

POLICY BRIEF

**RETHINKING THE EAST ASIA SUMMIT:
PURPOSE, PROCESSES AND AGENDA**

September 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Started ten years ago, the East Asia Summit (EAS) was developed to bring together leaders of all the major powers concerned with the region. Hosted by ASEAN, the EAS has been heralded as a confidence-building mechanism to minimise conflict and move towards cooperation. Yet it has also been criticised as a “talk shop” that lacks teeth and focus.

The SIIA believes that the EAS has the potential to become the apex summit for dialogue among leaders about the key strategic issues facing the Asia Pacific region. In this policy brief, we argue that given the deficit of trust among major powers, the focus should remain on confidence-building. The EAS should continue to be “leader-led”, with a degree of informality to allow a candid and close exchange of views, as originally envisaged.

This policy brief also suggests changes to focus the EAS agenda and its work processes. These aim to increase the timeliness and relevance of dialogue in the EAS, to develop a flexible yet viable platform for the leaders to initiate action to respond in times of crisis and need. Our main recommendations are:

- (1) To ensure that the EAS maintains ASEAN centrality and limit EAS new membership;
- (2) To create a “Sherpa” system as a guiding process to surface the most relevant and critical issues to the attention of EAS leaders; and
- (3) Make the EAS plenary shorter and more focused while allowing more informal interactions to build trust and candour.

Introduction: Why rethink the East Asia Summit?

Since the end of World War II, the United States has safeguarded the peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific. Yet as the region witnesses the rise of China and other major powers, the changing circumstances require new thinking about the processes and institutions that can build confidence and prevent conflict.

The East Asia Summit (EAS), which is hosted annually by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), is the only meeting that allows leaders of key countries across the Asia Pacific to gather informally to discuss strategic issues.

The EAS aims to be an “open, inclusive, transparent and outward-looking forum... to strengthen global norms and universally recognised values”.¹ The EAS seeks to promote “dialogue on broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest and concern, with the aim of promoting peace, stability and economic prosperity in East Asia”.²

In this regard, the summit has the potential to improve dialogue on key issues, and build trust and transparency among leaders to ensure long-term peace and stability in the region.

However, there are questions about both the effectiveness and the sustainability of the EAS. Its critics complain that the EAS is a “talk shop”, without follow-up or concrete action. Others expressed the need for a more

focused agenda, supported by a process that ensures that the leaders' time be better utilised. Calls to further institutionalise the EAS have also been made.

Yet others have suggested that the EAS be left as it is – implying that the EAS should continue primarily as a “leaders-led” meeting that supports an annual informal dialogue and confidence-building efforts.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has specifically set out the aim for a revitalised EAS that would be the “premier forum” for regional politics and security in Asia. Japan’s proposals include using the EAS to have leaders disclose their military budgets in order to encourage the promotion of transparency in the region. South Korea too has proposed “to host a Track II forum to discuss the future direction of the EAS in 2014”.³

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deficit of trust among major powers, the focus should remain on confidence-building. The EAS should continue to be “leader-led”, with a degree of informality to allow a candid and close exchange of views, as originally envisaged.

Yet this brief also suggests changes to focus the EAS agenda and its work processes. These aim to increase the timeliness and relevance of dialogue in the EAS, to develop a flexible yet viable platform for the leaders to initiate action to respond in times of crisis and need.

Suggestions in this policy brief include the creation of a “Sherpa” process to coordinate across EAS ministerial meetings. We believe this will provide greater synergies with other meetings in the Asia-Pacific region, and allow the EAS to tap into the best thinking of those fora, while avoiding too much bureaucracy.

The first and second sections of this brief provides an overview of the EAS’ history and outlines its original purpose, format, processes and agenda. The third and fourth sections discuss the need for a stronger ASEAN voice and centrality to lead the EAS, and for the grouping to engage more deeply with non-ASEAN stakeholders in the EAS. The fifth section provides recommendations on the type of reform the EAS can adopt to remain relevant in the regional architecture.

1. Ten Years of the EAS

The EAS has evolved and grown over the ten years of its existence. The first step came in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98, with the first meeting between ASEAN and the Northeast Asian countries of China, Japan and South Korea. This ASEAN+3 process gathered pace and an East Asian Vision Group suggested in 2001 that this be developed into the East Asian Community.⁴ The official decision to launch an EAS was made at the 2004 ASEAN+3 meeting.

When the first EAS Leaders’ Summit was held in December 2005, and hosted by the then Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, this included not only the ASEAN+3 countries but also India, Australia and New Zealand. This expansion was agreed to, notwithstanding views that the inclusion of Australia and New Zealand might dampen East Asia’s voice.⁵

A subsequent and further expansion brought in Russia and the US. During the fifth EAS in Hanoi in 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov attended as special guests. Both countries formally joined the grouping the following year.

In this expansion, it was agreed that the ASEAN Chair would host the EAS, and hold it following the ASEAN summit. This has cemented ASEAN centrality within the EAS – notwithstanding the inclusion of major and middle powers.

While the EAS is to be held annually, there have been disruptions. The 2006 EAS, hosted by the Philippines, was postponed to January 2007 due to a typhoon. The 2008 EAS that was supposed to be hosted by Thailand was postponed to 2009 due to political unrest in the country.

Besides the EAS summit, a number of ministerial meetings are also held. These include meetings for Foreign Ministers and Education Ministers. Special meetings among health ministers are also held during periods of pandemic scares, and an EAS Energy Ministers' Meeting was recently hosted.

The EAS gains by having a tighter membership in comparison to other regional bodies.

The growth in the number and range of EAS ministerial meetings has reflected a growing agenda for the forum. These include education, finance, and non-traditional security issues such as energy, disaster management, infectious diseases and food security. Discussions have also expanded beyond these areas to include issues pertaining to the environment, ASEAN connectivity, and maritime security and dispute settlement in accordance with universally agreed principles of international law.⁶

Moreover, notwithstanding the expansion already noted, there are further applicants who wish to participate in the EAS. Those who have indicated interest to join the EAS include the European Union, the Arab League, Canada, Pakistan, Mongolia and Bangladesh. A decision was however taken for moratorium on new membership of the EAS so as to consolidate the forum. There is concern that admitting too many members into the EAS,

especially countries from outside the region, would “risk diluting the forum’s East Asian identity”.⁷ The EAS gains by having a tighter membership in comparison to other regional bodies, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

EAS members have, however, noted the need to review, strengthen and deepen its processes in order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the EAS.⁸

2. Purpose, agenda and process

2.1 The EAS’ purpose, process and agenda: inextricably connected

At the inaugural Summit in 2005, the Kuala Lumpur Declaration explained the EAS aims to “provide a platform for dialogue on broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest and concern, with the aim of promoting peace, stability and economic prosperity in East Asia”. This purpose remains as relevant today as it did then, and perhaps more so, as powers rise and resurge in the region.

The EAS has also developed its own process and character, centred around an informal “leader-led” process. This provides an opportunity to exchange ideas as well as to establish and strengthen personal relationships between the leaders. These efforts were aimed at promoting community and confidence-building in the region with the hope of realising an East Asian Community.

There have been calls for the EAS to become more institutionalised and to work on issues in more depth, and in a timelier manner. More regular and formal meetings with a set agenda have been proposed. Some also suggest institutionalising support for the EAS, whether with a unit within the ASEAN Secretariat or as a new and free-standing secretariat of its own.

These conceptions of the EAS – informal and leader-led, or institutionalised – do differ. Yet there has already been some compromise on how the EAS functions today. In addition to the leader’s summit, a number of EAS ministerial meetings have been held, and some, regularly – like those among the Foreign Ministers. These ministerial meetings are held on functional issues such as education, finance, and non-traditional security issues such as energy, disaster management, infectious diseases and food security. These relate to issues that the EAS leaders have raised on occasion.

These leaders’ discussions have also occasionally expanded beyond these areas to touch on issues pertaining to the environment, ASEAN connectivity, and maritime security, as well as dispute settlement in accordance with universally agreed principles of international law.⁹

Reform efforts should not underestimate the importance of informal discussion and the benefits that can arise from talks that are candid and constructive.

While this compromise may have arisen quite organically to follow up from EAS Summits, there is some sentiment that this has created confusion about what the EAS is and should be, making it “neither fish nor fowl” – neither sufficiently institutionalised to follow up on all items that EAS leaders discuss, nor as informal as in past years so that discussion can be truly strategic and help develop trust and candour.

This helps explain the various calls for the reform of the EAS – both from within ASEAN as well as from some non-ASEAN participants in the Summit. The EAS can and should be reformed and improved. However, reform efforts should not, in our view, underestimate the importance of informal discussion and the benefits that can arise from talks that are candid and constructive – even at the risk of being labelled a “talk shop”. An adage from Winston Churchill is, “Better jaw-jaw than

war-war”, and this is especially salient in today’s Asia.

One often-neglected function of the EAS is its potential as an incubator of new ideas. Because of the informal nature of the dialogue, leaders have freedom to discuss ideas, which could be developed outside the confines of the meeting room.

For example, negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) were launched on the margins of the EAS in 2012. Another example was the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), which has grown to support analyses and policy research in ASEAN and for other governments in the EAS. While ERIA did not originate from EAS discussions, its conception and subsequent establishment was made possible only after leaders at the second EAS endorsed the idea and pledged to establish it by the third EAS in 2007.

The Asia-Pacific stands to benefit from good ideas that the EAS leaders generate and/or endorse for action, and this potential should not be lost in any review. Rather, revisions made to EAS processes and agenda should continue to support the development of thinking and discussion on key strategic issues. EAS processes may also be developed to better encourage the implementation of ideas that are generated from the EAS’ discussions.

2.2 Reconsidering the EAS processes

The EAS is currently organised together with the ASEAN Summit by the ASEAN Chair. The EAS does not have its own institutional organisation outside ASEAN, and no secretariat to organise its affairs. At present, the EAS meetings are conducted on a relatively small and informal scale. If ASEAN hopes to further develop the EAS, it would need to strengthen the processes of the grouping. In this context, the agenda that has developed from past EAS meetings needs review. This is now spread across six quite diverse, functional issues – education,

finance, and non-traditional security issues such as energy, disaster management, infectious diseases and food security.

While these issues are often relevant, the areas do not always stand high on the list of priorities and attention of the leaders. These topics also overlap discussions in other regional forums. If the six functional areas were to dictate the agenda of an institutionalised Summit, the EAS would lose flexibility and its overall strategic perspective. In the event this happens, the EAS might not be able to address and respond to fast-developing strategic concerns in the region.

In connection with these functional areas, the EAS currently holds a number of inter-sessional meetings among some of the ministers. However, there is no clear process by which these discussions then feed into the EAS with sufficient sieving so that they can properly command the attention of the leaders.

3. ASEAN Centrality

As hosts, ASEAN enjoys a central position in the EAS and the ASEAN Chair has the responsibility of issuing the chairman's statement. All EAS participants say that they accept the need to maintain ASEAN centrality in the EAS.

As a grouping of small- and medium-sized countries, ASEAN is a non-threatening actor and is "the politically safest option to occupy the 'driver's seat' vis-à-vis the region".¹⁰ It does not have great military strength or economic weight, and is deferent to the ASEAN Way, which respects national sovereignty and embraces the principle of non-interference.¹¹ Given these characteristics, ASEAN can harness its ability as a source of convening power and influence over a region where emerging powers are jostling and contesting for greater influence. However, despite its convening role, ASEAN lacks a clear and common group strategy about its regional goals for the EAS. ASEAN aims to organise the EAS meeting annually,

but beyond this, it does not appear to have the ability to clearly articulate a united position on the issues that should take priority on the EAS agenda. This has limited the development of the EAS and some have voiced frustration with ASEAN leadership.

Some of these criticisms are flawed. Often the lack of movement on more controversial issues is not due to any lack in ASEAN but rather stems from the strong contention of major powers over the issue.

ASEAN members need to take steps to arrive at a consensus on key strategic issues before meeting with other, non-ASEAN participants in the EAS.

Nevertheless, there are steps that ASEAN can take to develop its role and contribution to the EAS. Steps can be taken to strengthen the unity and decision-making process within the group, and especially to help some ASEAN members that may lack the capacity and experience in international and Asia-Pacific fora.

ASEAN members need to take steps to arrive at a consensus on key strategic issues before meeting with the other, non-ASEAN participants in the EAS. To work towards an ASEAN common voice will not be easy, given the diversity among the ten members. However, we would expect that integration and alignment will strengthen over time from the ambitions to create an ASEAN Community. This can be assisted by a process that includes informal retreats and workshops to specifically discuss issues in the EAS context, and to shape the agenda for the leaders. At present, while some meetings are held, these tend to be limited to exchanges, rather than aiming specifically to decide on common stances on key issues.

Where ASEAN has managed to reach a consensus on an issue, it would be ideal for the ASEAN Chair to speak on behalf of the whole group during the EAS plenary session.

This would strongly reinforce the perception of a common ASEAN voice and unity. Practically, it would also help create more time for discussion with non-ASEAN members.

4. Non-ASEAN Stakeholders

Even as ASEAN maintains and makes efforts to justify its central role in the EAS, there is also a need provide greater recognition to non-ASEAN participants as stakeholders in the EAS. One way is for ASEAN – in particular the ASEAN Chair – to consult more extensively with non-ASEAN EAS participants.

This need is especially felt at present, as countries such as Japan and South Korea have publicly expressed hopes for the reform and development of the EAS. Efforts to engage and involve others are also needed. This is especially so for the newest members, the US and Russia.

Concerns have risen over the US and Russia's ability to commit to the EAS and the overall priority accorded to the region [...] Yet attendance by leaders is only the first issue.

The reason that the US and Russia were allowed into the EAS was because ASEAN states believed that their inclusion would enhance the value, weight and influence of the ASEAN Plus bloc.¹² It also reflected ASEAN's desire to engage with the region's external powers within a framework where it plays a central role.¹³ However, concerns have risen over the US and Russia's ability to commit to the EAS and the overall priority accorded to the region.

President Barack Obama was unable to attend the 2013 EAS meetings due to pressing domestic concerns over the US debt crisis. Although his absence was not a deliberate sign of neglect and was due to US domestic distractions, it called into question the US'

ability to commit to its much heralded Asia pivot and, thereby, the EAS.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's commitment to the EAS is also being questioned after he skipped the summit three years in a row, choosing instead to send a proxy in his place. Putin's continued absence at the summit prompted Fyodor Lukyanov, Chairman of the Kremlin-linked Council on Foreign and Defense Policy to remark: "Putin simply has nothing to offer this summit... there was no point in going there as tourists".¹⁴ Critics have also pointed out that despite the Kremlin's policy statements that "Asia Pacific is a priority for Russian foreign policy", the country simply "does not give much weight to ASEAN".¹⁵

But the Russian leader's decision to skip the meetings may also be strategy on the country's part to "pursue diplomatic neutrality" in order to avoid spoiling relations with other contending parties.¹⁶ This is especially since the issue of the South China Sea disputes, which Moscow is not involved in, is now tabled for discussion at the EAS.

In contrast, Chinese, Indian and Japanese leaders have attended every EAS meeting since its inception, showing their sustained commitment to the summit. The attendance of the Chinese and Japanese leaders is all the more significant in that this has continued even in the face of rising Sino-Japanese tensions. In recent years, there has been a conspicuous absence of a bilateral Sino-Japanese Summit.

In the longer term, the continued absence of a Russian leader, and especially the US, at the EAS, weakens the influence and confidence-building efforts of the regional grouping. Without a counterbalancing force in the presence of the US, there is also a possibility that China could start to fill the gap and play a regional hegemonic role at America's expense. This scenario would not be aligned with ASEAN's interests of being the driving force in its engagement of external powers through the EAS.

In looking at the diverse levels of engagement among the major powers, it is unfair to suggest that a complete revamp of the EAS is needed to maintain the interest of all major powers. It would be fairer to observe that Russia has never been fully engaged in the process. From this, we suggest that if non-attendance persists, ASEAN as the host should candidly re-open the question of whether Russia should be expected to continue to be a full participant in the EAS.

Engaging the non-ASEAN participants more deeply and broadly and recognising them as stakeholders is key to EAS development.

Engaging the non-ASEAN participants more deeply and broadly and recognising them as stakeholders is key to EAS development. The most visible, headline-grabbing sign of their engagement is whether their leaders attend.

Yet attendance by leaders is only the first issue about the EAS that raises the question of whether ASEAN can and should be better hosts for the Summit. Even if all attend, there are questions about maintaining and deepening engagement among the major powers. It is, therefore, necessary to review the EAS agenda and processes.

5. Recommendations

This policy brief takes the position that the organisers of the EAS should adopt moderate changes to the current practices of the EAS. The EAS should focus and develop consistent dialogue among leaders that is aimed at cultivating higher levels of community and confidence-building in the grouping. This will help leaders address and resolve pressing issues that could pose a threat to the region's peace, stability and economic prosperity, and contribute to the realisation of the group's larger goals of establishing an East Asian Community.

The EAS would benefit from more structure that would strengthen the level of confidence-building among its participants. It would also benefit strongly with clear instructions and work plans with deadlines to carry out key ideas resulting from the leader's discussions. This would allow the EAS to become an empowering vehicle with the ability to put ideas into action.

One way to strengthen the EAS process is to identify "Sherpas" – senior officials or ministerial representatives to help shape the EAS agenda.

Having EAS Sherpas would aim to develop the EAS so it is a year-long engagement, rather than only an annual Summit, and to ensure that the Summit is indeed focused on key strategic issues.

Such a system is used in the long established G7/G8 and the newer G20. This system allows the G20 to function efficiently with annually rotating organisers, despite the absence of a permanent secretariat. Similarly, the EAS can adopt this Sherpa system. Under this system, EAS Sherpas will be responsible for attending all of the inter-sessional EAS meetings to ensure that only key elements of these discussions will be discussed at the EAS. Having EAS Sherpas would help develop the EAS into a year-long engagement, rather than just an annual Summit, and to ensure that the Summit is indeed focused on key strategic issues.

However, we are cautious about calls for the EAS to be further institutionalised with a secretariat and permanent staff, as well as suggestions that the EAS be separated from adjoining ASEAN processes. For instance, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recently called for the creation of a permanent committee comprised of permanent representatives to ASEAN from the member countries, and to prepare a roadmap to bring renewed vitality to the EAS.

We believe that a Sherpa system – as outlined in this policy brief – could be more effective. In view of the analyses shared, this policy briefing makes four suggestions as to how to reform the EAS.

5.1. Revising the format

Changing the format of the EAS could help improve the summit's confidence-building mechanisms. The current EAS is made up of a formal plenary session, where leaders have a scripted discussion of the focus areas of the EAS. A working dinner and a two-hour long closed-door retreat, which allows for more intimate discussions, follow this. Although organisers usually abide by this format of meetings, the 2013 ASEAN Chair Brunei dispensed with the plenary session and retained the leader's retreat when organising the EAS. However, this format of meetings does not give enough time for leaders to engage in proper confidence-building efforts. The SIIA believes that a revised format of meetings for the EAS must be considered to create more time and a better quality of discussions. There are many ways this can be done.

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One option would be to retain the opening, formal plenary session. But this would need to have a pre-agreed agenda to set the tone and provide structure to the discussions. Discussions at the plenary session could be tightened, and the time, shortened. This is especially if ASEAN leaders come prepared with a unified EAS strategy that is vocalised by the current ASEAN Chair – as earlier suggested in this policy brief.

The formal plenary session would be followed by several rounds of informal sessions to increase the opportunity for informal exchanges among leaders. This would allow

the EAS to retain its largely informal nature and increase candour on key strategic issues.

Meeting fatigue and lack of time are two potential factors that could limit the success of this approach. Any attempt to increase time for the EAS must be mindful that the Summit at present follows behind a full week of ASEAN meetings – the ASEAN Summit, followed by the ASEAN Plus summits (ASEAN+1 and ASEAN+3 summits).

To address this, some have suggested that the EAS be moved to another time, such as in tandem with the APEC Summit or the United Nations General Assembly. However, there are concerns that this might affect ASEAN centrality. There are alternatives.

One suggestion to deal with this would be to reverse the order – to host the EAS immediately after the ASEAN Summit. This would raise the EAS to the highest priority among the ASEAN-led summits. The ASEAN+3 might then follow. For the ASEAN+1 Summits, we additionally recommend that there be some flexibility on the timing and recurrence of these summits. If these could be held at other times, or even less than annually, this would help to reduce meeting fatigue among leaders and raise the priority of the EAS.

5.2. Creating and utilising Sherpas

As described above, the EAS comprises not only of the leader's summit but also ministerial meetings on health, finance and education. There is not always a clear structure for the proceedings of these meetings to feed into the leader's discussions. A Sherpa system could help to improve the transmission of ideas from various inter-sessional ministerial meetings to the EAS leaders.

The Sherpas – as high level officials – would attend all of the inter-sessional EAS meetings with the specific aim of setting and prioritising their agendas for the EAS beforehand. Consolidating the main ideas and solutions from the foreign, education and energy

ministers' meetings in preparation for the EAS would allow for greater coordination and transfer of ideas between the inter-sessional meetings and the EAS.

Even as we recommend such a system, we recognise that the EAS agenda should not be managed too formally and rigidly. Some have cautioned that the EAS could be in danger of becoming another mini-APEC summit, which has been perceived as overly stage-managed. On the other hand, we recognise that the current agenda is something of a "laundry list", on which as many topics as possible are included for discussion within the time frame of the plenary meeting. This then combines negatively with the short duration of the Summit so that each issue is only surfaced, rather than deeply engaged.

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Reforming the EAS agenda and processes should not be an end in itself, and we should aim to have sufficient structure to support that original and still relevant purpose of the summit: to foster candid dialogue and trust-building among leaders.

The EAS focuses on topics that are often considered "soft issues", such as disaster relief and global health, and not on the "hard issues" of security and economics. These "soft issues", which are often non-contentious, are useful for the purposes of confidence-building.

But tabling the discussion of some "hard issues" during the plenary session may have its advantages, as this draws more attention to the EAS and gives weight to discussions at the summit. Bringing up "hard issues" during the plenary sessions may also encourage further informal discussions of such sensitive

topics during the informal, closed-door retreat sessions.

5.3. Creating synergies

The EAS agenda should not be fixed as the topics of discussion may shift from year to year depending on regional and global developments. To buffer against this, the summit's organisers may make use of the Sherpa system in order to reform the agenda of the meeting. Under the proposed system, Sherpas will need to identify and propose key issues that will shape the EAS agenda for the year.

Given the differences in focus areas between the EAS and other regional forums such as APEC and the ARF, it may be possible to create synergies between them.

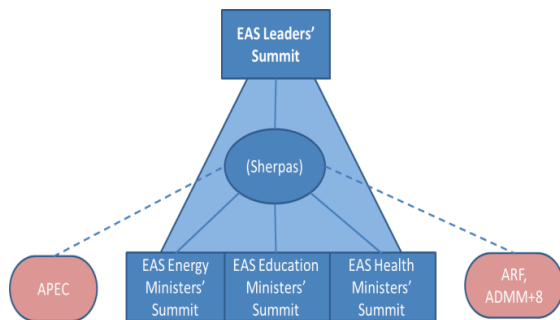
It is also important for Sherpas to ensure that discussions at the EAS do not duplicate the agenda of other forums in the Asia Pacific. Instead, the EAS should draw key elements from them. For example, the ARF and ADMM+8 are key ministerial-level security forums for the Asia Pacific region. All EAS member countries are also participants in these forums. Similarly, the APEC Forum is the key economics forum for the Asia Pacific region, and its membership again encompasses all EAS member countries.

Given the differences in focus areas between the EAS and other regional forums such as APEC and the ARF, it may be possible to create synergies between them.

The ARF is not a forum for heads of governments. Its highest summit involves the foreign ministers of the participating countries. The APEC summit involves a large number of countries, which may not allow for focused discussion. Thus, the EAS can aspire to be the apex summit of the region, where both formal and informal discussions from the plenary and retreat sessions provide guidance

and direction for discussion of actionable plans at the ministerial-level meetings. This will also help to forge links between the rest of the regional architecture. Figure 1 below provides an illustration of the proposed synergy between the EAS and other regional forums in the Asia Pacific.

Figure 1: Proposed synergies among other regional forums in the Asia Pacific



This idea may, however, stir opposition among countries that are members of one forum but not the other. It should, therefore, be emphasised that the EAS is not intended to replace these other forums, and that they should still play their individual roles.

As such, the EAS should be positioned as having the ability to discuss solutions to potentially contentious issues in a smaller and more informal setting among leaders. This will set the EAS apart, by allowing it to develop a flexible yet viable platform for the leaders to initiate action to respond in times of crisis and need.

6. Conclusion

The EAS should not be dismissed as a mere “talk shop” given the lack of trust and confidence in the region and the rise of Asian powers. Dialogue is a key process to share perspectives and develop understanding and trust through the exchange of views with increasing candour.

In this context, the EAS is an important vehicle for community and confidence-building. It provides an opportunity for the leaders of China, India, Japan and the US to discuss

issues of strategic concern to the region, but with ASEAN as the host at the centre. The EAS can also serve as a place for incubating ideas for the regional good.

ASEAN as the host and initiator should take the lead in the development of the EAS, while recognising the interests and emphases of different non-ASEAN countries as stakeholders in the EAS.

A lot of what the EAS has done so far has been positive – which explains the interest of many countries in participating in the EAS. Its original purpose remains relevant in current times, if not even more so. Yet there is also a need to refocus the EAS with more efficient and participative preparation, as well as to provide the leaders with the right time, agenda and format to make the most of the EAS.

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About this policy brief

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