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Asian Regionalism and US Policy: The Case for Creative Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

The United States belongs to various organizations and networks that encompass countries on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. The East Asia Summit (EAS) is not among them. Should the US try to join? This paper answers that question with a qualified yes: Despite formidable difficulties affecting President Obama's schedule of foreign travel, his administration should try to "ease" the US into the Summit, initially as a guest of the host country. Eventually, pending a review of the EAS's prior performance and future prospects, the administration may wish to upgrade that status to membership. The paper uses this case to illustrate larger themes, discusses the relevance of frameworks other than the EAS, and recommends, between radical innovation and benign indifference, a policy of creative adaptation to regionalism in East Asia.

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ASIAN REGIONALISM AND US POLICY: THE CASE FOR CREATIVE ADAPTATION[1]

Should the US make an effort to become a member of the East Asia Summit (EAS)? The question has sparked a running debate inside the Obama administration. Compared with the life-and-death dilemmas the US faces in the Middle East and South Asia, entering or ignoring the EAS seems a trivial choice. But it has substantial implications.

Enlarging East Asia

Former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson entitled his 1969 memoir *Present at the Creation*[2]—the creation of a global order from the rubble of World War II. Joining or ignoring the EAS, some might say, is a comparably weighty choice—between being present or absent at the creation of an East Asian regional order in the wake of the Cold War.

The choice is conditioned by time and space. The East Asia Summit has been meeting without the US since 2005. The Obama administration, unable to travel back in time to the Summit's creation, can only be present or absent at its maturation. Nor can the US play an insider's part, the role of a local, in the growth of an East Asian regional order. Barring hilariously implausible continental drift, the US will never be an Asian country in *geophysical* terms. Washington can speed (or impede) East Asian integration, but only from a distance, never as a denizen.

That said, however, the *political* meaning of East Asia has already been blurred. In 1995 Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed scoffed at the inclusion of Australia and New Zealand in the "East Asian Hemisphere" proposed by Australian

[1] Jack Andre and Termsak Chalermpalanupap do not necessarily agree with the views voiced in this piece, and they bear no responsibility for remaining errors of fact or interpretation. These analysts do, however, deserve the author's thanks for helping make the final draft less deficient than it would otherwise have been.

[2] Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: Norton, 1969).

Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.[3] But Evans had the last laugh a decade later when, alongside China, Japan, and South Korea, Australia was seated at the First East Asia Summit—convened, ironically, in Malaysia's own capital, Kuala Lumpur. India and New Zealand were also present at the creation of the EAS, despite their respectively South Asian and Australasian locations.

Notwithstanding these six additions, the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) formed and still form the core of the Summit. The Association invented the EAS, sets its agenda, and requires it to meet annually inside Southeast Asia in conjunction with ASEAN's own summit. All of the criteria for joining the EAS were determined by and linked to the Association: A country cannot join the EAS unless it has first acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, been formally recognized by ASEAN as a "dialogue partner," and established a record of substantial cooperative relations with ASEAN.

The US meets these criteria, but doing so does not ensure admission. In a further illustration of ASEAN's centrality, it is the Association's ten governments—not the Summit's six non-Southeast Asian members—who must unanimously agree to accept a request to join the EAS.

No Southeast Asian government has said publicly that it would oppose, and several have informally encouraged, an American application. China may not welcome US membership. But an open campaign by Beijing to keep the Americans out would risk offending those ASEAN members who want the US inside the EAS and confirming Southeast Asian fears of China's hegemonic intentions. Besides, the profile and activities of the EAS pale by comparison with those of another forum, ASEAN Plus Three (APT), which already includes China (along with Japan and South Korea) and fosters cooperation within a conventionally East Asian frame.

[3] Mahathir's rejection seems to have had a racial basis—Australia and New Zealand being mostly white not brown. But he was also quoted as imputing a money-grubbing motive to Canberra's effort to reach out to Asia: "When the British were rich, Australia wanted to be British. When the Americans were rich, Australia wanted to be American. Now that Asia is rich, Australia wants to be Asian." As reported by Brian Toohey, "The Experts Divide over Asia," *The Australian Financial Review*, 13-14 December 1997, and cited by Gary Dean, "Australia's Place and Influence in Asia," June 2000, http://okusi.net/garydean/works/OzInAsia.html.

There is no evidence that the US either wants or would be allowed to join APT and make it ASEAN Plus Four. That framework does not yet include a few plausibly "East Asian" entities such as Mongolia, North Korea, and Taiwan. But its thirteen members all fit the consensus definition of East Asia as a composite of Southeast and Northeast Asia. No other regional arrangement is more patently East Asian in character.

Ironically, the EAS lays claim to "East Asia" in its very name, whereas "Plus Three" in APT could in theory refer to Ghana, Cuba, and Iceland, that is, to any trio of states. Nevertheless, of the two frameworks, APT has a far better chance of evolving into a delimited "East Asian Community" as opposed to an amorphously "Asia-Pacific" one. If China wants to lead East Asia, it does not need the East Asia Summit to do so.

But although Beijing is not likely to mount an open campaign against US membership in the EAS, China might respond to American interest in joining by arguing that Russia, too, should be part of the Summit. Russia attended the inaugural EAS in 2005 in Kuala Lumpur, but only as a guest invited by the Malaysian host, and has been trying to become a member ever since.

Disabling or Enabling the Summit?

Some in ASEAN worry that letting both the US and Russia into the EAS will disable the Summit by rendering it too diverse and disputatious to be effective—that rivalrous China, Japan, Russia, and the US will wreck the arrangement much as sparring elephants trample grass. Analysts who are skeptical of Beijing's motives suspect that such an outcome would suit China fine—that disarray in the EAS would limit the ability of non-Asians to shape East Asia and thereby enhance the influence of Beijing as primus inter pares inside an efficacious APT. Others object to Russian entry on the grounds that, unlike the US, it has not met the third criterion of membership stated in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation: a record of "substantial" prior cooperative engagement with ASEAN.

For all its limitations and shortcomings, ASEAN Plus Three has developed an infrastructure that is ongoing and operational—pooled resources, national

commitments, policy agendas—and has compiled a record of concrete results, including measures to protect members against future financial crises. By comparison, the East Asia Summit as it now stands is not a lot more than a dinner followed by sixteen speeches.

Could this gap in performance be closed? Could American accession to the Summit, far from triggering Russian membership and thus rendering the EAS even more incoherent than it already is, be a tipping point toward the opposite outcome: a trans-Pacific entity of some real heft and achievement?

In 2006, a year after the East Asia Summit was born, ASEAN Secretary-General Ong Keng Yong sought to lower expectations of what it might do. In the eyes of most Asian leaders, he argued, the Summit amounted to little more than a "brainstorming forum" and should not aspire to a higher-profile role.[4] In 2009 the Summit's foreign ministers described it as a "Leaders-led forum."[5] That reference to the heads of member governments could be taken as an effort to discourage the growth of decision-making capacity—leadership—at lower policy levels.

Yet the member countries' economic ministers already meet annually under EAS auspices, as do the energy ministers, although the foreign ministers still only hold "informal consultations." A Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia, proposed by Japan in 2007, has not been implemented. But it remains on the Summit's agenda of "to dos" that could be done. Another Japanese suggestion has already borne fruit: A Tokyo-funded, EAS-approved Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia was inaugurated in Jakarta in 2008. Its activities include supporting the EAS with policy research and advice. The Fourth EAS, in 2009, on the other hand, yielded meager results.

[4] Dan Eaton, "Peters Leaves Asian Chiefs Gobsmacked," *The Press* [Christchurch, New Zealand], 28 July 2006, http://findarticles.com/p/news-articles/press-the-christchurch-new-zealand/mi_8033/is_20060728/peters-leaves-asian-chiefs-gobsmacked/ai_n43503279/. The title of Eaton's piece referred to an effort by the foreign minister of New Zealand to persuade ASEAN leaders of his country's Asian credentials by inferring, from DNA evidence, an originally Chinese origin for the islands' Maori minority.

[5] "Chairman's Statement," The East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers Informal Consultations, Phuket, Thailand, 22 July 2009, http://www.aseansec.org/PR-42AMM-Chairman-Statement-EAS.pdf.

Could this mixed picture be improved? What if the US not only joined the EAS but went on to spend significant time and funds trying to deepen the Summit's presence and galvanize its performance on a range of policy issues of importance to its member countries? China might object lest the EAS eclipse APT, if indeed the latter is Beijing's preferred template for an East Asian community, but there is no reason in principle (as opposed to political practice) why the two cannot be complementary rather than competitive. And an American priority on energizing the EAS might be welcomed by Summiteers such as Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, and—who knows?—perhaps Russia as well. That said, one can doubt the appetite in Washington for such an activist agenda at a time when Obama's team is already at risk of burnout from having to deal with tough legislative battles and a risky upcoming electoral showdown at home while prosecuting two costly and unpopular wars abroad.

As for China, why should it not continue to acquiesce in a set of complementary concentric circles—ASEAN inside APT inside the EAS—provided the third and largest circle is not instigated to collude with certain ASEAN members in squeezing the middle one? Nor is it plausible that the Obama administration would attempt such a devious and sure-to-backfire machination. Not even a shift in Beijing from "smile" to "frown diplomacy" toward Southeast Asia would push the EAS to react by trying to outflank or sideline China. It is far more likely that China could and would use its EAS membership to derail any such anti-Beijing ploy, or to prevent the Summit from accomplishing anything at all.

More foreseeable than either a "perfidious eagle" or a "fierce dragon" scenario is a subtler process whereby relations between APT and the EAS combine and display a shifting selection of possible features including complementarity, redundancy, indifference, competition, irrelevance, and comparative atrophy as well. As an actor inside the East Asia Summit, the US could try, with other members, to nudge it in a constructive direction.

Some analysts worry that an EAS strengthened by American participation could drain relevance and utility from the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and its own annual summit, the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting. But this need not be

the case. If the East Asia Summit and the APEC summit can be scheduled on adjacent days, it will be easier to coordinate and maintain the complementarity of the two events, and a role for the US president in both. Nor should APEC necessarily suffer redundancy with the EAS if the division of labor between them—the economic focus of APEC, the multi-sectoral compass of the EAS—is retained. The presence of Taiwan inside APEC precludes, in any case, Chinese assent to a security function for that forum.

The overlap between APEC's and the EAS's economic plans and pretensions does, however, bear attention. If it does join the EAS, the Obama administration should propose forming a small but representative group of experts to ensure that a Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia linked to the EAS is compatible with the Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific that APEC has been trying, without much success, to pursue. Such an advisory group could also explore the prospect of achieving a consensus on minimally acceptable "green" and "blue" provisions to be included in future agreements for freer trade and investment—green for environmental protection, blue for labor standards. To this end, such a group could compile and evaluate a database of existing agreements that include such provisions.

Of particular importance in this context will be the outcome of current negotiations to enlarge the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership (TPP) by incorporating the US and other prospective entrants. At the same time, if the Obama administration is to achieve a rate of growth in American exports anywhere near the president's announced goal of doubling their value by 2015 and creating two million jobs in the process,[6] his administration will have to work harder to educate the US public, and protectionists in his own party, on the benefits of reducing the cross-border costs of economic transactions.

Showing Up Is Hard to Do

[6] Helen Cooper, "Obama Sets Ambitious Export Goal," *The New York Times*, 28 January 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/29/business/29trade.html.

Cutting across these issues of efficacy is a matter both vital and banal: the scheduling of the US president's time. Obama cannot afford to commute between the White House and Asia.

The most consistently voiced American criticism of ASEAN-style regionalism has been that it substitutes confidence-building "talk shops" for action-focused workshops. Comparably recurrent over the years has been this Southeast Asian charge: that the US government's less than perfect record of attending those ASEAN meetings to which it *has* been invited betrays American indifference toward the region.

Fortunately for trans-Pacific understanding, each of these critiques has been received with some sympathy on the other side of the ocean. Southeast Asians who used to be more than half-facetious when referring to ASEAN as an "Asian NATO"—"No Action, Talk Only"—have stopped joking and begun seriously to urge fewer speeches and more achievements. In Hillary Clinton's State Department one hears less about Southeast Asian "talk shops" and more about the need to send high-level envoys to relevant meetings of ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum. Speaking in Honolulu in January 2010, Clinton put it this way: "I don't know if half of life is showing up, but I know half of diplomacy is showing up"[7]—an implicit swipe at her predecessor's decision, for whatever reasons, not to attend several ASEAN events.

Showing up, however, is easier to advise than do. Consider what happened to Obama's plan to visit Indonesia. He had intended to be there in November 2009, back to back with a stop in nearby Singapore to attend the Seventeenth APEC summit. The Indonesian part of that journey was cancelled and eventually rescheduled for 20-22 March 2010. In Washington in mid-March, the administration found itself engaged in a complex last-minute effort, against Republican opposition, to push controversial and long-delayed legislation on health care through the US Congress. Feeling that he had to be on hand for the showdown, Obama delayed his trip to Indonesia by three more days. Then, on the day that he was supposed to begin

[7] Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks on Regional Architecture in Asia: Principles and Priorities," Honolulu, HI, 12 January 2010, http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135090.htm.

the trip, the White House announced its postponement for three more months, until June.

This third delay stemmed from still unresolved questions as to when the legislation would finally be voted on, and with what result. Obama had staked his presidency's reputation on achieving health care reform. His absence from Washington at such a crucial time would have been used against him, and not only by the bill's opponents. If the bill were defeated while he was gone, who could be sure that it would not have passed had he opted to stay home? Members of Congress who voted for the legislation, only to lose by a razor-thin margin, might have felt betrayed. Had he left Washington as planned, abandoning the field of battle at the eleventh hour, the president could have been accused of caring more about Indonesians than Americans. The fact of his having spent four years in Indonesia as a child would have made him all the more vulnerable to that charge.

The price of being physically present in one location is, of course, being physically absent from every other location. But even if this ineluctable opportunity cost did not exist, enough summits are scheduled to be held in Asia in 2010 to exhaust the hardiest mountaineer. On 29-31 October a series of ASEAN-linked leaders' meetings will take place in Ha Noi. They include the Fifth East Asia Summit. The Association's current chair, Vietnam, has invited the US to a Second US-ASEAN Summit within this same late-October window. The Fifth G20 Summit will convene in Seoul on 11-12 November. Immediately thereafter, on 13-14 November in Yokohama, Japan will host the Eighteenth APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting.

As this schedule of events now stands, and if Obama were to attend all of the summits that it includes, he would need to make three roundtrips to Asia: to Indonesia (with planned stops in Australia and Guam) in March; to Vietnam in October; and to South Korea and Japan in November. Significantly for the prospect of US participation in the East Asia Summit, the most problematic of these journeys is the late-October one to Ha Noi. Can the US president afford to spend the bulk of the final week of the campaign before mid-term Congressional elections on 2 November—elections that his party could well lose—hobnobbing with potentates in Vietnam's capital? Surely not.

Regarding that summit, the second between the US and ASEAN, the White House and State Department could hold fast to their prior invitation to the heads of ASEAN's governments to gather instead in Obama's former hometown, Honolulu. Vietnamese leaders would prefer to host Obama in their country, for reasons that include symbolically cautioning Beijing under the safe cover of an ASEAN event. But they might be willing to host Obama at a rescheduled meeting of US and ASEAN leaders to be held in Vietnam in November, just before the G20 Summit meets in Seoul on the 11th, or just after the APEC summit ends in Yokohama on the 14th. This would reduce Obama's prospective trips to Asia in 2010 from three to two.

As explained above, if the East Asia Summit meets as planned in late October, Obama will be unable to attend. Nor would it be easy for Vietnam, despite holding the ASEAN chair, to reschedule the event. That would involve persuading the other nine ASEAN heads of government, not to mention the Summit's six non-Southeast Asian members, China notably included, to add another trip to their own busy schedules. Would they all comply? Merely to help Obama economize on travel time and avoid domestic flak for not showing up in cities across America to support Democratic candidates in the week before the first Tuesday in November? Not likely.

Disproportional Destinations

Looking beyond these near-term details, one may usefully ask: In recent decades have US presidents been showing up in Europe more often than in Asia, or vice versa?

In the 28 years and seven presidential terms from 20 January 1977 to 20 January 2005—those of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan (2), George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton (2), and the first term of George W. Bush—a visit to a foreign country by an American head of state occurred 314 times. Of these visits, 154 took place in Europe,

compared with only 41 in Asia, yielding a disparity in proportions of 49 percent (Europe) versus 13 percent (Asia).[8]

The relative neglect of Asia is even more striking if Barack Obama is included in the calculation. In their first six months in office, Carter (1977), Reagan (1981), G. H. W. Bush (1989), Clinton (1993), G. W. Bush (2001), and Obama (2009) made a total of 33 visits to foreign countries. Of these visits, Europe accounted for 18 (or 55 percent), while only three (or nine percent) took place in Asia—one in China, one in Japan, one in South Korea—and all three of these visits to Asian countries were made by a single person, George H. W. Bush. Not one of the six US presidents since 1977 traveled to Southeast Asia (or South Asia) during his first six months in office.[9]

One ought not make a fetish of showing up at the highest level. Some heads of state are busier than others. Some live farther than others from a given conference venue. Close and productive relations between governments do not require the physical presence of heads of state sitting around a table in the same room.

Nevertheless, the travel records summarized above are dispiriting if, as many believe, Asia is becoming both the fount and the fulcrum of the world economy. The burgeoning global importance of Asia is a compelling reason for the US president to interact personally with counterparts in the region. The White House should be willing and able to schedule two or even three such trips to Asia annually if—I repeat, if—there is sufficient reason to believe they will be productive. At the same time, if US involvement in Asia and in Asia-Pacific regionalism is desirable from the standpoint of ASEAN and other Asian governments, they should be willing and able to adjust the scheduling of regional events to accommodate, to the extent possible, the American head of state.

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[8] Brendan J. Doherty, "The President on the Road: International and Domestic Travel, 1977-2005," The White House Transition Project, n.d., http://whitehousetransitionproject.org/resources/briefing/WHTP-2009-05-Travel.pdf.

[9] Brendan J. Doherty, "Barack Obama's First Six Months of International and Domestic Presidential Travel in Historical Context," 2009 White House Transition Project, revised 21 July 2009, http://whitehousetransitionproject.org/resources/briefing/SixMonth/Doherty%20-%20WHTP%20-%20Obama%20Six%20Month%20Travel%20-%20Revised%2007-21-09.pdf, pp. 2-3. In this comparison, Turkey, which Obama visited during his first half-year as president, is classified along with Egypt and Iraq as a Middle Eastern country, i.e., neither European nor Asian.

That said, if the US does join the EAS, it is unrealistic to expect a perfect record of American presidential attendance, year after year after year. Will Asian leaders then seize upon each American absence as evidence of US indifference toward Asia? A few may do so from insecurity or ill will. But most will be receptive to Washington's explanation for non-attendance, if the reasons are non-trivial and carefully conveyed in as timely a fashion as feasible, and if the status of the president's stand-in is not too low.

A trickier situation will occur if the US decides that a given meeting is not *worth* attending. Critical to the outcome in such a case will be the extent to which other Summit members share America's disappointment and impatience. Helpful, too, will be the existence of other arrangements to which the US belongs, such as the G20, APEC, and the ASEAN Regional Forum. Such frameworks could at least partially compensate for the diminution in high-level American access that would result if the EAS atrophied or were dismantled. The redundancy of regional arrangements does stress the schedules of those who are expected to take part in them. At the same time, however, such duplication and overlap can be a kind of insurance—potentially limiting the damage likely to accrue from the inadequacy, or the failure, of any one vehicle of Asian or Asia-Pacific regionalism.

To Innovate or Accommodate—or Both?

In February 2010, speaking in New York, ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan emphasized that the "landscape" in Asia has changed.[10] He seemed to be saying: The train of regionalism has left the station. Arrangements such as APT and the EAS are already in place. You (Americans) cannot reprogram Asian regionalism. That is no longer possible, if it ever was. All you can do is adapt to the realities, and the frameworks, that already exist, that ASEAN has already created.

As I have implied here by entertaining an energizing role for the US in the EAS, Washington need not be reduced to passivity by Surin's advice. Nor would he want

[10] Surin Pitsuwan, "A New Landscape in Southeast Asia," Asia Society, New York, 19 February 2010, http://www.asiasociety.org/policy-politics/international-relations/us-asia/new-landscape-southeast-asia.

or expect the US to be no more than a bystander watching the regionalist train go by. The Obama administration could contribute to improving the regional architecture in Asia in many different ways.

The Obama administration could, for example, try to: (a) speed the apparently laggard pace of APEC on various economic fronts; (b) join and develop the quadrilateral TPP between Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, and Singapore into a trade-and-investment-facilitating vanguard leading APEC toward an eventual Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific; (c) upgrade the security-maintaining role of the ASEAN Regional Forum; (d) single out an Asian-Pacific subset of G20 members to deal with both economic and security issues; and/or (e) explore the creation of a new regional vehicle for addressing common problems (and be prepared for resistance to that idea).

These (among other) options go to the heart of the debate inside the Beltway: Should Washington boldly propose what, from its perspective, would be the optimal Asian-Pacific architecture—that set of arrangements best suited to ensuring a role in the political economy of the Pacific Rim to the benefit of the US and its partners? Or should the Obama administration pursue that possibly elusive optimum inside what already exists—by becoming more active in the frameworks to which it already belongs, and seeking to join those, notably the EAS and the TPP, in which it has not been involved?

I hope it is not a failure of imagination on my part to prefer creative adaptation to radical innovation. The fate of the Asia Pacific Community as originally proposed by Australian Prime Minister Rudd is instructive in this context. In a speech in Singapore in June 2008, he noted that APEC, APT, ARF, and EAS each had "its own positive role to play," but posed as "the core question" the need for "a long-term vision" embracing "a regional institution" spanning "the entire Asia-Pacific region." That institution, he argued, should comprise "the United States, Japan, China, India, Indonesia and the other states of the region" and be "able to engage in the full spectrum of dialogue, cooperation and action" on economic, political, and security affairs—purposes that "none of our existing regional mechanisms as currently configured," in his view, could achieve.

Was Rudd proposing to create a new "regional institution"? Or to upgrade an existing one? Did "the other states of the region" to be folded into this institution mean *all* such states, or only some, and if the latter, which ones? How would the institution and the Community be related? Would they be one and the same? Or would building the former be a purpose of the latter? How would that task be accomplished? It was not clear.

Ambiguity can be productive. If the APC had become a Rorschach, various players might have read their own preferences into it, and the idea might have taken off, at least as a frame of reference. Instead, Rudd's suggestion was so coolly received in Asia that its profile had to be reduced. First, the "C" in "Community" was lower-cased. Finally, in December 2009 in Sydney, at a sometimes acrimonious international conference convened mainly to discuss the APc, the Australian host had to acknowledge Asian distaste for complicating the regional architecture with yet another new structure—even (or especially) if that new "regional institution" were designed to play a coordinating or "capstone" role. In Sydney the Singapore delegation was particularly upset at the prospect that the centrality of ASEAN in East Asian regionalism might be jeopardized. Aware of how controversial the APc had become, the Obama administration neither endorsed nor opposed the idea.

What was left of Rudd's concept after all this skirmishing was sufficiently vague and anodyne that even a modest tweaking of regional arrangements could be cited by Canberra as evidence of success. As one proponent of the APc later said to me, either "EAS plus" or "G20 minus" could be construed as implementing what the prime minister had in mind—or, as I would put it, what Asian skepticism and American hesitation had finally obliged the prime minister to have in mind.

The East Asia Summit's agenda already spans, however superficially, the "full spectrum" of activities cited by Rudd. Of the five countries listed by name in his 2008 speech, only the US is not already a member of the EAS. The Obama administration, merely by joining the Summit, could enact "EAS plus" and give Rudd reason to say that at least a minimal rendition of his idea had been put into effect. By the same token, a "G20 minus" would occur if the ten Asian or Pacific members of the G20 were to meet separately, that is, minus the other ten.

Future American analysts may look back and conclude that Rudd's nebulous idea facilitated creative adaptation along these modest and incremental lines. Their judgment will be less generous, however, if the backlash triggered by his talk of a versatile, full-spectrum, trans-Pacific "regional institution" winds up tarnishing the very notion of a functionally comprehensive and expressly Asia-*Pacific* community.

It is of course naïve to think that a zone so vast and populous could ever sustain a community in any primordial sense of that term. But the ambition to promote regional comity ought not focus only on the Pacific Ocean's western (Asian) coast. It is natural that the regional architecture include meeting rooms where next-door neighbors can get together to improve the neighborhood. There should also be space in this evolving complex, however, for broad policy consultation and coordination across neighborhoods, even (or especially) if those neighborhoods are an ocean apart. If protecting and thickening the hyphen in "Asia-Pacific" calls for inventive diplomacy, regionalists on both sides of the Pacific should be up to that task.

Innovation and adaptation are not, of course, mutually exclusive. The path of creative adaptation, recommended here, combines elements of both.

Consider, for example, the long-standing practice of rotating the host of each in a series of summits from one member state to another. This tradition could be put to good use on behalf of both invention and accommodation in the run-up to the Fifth G20 Summit in Seoul this November. There is nothing to prevent the South Korean government, as the host of that event, from organizing an informal, off-the-record "Asia-Pacific" dinner on the evening before that summit begins. Such a dinner could include a thematic and interactive discussion, without set speeches, on a socioeconomic, political, or environmental issue selected by the host for its timeliness and relevance to the guests.

Some or all of the ten G20 leaders of countries bordering the Pacific or Indian Ocean—Australia, Canada, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Korea, and the United States—might (or might not) want to attend such an occasion.

If ASEAN's current chair (Vietnam) and secretary-general (Surin), are at the G20 meeting as guests of South Korea, they might wish to join the dinner as well.

South Korea will be the first Asian state ever to host a gathering of G20 leaders. Seoul has already said it would like to help bridge the gap between developed and developing nations. Even if such an informal dinner were held, of course, nothing might come of it. But if it were thought to be useful enough by enough participants, it might be repeated the next time a G20 summit is hosted by an Asian or Pacific country. Eventually such "dinner diplomacy" might even evolve into something more regular and less epiphenomenal.

One would hope that the diners at such an event could be sufficiently consequential, yet few enough in number, to make timely progress toward solving problems, but numerous enough to avoid being dismissed as unrepresentative of the larger region. A thematic, issue-focused discussion would allow the government hosting the dinner, if it wished, to limit or to expand the guest list to feature countries with a significant stake in, or substantial influence over, the policy question chosen for treatment on that occasion. (Or, in one of the format's variations, the diners could be tasked not to address immediate risks and needs but to suggest and discuss future opportunities for cooperation.) Formal oral statements—the time-eating bane of summits generally—should be disallowed to maximize interaction.

It could be objected that holding a separate event, however gustatory and informal it might be, would trigger the factionalization of the G20—that each regional group would follow the Asia-Pacific lead, meet separately, and enter the plenary as a bloc, its constituent leaders' minds already made up. Varying its thematic focus and guest list, as suggested here, should help alleviate such concerns. In addition, the sheer diversity of the G20's ten Asian or Pacific members—its "AP10"—should undercut suspicion that they could, over dinner on the night before the larger event, predetermine G20 decisions. That fear could be further allayed by timing the dinner to occur not immediately before but immediately *following* the G20. To reduce centrifugal pressures inside the G20, one could also consider equipping it with a secretariat and a secretary-general. In any case, if subsets of the G20 want to caucus

on a regional basis, they will find a way to do so whether or not the AP10 share a meal in Seoul this November.

Easing into the EAS

As I have noted, President Obama's domestic political calendar rules out late-October travel overseas, precluding a trip to attend a Second US-ASEAN Summit or the Fifth EAS in Ha Noi at that time. Can these events be rescheduled to allow him to show up?

Holding the next US-ASEAN summit at a time and place convenient to both parties will be difficult, but not impossible: The meeting could be kept in Vietnam but postponed to a date in mid-November immediately after the APEC summit. Obama and the heads of the seven ASEAN countries that belong to APEC would then leave Yokohama for Ha Noi, meeting the other three ASEAN leaders there. Or they could all gather in Japan right after the APEC meeting. Or the US president could revive his offer to host the heads of ASEAN governments in Honolulu at a future date to be determined.

These are tricky logistics, to which ASEAN would have to agree. But they are far more negotiable than the prospect of rescheduling this year's East Asia Summit to suit the US president. In 2008-09 political unrest in Thailand caused the Fourth EAS to be consecutively postponed or relocated to four different dates and venues in that host country. Nor did those zigs and zags prevent the debacle in Pattaya when Thai protesters, acting for local partisan reasons that had nothing to do with the EAS itself, overran the venue, forcing the cancellation of the event just before it could get underway. Vietnam this year will brook no such turmoil. Having been held hostage to Thai domestic politics in 2009, ASEAN may be reluctant even to try to reschedule a sixteen-country summit, including China and India, for domestic American political reasons—least of all since, in mid-March 2010 when this was written, it was not even clear that the US wished to attend.

Even if the date and place of the Fifth East Asia Summit in 2010 cannot be changed, Washington can make a virtue of necessity. Obama's inability to show up in Ha Noi

at the end of October frees his administration to plan ahead to 2011, when Brunei will chair ASEAN and therefore host the Sixth EAS. An expression of Washington's interest in attending that meeting, conveyed to ASEAN in the months to come, would leave ample time for the Association to explore scheduling the EAS on a day when Obama would already be in Asia.

Even that will not be easy. The 2011 gathering of APEC leaders will be held in Hawai'i, nearly 6,000 miles from Brunei. The first of the two G20 summits in 2011 will occur still farther from Brunei, in France. (As of this writing, a venue for the second meeting had not been announced.) The venues for APEC in 2012 and 2013, on the other hand, look more promising: Compared with France in 2011, Vladivostok (2012) is closer to Southeast Asia, while Indonesia (2013) is of course inside that region.

In a given year, timing the EAS to occur just before or just after the yearly APEC summit or one of the semi-annual G20 summits, depending on which of these three events is being held in Southeast Asia, will simplify US presidential travel. In some years, however, none of these gatherings will take place in that region, nor even in Asia at all. Sophisticated interactive teleconferencing technology could someday replace showing up in person with showing up on-screen. But constraints of time, distance, competing events, and domestic distractions are not likely to disappear. In particular, if US policymakers do develop a sustained interest in joining the EAS, and if ASEAN reciprocates that interest, the Association may have to consider convening the East Asia Summit outside Southeast Asia in those years when neither the APEC nor the G20 leaders are planning to meet within a reasonable distance of the ASEAN Summit.

As for the October 2010 East Asia Summit in Ha Noi, the most sensible outcome for the US might be to attend this meeting not in the person of its president, nor even as a member of the Summit, but rather as a guest of the hosting government, Vietnam. Obama's absence would be understood. But the US vice-president or secretary of state, their own schedules permitting, could show up and thus signal support for trans-Pacific cooperation while affording an occasion for the US to assess first-hand the

productivity of the EAS and the likely drawbacks and benefits of American membership.

Assessment is crucial. Given how much the existing regional architecture has been discussed in Washington and other Asia-Pacific capitals, it is astonishing how little has been done to evaluate its effectiveness in any systematic way. The joke about an "Asian NATO" with an action-to-talk ratio of zero to one can only be dismissed on the basis of relevant evidence and careful evaluation.

ASEAN loves to meet. According to its secretariat's website, 649 such gatherings were held in 2009 alone.[11] To what result?

In fairness to the case for talk, an assessment of what Southeast and East Asian and Asia-Pacific regionalisms have (and have not) accomplished should not be biased in advance by asking only whether specific programmatic steps have been taken against poverty, disease, pollution, corruption, terrorism, crime, and other ills. The case for "merely" talking must be given its due.

Enthusiasts of ASEAN often rationalize meeting and speaking as "building confidence." Typically that catch-all term is justified either in its own right—getting to know one another, establishing a comfort level—or as a necessary precursor to more targeted endeavors such as "preventive diplomacy" and the even more case-specific "conflict resolution." But such "confidence" is rarely defined, and almost never in operational terms. How can we know how much of it has been built? What kind of confidence? In whom? In what? By what indicators and measures?

At the risking of sounding cynical: How much of the confidence that has been built on the conference circuits of regionalism amounts to a reassurance among elites that they are among friends who can be relied on not to call them to account for what they do?

[11] ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN Calendar of Meetings & Events 2009," http://www.aseansec.org/22984.htm. I am grateful to Lisa Lee for counting the total number of relevant meetings listed in this source.

Based partly on careful answers to such questions, one can try to estimate the likely future potential of this or that regional arrangement, including the East Asia Summit. What purposes has the EAS already served, and with what future implications? Has it been—can it be—successful enough to warrant the US being "present at the maturation"? And what are the probable costs (and benefits) of deciding *not* to climb that particular summit?

Tentatively, absent a more thorough review, I favor creative adaptation: Despite the challenge of scheduling, the Obama administration should try to "ease into" the East Asia Summit as a guest of the host, and perhaps later seek membership as well, depending on the likely ratio of effort to return.

Identity, Interest, and Efficacy

Globalization has not made distance obsolete. Geography still matters. As a case in point: China is not about to request membership in the Summit of the Americas. Admittedly, China (along with Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand) is among the sixty-plus Permanent Observers of the Organization of American States. Using parallel logic, one could imagine the US requesting observer status with ASEAN Plus Three, although China (not to mention other APT states) might object to even this partial intrusion into East Asia. But the US simply is not a prospective or plausible fourth *member* after the "Plus" in APT.

Expressly East Asian regional identity is a game that the US is ill equipped, by location and inclination, to play. The Hawai'ian background that sustained Obama's claim to be America's first "Pacific" president did not allow him to say he was an Asian one. Someday an Asian-American will call the White House home. But the US has *three* faces, after all: westward-Pacific, yes, but eastward-Atlantic and southward-Hispanic as well.

The US does, however, have an interest in preventing the growth of an exclusivist, inward-looking East Asia along the barely concealed racial lines once championed by Mahathir Mohamed.

The rationale behind including Australia and New Zealand in the East Asia Summit, and potentially adding the US as well, is not just to counterbalance China. At least symbolically, American participation could help cultivate cross-oceanic networks of cooperation that can serve peace and enhance life on both sides of the Pacific Rim. Experts can and will differ as to the exact hypothetical effects of a high-growth East Asian trade bloc that discriminates against the US. Such a formation would, however, ceteris paribus, damage the welfare of Americans by worsening their terms of access to Asian goods and markets. Not to mention the possible benefits that could accrue from a Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific to economies around the Rim.

In that economic and security context, Asian and Asia-Pacific regionalists alike should encourage and facilitate independent, nonpartisan evaluations of the actual performances of APEC, ARF, EAS, and APT—and, for that matter, of ASEAN itself. In pursuing what goals, in what sectors, and with reference to what challenges has each of these entities succeeded, failed, or been irrelevant, in what way, and to what degree? Absent such assessments by uninterested outside parties, it will not be possible either to mollify the critics of ASEAN and its offshoots, or to vindicate the faith of the Association's fans.

In the end, the Obama administration may decide to join the EAS even without convincing evidence of its utility. But that decision should not be taken by ASEAN to mean that the US president will continue to attend, irrespective of the benefit of doing so. President Obama chose not to attend a May 2010 summit with the European Union in Madrid, apparently because the likelihood of the meeting's being productive was too low. That "Madrid misgiving" sets a potentially constructive precedent. As I have argued above, in some quarters inside ASEAN itself there is already a growing sense that the Association needs to focus less on making promises and issuing pronouncements, and more on solving problems—on actually carrying out the many "action plans" to which its members consent.

Affiliation is a two-way street. When Secretary Clinton said in January 2010 in Honolulu that "showing up is half of diplomacy," she declined to specify the other half. That half is performance: the product that justifies the process. The US in EAS should not be passive-aggressive, impatiently waiting for the Summit to prove itself

worthwhile. If the EAS is worth joining, it is worth improving, and being rendered more effective, with American help. But if the US does take part, ASEAN will do well to obviate the "Madrid misgiving" by working with the American administration to ensure that the ratio of action to talk in the East Asia Summit is considerably greater than zero to one.

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