing the Driver's Seat

On the one hand, they argue that a Northeast Asia forum that comprises the big powers could mean the sidelining of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the 17-member security forum that services the Asia-Pacific region, whose membership extends beyond the frontiers of East and South Asia to include Russia, the European Union, and the US. For ASEAN leaders who decry the Americans'

alleged lack of commitment whenever the US Secretary of State decides to give the annual ARF meeting a miss, the prospect of a competing mechanism that enjoys the enthusiastic support of the US and other big powers is clearly bad news for the ARF. Moreover, the view that the ARF has achieved little of note other than as a “talk shop” (useful as that might have been) could compel the big powers to devote their energies and resources instead to a Northeast Asia forum, not least one which could eventually boast of a legacy of success in denuclearizing the Korean peninsula.

On the other hand, and perhaps of deeper concern to ASEAN, the realization of such a forum could well spell a decline in prominence of ASEAN’s own role in regional security management. It is a known fact that the strategic importance of Southeast Asia to the West, and particularly to the US, diminished considerably after the Cold War ended; a situation the region’s leaders have sought to redress in the face of a rising China and other challenges. Furthermore, faced with what looked like, prior to 9/11, the newly installed Bush Administration’s apparent disinterest in Southeast Asia, ASEAN officials and some Southeast Asian security specialists (including this writer) took pains to appeal to the US not to neglect the region. Not without irony, their efforts were rewarded when, thanks to the capture of Jemaah Islamiyah militants in Singapore in December 2001 and the Bali bombings of October 2002, Southeast Asia was designated, fairly or otherwise, as the “second front” in the US-led global war on terror.

Competition is Healthy

What ramifications could the creation of a permanent security mechanism in Northeast Asia hold for the extant regionalism in East Asia, one presumably based on the ASEAN model of regional cooperation? At least three interrelated concerns are noteworthy.

First, the US push for a Northeast Asia forum has to do with the evident contradictions at the heart of East Asia’s experience in regionalism. ASEAN is clearly apprehensive about what such a mechanism could mean for the future of not just the ARF, but itself. In this respect, this regional unease seems somewhat misplaced in the face of the reality of East Asia today, whose landscape is dotted with regional institutions such as the APEC, the ASEAN+3 and the East Asia Summit; importantly, the latter two, along with the ARF, are ASEAN-centred. As reported by the Agence France Press, noted academic and former White House official Michael Green has insisted that the proposed Northeast Asian forum is all quite in line with East Asia’s evident preference for “multilateral levels of multilateralism”. ASEAN officials may be right to worry about the competition the ARF and ASEAN could face from a Northeast Asia forum. Yet no such similar worry inhibited East Asians from flooding their region with numerous institutions, despite endless pleas from concerned observers for regional leaders to focus on the substance rather than form of their regionalism.

That ASEAN leaders worry less about the number of institutions than who initiates and manages them brings us to the second ramification: ASEAN’s desire to maintain its tenuous hold on the regionalism enterprise in East Asia. This much is clear in the light of the Association’s reservations about the rivalry posed to the ARF and ASEAN by a prospective Northeast Asia forum, especially one promoted by the big powers. But as Mr. Green reportedly said of this matter, “it’s not unhealthy if there is a certain amount of competition”. Despite repeated caveats from regional observers about the potentially conflicting mandates and agenda of East Asia’s many institutions, ASEAN officials have not been particularly concerned by this fact, so long as the regionalism enterprise remains in ASEAN’s hands. It is therefore understandable that the idea of a Northeast Asia forum – especially one promoted aggressively by the US, and not, importantly, by ASEAN – has found little support within Southeast Asia. Whether Democrat or Republican, the next US administration would do well to welcome ASEAN’s involvement in helping to shape the future security architecture of Northeast Asia.

ASEAN's Need for Relevance

The third ramification concerns the accountability that the stakeholders of East Asia's regionalism, not least ASEAN, have to bear for their institutional investments. The fear that the ARF and ASEAN could be sidelined by a Northeast Asia forum which the big powers could come to regard as significant has a fair bit to do with whether those mechanisms are seen as relevant to the security challenges at hand. If so, what could well become the yardstick of future East Asian regionalism is simply this: that the mechanisms actually work, that they accomplish what they claim to do, namely, manage if not resolve pressing security challenges that confront the region. Hence, if ASEAN leaders worry about a Northeast Asia forum, a way to assuage their own concerns would be to take seriously the task of fulfilling the expressed aims and action plans of both the ARF and ASEAN. What this could eventually mean is a shift from East Asia's longstanding emphasis on regionalism as process, to concern over its substance, with the region's officials being held accountable for their policy promises. Whether it is the long awaited evolution to preventive diplomacy for the ARF, or the anticipated progress towards a regional community for ASEAN, the trustees of regionalism in East Asia clearly have their work cut out for them.

Tan See Seng is Associate Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), where he concurrently heads the multilateralism and regionalism research programme and the executive education unit. He is the author of The Role of Knowledge Communities in Constructing Asia-Pacific Security (2007) and co-editor of Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order (forthcoming 2008).