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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **US in East Asia Summit: Implications for US-ASEAN Relations**

By Ralf Emmers

### **Synopsis**

*The United States will for the first time participate in the upcoming East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bali. The American decision to join the EAS will have wider implications for US-ASEAN relations.*

### **Commentary**

THE UNITED STATES' decision to join the East Asia Summit (EAS) is part of a recalibration of US foreign policy vis-à-vis multilateral regional institutions led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This shift in policy reflects a broader American attempt to re-engage Southeast Asia, after years of perceived indifference, and is related to the growing influence of China in the Asia-Pacific region.

The current US policy towards ASEAN also represents an attempt at complementing and deepening bilateral ties with Southeast Asian countries, especially Indonesia and Vietnam. Moreover, the Obama administration wishes to encourage the formation of a multilateral security architecture in Asia that includes the US and which complements its bilateral defence and foreign policy commitments.

### **Bush Years of Disinterest**

The US was not invited to join the EAS when it was established in 2005. At the inaugural EAS summit in Kuala Lumpur, the latest ASEAN Plus institution was pitched as a predominantly Asian forum concerned with community building and regional issues. Before its formation, the Bush administration had repeatedly indicated its preference for flexibility and mobility over formal and institutionalised arrangements. As a result, Washington had been perceived regionally as increasingly disinterested in East Asian cooperation. For example, a non-active US involvement in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) had been felt when then Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, decided not to attend its ministerial meetings in 2005 and 2007.

### **New interest under Obama**

The Obama administration, however, signaled a renewed US interest in East Asian regionalism driven by ASEAN. Besides making positive statements, the US held summit meetings with ASEAN Leaders on the sidelines of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and of the opening of the United Nations General Assembly respectively in November 2009 and September 2010. The Obama administration also acceded to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) by presidential decree in July 2009. This opened the door for US membership of the EAS.

The possible inclusion of the US in the EAS, along with Russia, was discussed at the 16th ASEAN Summit in Hanoi in April 2010. Significantly, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made clear to her ASEAN counterparts America's willingness to join the EAS. That overcame a split within ASEAN between the expansion of the EAS on the one hand, and an ASEAN+8 meeting every two years when the APEC Leader's Meeting is hosted in the region. The latter proposal was to meet concern about scheduling difficulties involved in getting the US President to visit Asia more than once a year.

The ASEAN states were united in their belief that the inclusion of the US and Russia would enhance the value, weight and influence of the ASEAN Plus bloc. It reflected ASEAN's desire to engage outside powers peacefully within frameworks in which the association was at the core in the development of an Asian regional architecture.

### **Seizing Opportunity**

By joining the EAS the US has seized an opportunity to reverse the perceived American disengagement from the region, which had allowed China to play a larger role in East Asian regional platforms. The Obama administration has expressed renewed interest in engaging allies and friends in Asia and regional groupings like ASEAN.

In contrast to the Bush years, the Obama administration has demonstrated a clear multilateral reflex, based on the premise that deepening key bilateral ties and engaging multilateral institutional structures go hand in hand.

From the Southeast Asian perspective US participation in the EAS serves to balance the increasing Chinese assertiveness in regional affairs. Signs of a more active US participation in East Asian regionalism have certainly been welcomed in ASEAN capitals. An active US participation, combined with an accommodative Chinese involvement, arguably constitute the best possible scenario for ASEAN in the years to come.

### **Challenges Ahead**

US participation in the EAS raises the important question of how the summit can complement existing cooperative arrangements and contribute to the emerging security architecture in East Asia. Specifically, there is a risk that the EAS and APEC could end up competing with one another. Should they cancel each other out that would benefit the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) - a forum involving the three Northeast Asian states China, Japan and South Korea - but which excludes the US.

Moreover, the EAS expansion to include the US also puts additional pressure on the ASEAN countries to draw up and deliver on a robust agenda. The challenge for the Southeast Asian countries will be to lead the EAS in such a way as to make it acceptable to Beijing as well as relevant to Washington.

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