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Visions at War?: EAS in the Regional Architecture Debate

By Tan See Seng

Synopsis

Three visions of regional architecture in East Asia – which can be referred to as the “Canberra”, “Washington” and “Singapore” schools – are in contention. What are their implications for the newly enlarged East Asia Summit?

Commentary

THE 6TH EAST Asia Summit (EAS) will convene on 19 November in the Indonesian island of Bali, with the United States and Russia as full members. However, doubts remain over the EAS' prospects as a high-impact forum and its likely contributions to East Asia's peace and prosperity.

Indeed, the institutional architecture of East Asia has come under intense scrutiny in recent times. At issue are the architecture's incoherence and its apparent inefficacy in response to an increasingly complex, uncertain and challenging regional environment. What is required, as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted in 2010, is an architecture that is relevant to East Asia's "new landscape".

What will this new architecture look like, and under what conditions might it succeed in delivering the peace and prosperity dividends desired by its stakeholders? At least three visions or unofficial "schools" of thought are in contention in the region.

Three Visions of Regional Architecture

The first of these is the so-called "Canberra School". Related to former Australian leader Kevin Rudd's Asia-Pacific Community initiative, it promotes a "command" or centralised brand of regionalism which argues the need in Asia for an overarching institution, fully empowered and equipped with a comprehensive agenda. Two Australian scholars have further prescribed that the architecture should be intelligently-designed and functionally-oriented. Regional architecture as such should be streamlined, its component institutions reformed and their roles and remits clarified, and underperforming institutions discarded. Asia "has too many organisations, yet they still cannot do all the things we require of them," lamented Allan Gyngell, a leading Australian strategist.

At a Sydney conference in 2009 to promote the Rudd initiative, participants proposed that the region be co-managed by a concert of powers comprising the Asia-Pacific's G20 members (the United States,, Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Russia and South Korea), but with no visible role for ASEAN. Following cool reactions from China and the US and strong objections from some ASEAN countries – as well as a number of

Australian intellectuals – the Rudd initiative was revised subsequently. ASEAN was included, while the newly enlarged EAS was presented as the logical expression of Rudd's idea of an apex institution.

The second model is the "Washington School", which promotes a functional or results-based approach to regionalism. Its proponents appeal for effective and relevant regional institutions that could deliver the desired dividends. As Secretary Clinton recently noted: "It's more important to have organisations that produce results, rather than simply producing new organisations." Functionalists neither see the need for overarching institutions nor the need to discard inefficient institutions; the challenge is in ensuring they work. Nor do they reject an ad-hoc approach since they welcome functionally-oriented coalitions of likeminded countries that collaborate on specific interests (what economists call "variable geometry").

Crucially, functionalists acknowledge the need for a strong ASEAN as the core of a balanced and peaceful architecture. They seek to minimise the overlap of roles and responsibilities among component institutions, and, where possible, ensure a division of labour. In this regard, Washington's prescription that the EAS focus on security concerns partly addresses disputes over whether the ASEAN+3 (ASEAN 10 plus China, Japan and Korea) or EAS is the more apposite vehicle for East Asian economic integration. But whether such functional distinctions can be successfully maintained remains to be seen.

Finally, a third perspective is offered by the "Singapore School", whose vision of architecture is relatively "laissez-faire" in orientation. It sees the existing architecture, despite its flaws, as fundamentally sound and still relevant to its stakeholders. Though its proponents accept that some reform is required, they do not see change, however, as urgent so long as regional structures and conventions do not constrain the pursuit of national interests. Nor are they averse to constructing more arrangements if needed.

This was exemplified by Singapore's proposal for an "ASEAN+8" forum in place of an enlarged EAS (out of concern that the US president may not commit to annual visits to East Asia). Ultimately, laissez-faire regionalists seek to preserve the default centrality of ASEAN in East Asian regionalism. In contrast to the Canberra School, they believe a concert of powers in Asia would be inimical to the interests of smaller Asian countries.

Implications for EAS

The three visions are primarily concerned with regional architecture broadly conceived. However, the East Asia Summit looms large against that policy debate, not least because Canberra School proponents see the expanded EAS as the overarching institution for which they have lobbied. But if privileging the EAS means sidelining other regional institutions, neither ASEAN nor countries that enjoy inordinate influence in the latter – China in ASEAN+3, for example – are likely to support such a move.

Nor is it certain that the EAS' more powerful members would commit to a concert arrangement, or that the Summit would survive should an exclusive concert emerge from within it. If anything, many East Asians enjoy the strategic flexibility afforded by the region's variable geometry, which increases their policy options and reduces the likelihood for zero-sum outcomes.

Nonetheless, the Washington School's wish for a neat division of labour among the component institutions of regional architecture is unlikely to be fully realised since, with the exception of the EAS and the ADMM+8 defence ministerial, no two institutions in East Asia share the same membership. Hence, despite nominal differentiation by function, East Asian institutions are likely to include in their agendas concerns and issues beyond their respective institutional remits (as in the APEC trade forum's interest in counterterrorism).

Nor will the "If it ain't broke, why fix it?" outlook of the Singapore School be tenable in the long term. Even ASEAN understands its centrality in East Asian regionalism is no longer guaranteed, and it has embarked on a process of institutional reform in order to stay relevant.

Important But Not Vital?

The probable outcome for regional architecture in the foreseeable future will combine attributes promoted by the Washington and Singapore Schools. The EAS will likely become an integral piece of the region's architecture, but not the region's alpha institution. That being said, all three schools will no doubt see in the Summit something for which they could claim credit.

Tan See Seng is Deputy Director and Head of Research at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He previously headed the RSIS Centre for Multilateralism Studies.