

Briefing Memo

The Obama Administration's Asian Policy – US Participation in the East Asia Summit and Japan

(an English translation of the original manuscript written in Japanese)

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Introduction

The 5th East Asia Summit (EAS) was held on October 30, 2010. The EAS is a regional institution in which the 10 ASEAN countries and Japan, China, the Republic of Korea, Australia, India and Singapore take part. The 2010 Chairman's Statement announced that the United States (and Russia) was to officially participate in the EAS. This article explores the factors that led the United States to decide to join the EAS, and discusses the future outlook of Obama Administration's EAS policy.

The three reasons behind the U.S. participation in the EAS

The United States' decision to join the EAS is a part of its broader effort to re-engage in Asia that is being repeatedly voiced by the Obama Administration. In an address in Tokyo in November 2009, President Barack Obama presented three tools for US involvement in Asia; 1. further strengthening the alliances; 2. cooperating with new partners, including emerging powers like China; and 3. developing and participating in the regional multilateral institutions. In particular, with regard to the third, President Obama acknowledged that over the past few years the United States (or the Bush Administration) has disengaged from many multilateral organizations and declared that, with the inauguration of the Obama Administration, such an era was over.

Of course, it would be an exaggeration to claim that the Bush Administration had been rejecting every form of multilateral cooperation, but looking back, its approach to those multilateral frameworks was characterized with two major attributes. One is "a la carte multilateralism," or approaches often called a "Coalition of the Willing." The Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and the formation of the Core Group for the Southeast Asian earthquake and tsunami rescue activities in 2005 belong in this category. The other character of Bush administration's approach was a "value-based diplomacy" expanding cooperation with

nations that share the universal values of human rights and democracy. Undoubtedly, the U.S. moves to strengthen the U.S.-India regulations and the US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue fall in this category. At the same time, there has been a wide belief that the Bush Administration was generally lukewarm to wider regional dialogue forums. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's decision to twice skip the ASEAN Regional Forum (a representative went in her place) attracted criticism in that regard. Reviewing the predecessor's regional policy, the Obama Administration is aiming to once again strengthen the United States' commitment to extensive multilateral systems while capitalizing on the previous Administration's achievements. In this context, the Obama Administration made the decision to join the EAS.

So why has the Obama Administration decided to participate in the EAS in the first place? There seem to be at least three reasons. First, it intends to alleviate various concerns about the U.S. Asia policy. One of the best examples is the so-called "G-2" debate. In an address at the Woodrow Wilson International Center For Scholars in September 2010, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg pointed out that, in the light of growing US-China cooperation, there is a risk that nations may feel they are being excluded from "G-2." Consequently, he emphasized the need to ease those countries' fears by simultaneously promoting multilateral cooperation and demonstrating the United States' willingness to work with a wide range of countries. Another illustrative example is such claims that the United States was "disengaging" from the Asia-Pacific region. While the U.S. is fighting two wars in the Middle East and the West Asia, Obama Administration seeks to counter the perception among regional countries that the U.S. might be losing interest in the Asia-Pacific region. With this in mind, it is conceivable that by taking part in the EAS, which regularly holds foreign minister-level meetings and sub-cabinet level meetings as well as summit-level meetings, the Obama Administration attempts to signal its strong commitment to engaging in the Asia-Pacific.

Another reason for the United States' participation in the EAS is to take advantage of the EAS as a framework for encouraging increasingly capable Asian countries to take a larger role in the region. In January 2010 Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton gave an address titled "Regional Architecture in Asia: Principles and Priorities," in which she stated that "Now, dialogue is critical in any multilateral institution. But as Asian nations become regional and global players, we must focus increasingly on action," and emphasized the necessity to cultivate a "results-oriented forum." Specifically, the United States is proposing cooperation in four sectors – nuclear nonproliferation, maritime security, climate change and human rights, in addition to the areas of cooperation that have been pursued in the EAS so far (finance, education, responses to avian influenza and infectious diseases, energy and disaster prevention),

and existing agendas such as the Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia (CEPEA) concept, research on which is underway with the establishment of the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA).

The third reason the United States is taking part in the EAS is to encourage China to recognize the necessity to reassure the regional countries through cooperating in the EAS. In September 2009 Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg gave an address titled “[The Obama] Administration's Vision of the US-China Relationship,” and within that he emphasized the need for “reassurance” – namely, that “China must reassure the rest of the world that its development and growing global role will not come at the expense of security and well-being of others.” And one such policy that is being suggested is for China to search for a constructive role within “regional and international systems.” In that context, for example, at the face of the growing assertiveness of the Chinese navy and fisheries patrol vessels in the South and East China Sea and the western Pacific, “maritime security” – one of the four US-proposed areas of cooperation mentioned above – could conceivably become a focal point of “strategic reassurance.”

Three potential challenges

2011 is a critical year for the Obama Administration to implement its EAS policy in earnest, but there will be many challenges along that road. First, U.S. Asia policy obviously must handle Asia’s diversity, geographically, economically, culturally and politically. For example, the EAS already saw a division between Japan on the one and China and India on the other, with regard to the cooperation in Energy security. Regarding the Myanmar national election in November 2010, Southeast Asian nations acknowledged the event as “an important step,” while the United States issued a critical statement saying it was “deeply disappointed.” These divisions illustrate that Asia is a region of diversity and any regional policy cannot avoid addressing it.

Another challenge may also arise from the difficulties of shaping the rising China. The Obama Administration will conceivably work with the EAS member countries to seek concrete actions from China in the area of maritime security. However, China is demonstrating a position of dealing with problems held by Japan and ASEAN countries separately (in 2002 it held an “exchange of thought” with ASEAN countries on the Code of Conduct concerning the South China Sea, and confirmed a “strategic relationship based on mutual interests” with Japan), and there is no guarantee that the growing sense of anxiety among regional countries over China’s maritime advance will necessarily lead to encourage China’s constructive behavior. How successful the U.S. efforts will turn out remains uncertain. Considering a possibility that

America will increasingly rely on China's cooperation on issues such as nuclear development by Iran and North Korea or currency and trade imbalance, it is even conceivable that a pattern will emerge in which conversely, China will increasingly possess leverage for shackling the U.S. policies.

Lastly, there still may be an expectation gap between the United States and ASEAN. True, ASEAN is increasingly oriented toward supporting the United States' Asia involvement by holding US-ASEAN Summits and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meetings. Despite all these, it remains to be seen how far ASEAN is willing to go in cooperating on the agendas that the U.S. present for the EAS process. Conversely, ASEAN's intention, so far, was only supporting the U.S. to gain a membership in the regional system as a counterbalance to China. Thus, in order to see more concrete cooperation from ASEAN, the United States is boosting diplomatic efforts to encourage ASEAN to do more, via U.S.-ASEAN Summits and other channels.

Conclusion

No immediate solutions exist for the issues surrounding the United States' EAS policy. Rather, it is conceivable that the United States will bolster its bilateral cooperative relationships with regional countries in order to drum up support for its EAS policy. In fact, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is pointing to the necessity to utilize cooperative relationships with new partners and the traditional bilateral alliances to propel the EAS. In that context, a key point is that cooperation with Japan will be extremely important for the United States' EAS policy. Naturally, the format that this cooperation takes may for example involve low-key efforts such as Japan and the United States cooperating to diplomatically encourage ASEAN to play a more proactive role in various areas. However, the cooperation of Japan, which shares universal values, concerns over China largely and furthermore has an established record of regional diplomacy, makes Japan an invaluable partner for the United States' Asia policy. For Japan as well, Obama's re-engagement is an opportunity to help strengthen U.S. involvement in regional multilateral frameworks. That being the case, further promoting the Japan-US Alliance as a "cornerstone" for the EAS development will undoubtedly serve the interests of both Japan and the United States.

Key References

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