



## East Asia Community-Building: Time for the United States to Get on Board

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### Recommendations

- The United States needs to end its “wait-and-see” policy toward East Asia community-building and more clearly articulate its support for the process in general and for the East Asia Summit (EAS) in particular.
- Reluctance to do so is broadly interpreted as US indifference toward Southeast Asia or as additional evidence that its preoccupation elsewhere (Iraq, DPRK) has resulted in Southeast Asia being overlooked.
- To the extent Washington does focus on Southeast Asia, it must stress the importance of ASEAN as an economic engine and driver of East Asia community-building, and not just as a “second front” in the global war on terrorism. President Bush’s next meeting with the “ASEAN Seven” along the APEC sidelines provides the opportunity to set this tone (even as his decision to skip his scheduled full ASEAN Summit undercuts this message). In this regard, since the full ASEAN-US Summit must now be “rescheduled,” consideration should be given to coinciding an Asia visit with the Singapore EAS, which would allow the US-ASEAN Summit to take place and further permit President Bush to be invited as a special guest to the EAS, similar to President Putin’s appearance in 2005.
- Washington needs to reexamine its reasons for not joining the EAS. The logistical excuse—the impossibility of scheduling two Asia trips for the president each year—is particularly weak. First, not all Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders’ Meetings are held in Asia and second, the EAS could be arranged to coincide with APEC or to serve as a bookend for an annual Asia trip.
- Regardless of a decision to join the EAS, Washington should consider acceding to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). This would not undercut America’s Asian alliances, as often claimed; all five of Washington’s Asia allies have signed with no perceptible impact on their respective alliance networks. As a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Washington has already endorsed the purpose and principles of the TAC and a simple side letter could deal with its existing reservations.
- Washington must continue to underscore that its commitment to, and preference for, the trans-Pacific institutions in which it participates does not indicate hostility or a lack of appreciation for pan-Asian multilateral efforts that, by building an East Asia community, can move the broader agenda forward.
- Washington also has a better definition of the relationship between its alliances and multilateral efforts in general and ad hoc “coalitions of the willing” in particular. What, for example, is the impact of allies being among the “unwilling”? And how, in Washington’s view, do trans-Pacific and pan-Asian initiatives fit together? Merely stating a preference for the former leads to open interpretation of attitudes regarding the latter.

- ASEAN, having taken the “driver’s seat,” must now prove that it is capable of driving; it must specify the direction in which it is heading and its ability not only to steer but also to step on the accelerator. Promulgating a meaningful charter and then identifying and backing a primary leader to steer ASEAN and its community-building efforts are early prerequisites.
- ASEAN and its Plus Six partners must more clearly articulate the mission, objectives, and priorities of the EAS and better define how this pan-Asian effort will complement and interact with broader trans-Pacific efforts like the ARF and APEC. The same applies to ASEAN Plus Three (APT). Washington’s basic question remains unanswered: “Do their [APT, EAS] overlapping agendas make sense or do they duplicate or undermine existing fora such as APEC and ARF?”
- APT and EAS members need to further demonstrate their willingness to adopt and reinforce global norms, especially in the areas of counterterrorism and counterproliferation and the promotion of free and open markets and to more effectively address growing transnational challenges.
- To the extent that East Asia community-building efforts signal a willingness to coexist with Washington and are not seen as threatening bilateral alliances or security interests, Washington is unlikely to discourage, much less derail, those regional efforts. But, while Washington continues to “wait and see” if this will indeed be the case, the East Asia community-building train is leaving the station. It’s time for the United States to get on board.

## The US and East Asia Community-Building

The US views toward ongoing efforts to develop a future institutional architecture for Asia are still evolving and will be determined, in the final analysis, by the outcome of several simultaneous debates both in the United States and in East Asia. One is the debate between Asia-Pacific versus East Asia regionalism and how (or if) the two can coexist. Another is the future role of Washington’s traditional alliance-oriented strategy in Asia and how this coincides or conflicts with East Asia multilateralism. The third is the debate over institutionalized versus ad hoc multilateralism that is currently playing itself out both globally and within Asia. The three debates are intertwined and complicated by the uncertainty of the organizing

principles and objectives behind East Asia community-building efforts and the desired or anticipated role of the United States in this process.

Washington’s preferences today are fairly straightforward but tentative and subject to change. The Bush administration has made it very clear that it prefers the more inclusive Asia-Pacific format to strict East Asia regionalism; the former involves the United States as an active player, while the US role in the latter remains ambiguous and subject to caveats that Washington views with suspicion. This debate potentially—although not automatically or inevitably—pits institutions like the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) “gathering of economies” or the ARF against more exclusive East Asia community-building exercises like the well-established APT effort or the embryonic EAS.

Historically, Washington’s view on the second debate has been clear, consistent, and bipartisan. Alliances come first. Democratic and Republican administrations alike, however, have argued that it is not an “either/or” choice; bilateral alliances and multilateral cooperation are (or should be) mutually supportive, not mutually exclusive. This view may be changing, however, especially in Asia, but is also being challenged in unofficial circles in Washington. Some Asian states, China foremost among them, see the existing US alliance structure as a remnant of Washington’s “Cold War mentality” or debate its future relevance, arguing for cooperative or collective security arrangements instead. While the current US administration, like its Cold War predecessors, maintains the primacy of America’s alliances, in recent years Washington has seemed more inclined to lean toward ad hoc arrangements where, to quote former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, “the mission defines the alliance” rather than the reverse. The perceived “requirement” for allies to support ad hoc efforts also adds new strains to both structures.

While the Bush administration has shown a distinct preference for ad hoc multilateralism over more institutionalized mechanisms, here again the two are not seen as mutually exclusive. In fact, one could also argue that there would be less need for the former if the latter were more functional. It has arguably been the lack of effective global and regional institutions that has prompted the ad hoc approach.

## Recent History

Despite its sometimes deserved reputation for unilateralism elsewhere around the globe, the administration of George W. Bush has since its inception been generally supportive of East Asia multilateralism and community-building efforts. Notwithstanding its alleged ABC (Anything But Clinton) approach to foreign and domestic policy, two Clinton-era East Asia multilateral efforts—the ARF and the APEC Leaders’ Meeting—have thus far enjoyed strong support from the current US administration. For example, witness President Bush’s willingness to attend the October 2001 Shanghai APEC meeting in the immediate wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks (and every APEC Leaders’ Meeting since then) and the presence of Colin Powell at all four ARF meetings held during his tenure as secretary of state, something neither of his predecessors could claim.

While Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (deservedly) received widespread criticism for missing her first ARF meeting in July 2005—she was ably represented by her Asia-oriented deputy, Robert Zoellick—she sent a strong positive signal of US commitment to the ARF the next year by attending the 2006 meeting in Malaysia despite multiple crises in the Middle East which could have easily (and credibly) been used to excuse her absence. Regrettably, the same cannot be said for 2007, when she missed her second of three opportunities to attend the ARF, this time being represented by her new deputy, John Negroponte.

The Bush administration’s early support for East Asian multilateralism was reinforced in the White House’s September 2002 *National Security Strategy for the United States of America*, which expressed the conviction that “multilateral institutions can multiply the strength of freedom-loving nations” and further stated that the United States would build upon the stability provided by institutions such as the ASEAN and APEC “to develop a mix of regional and bilateral strategies to manage change in this dynamic region.”

This message was reiterated in the 2006 *National Security Strategy*. Consistent with its theme of promoting freedom and democracy, it noted that institutions like the ARF and APEC can play a “vital role” in “the spread of freedom, prosperity, and regional security.” It also noted that “new arrangements—such as the United

States-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership, or others that are focused on problem-solving and action, like the six-party talks and the PSI [Proliferation Security Initiative]—can likewise bring together Asian nations to address common challenges.”

In short, the Bush administration has renewed and reinvigorated US interest in the ARF and APEC and, against some initial regional resistance and criticism, insisted on a multilateral approach, under the six-party talks, for dealing with the North Korean nuclear problem. On a more contentious note, it has also placed a great deal of importance on “ad hoc multilateralism”—the PSI, for example, which is a primary vehicle in the US-led global effort to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

## Evolving Approaches to East Asia Community-Building

A number of serious questions are being debated in the United States regarding the nature, intent, and future direction of East Asia community-building and the motivation of some of its key proponents. One lingering question, at least from an American perspective, is the extent of US involvement in East Asia community-building: should Washington be included as a member, or as an observer, or not at all, in this evolving East Asia community? How and why the United States is excluded could be as important as whether or not it is invited to participate.

When it comes to the EAS—including the ten ASEAN countries (Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam); its “Plus Three” partners (China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea); and Australia, India, and New Zealand—it is not clear if Washington even desires a seat at the table. Many argue that getting the US president to two Asian summits in any given year, especially if scheduled only a few months apart, would be no mean feat, not to mention the problem of bringing him (or her) into direct contact with the leader of Myanmar, whose legitimacy Washington does not recognize. Nonetheless, the United States has made it clear that it is interested in learning more about the composition of the EAS; the criteria for membership; and most importantly (and still largely undefined) its mission, objectives, and priorities.

In the final analysis, much will depend on who leads the East Asian community. ASEAN appears to have solidified its position in the driver’s seat.

But who is driving ASEAN? Is it possible to steer a steady course with ten sets of hands on the wheel? Is it possible to move forward when there are more feet on the brake than on the accelerator? There seems to be great hope in ASEAN that the establishment of its first real charter, coinciding with its 40th birthday this fall, will lead the way toward a more unified ASEAN position, but this remains to be seen. At some point, someone needs to step forward and lead, with the acknowledgment and backing of the others, much in the way Indonesia did in earlier days.

Can any of the Plus Three provide the leadership if ASEAN falters? Japan, as the real economic giant in East Asia, might have a strong claim to leadership. Ironically, a decade ago, when other states in the region seemed prepared to accept Japan as the so-called “lead goose,” Japan balked. Today, however, there are signs that Tokyo is more willing to take on this role. However, problems of “history,” many of which Japan brought upon itself, have made it difficult for Japan to emerge from the shadow of its own past, even as it seems to be entering into the shadow of China, the region’s emerging new giant. Will China be the presumptive or de facto leader of this new East Asia community? If so, will that leadership be benign or will it be aimed—or be perceived by the United States as being aimed—at limiting or replacing Washington’s (and Tokyo’s) influence in the region?

The most important question, from a US perspective, will be how an East Asian community relates to the region’s other multilateral organizations and initiatives—both institutionalized (like the ARF and APEC) and ad hoc (like the six-party talks and PSI). As Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Eric John observed, “the EAS has focused our attention on the longer-term questions of regional architecture in East Asia.” Speaking directly about pan-Asia community-building efforts like the EAS and APT, he asked: “Do their overlapping agendas make sense or do they duplicate or undermine existing fora such as APEC and ARF?”

Another key factor affecting Washington’s attitude will be the willingness (or unwillingness) of emerging East Asia mechanisms to adopt global norms, especially in the areas of counterterrorism and counterproliferation and the promotion of free and open markets. Will the new East Asia community reinforce or weaken multilateral efforts to accomplish these goals? Will it help the

states of the region to meet the growing transnational challenges...or provide another excuse not to? These questions and some preliminary answers are explored below.

### Pro-Multilateralism, With Caveats

Washington has historically viewed Asia-Pacific multilateral organizations as useful vehicles both for promoting greater political and economic cooperation and for enhancing regional security. This support for multilateral institutions—in the Asia-Pacific and globally—has one important caveat, however: no US administration, Republican or Democrat, is likely to allow such institutions to substitute for or threaten US bilateral alliances and other security arrangements.

This was clearly spelled out in the 2006 *National Security Strategy*: “Asian nations that share our values can join us in partnership to strengthen new democracies and promote democratic reforms throughout the region. This institutional framework, however, must be built upon a foundation of sound bilateral relations with key states in the region.” Like the Clinton administration before it, the Bush administration does not see bilateral and multilateral efforts as being in tension; rather, they complement one another. As a general rule, East Asian multilateral organizations are seen as useful tools in pursuing US national security objectives.

During its first term in office, the George W. Bush administration was also cautiously supportive of Asia-oriented multilateral organizations, such as the APT, which do not include the United States. In its second term, however, the Bush administration started to look askance at organizations established and/or dominated by China (like the Central Asia-oriented Shanghai Cooperation Organization), to ensure that these do not diminish Washington’s (or Tokyo’s) involvement or interests in the region. While the United States is still not actively blocking or interfering with East Asia regionalism efforts like the APT, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and EAS, it is monitoring their future direction and examining the motives of those who seek to guide them. Meanwhile, the Bush administration continues to state its clear preference for “inclusive” Asia-Pacific regional efforts that include Washington, despite the inherent perceived weaknesses.

While the United States has been circumspect regarding East Asia community-building, it has not

concealed its support for ASEAN in general and for more “inclusive” multilateral approaches in particular. During a visit to Singapore in May 2006, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill commented that US “engagement with Southeast Asia continues to broaden and deepen,” stressing that Washington has no intention of abandoning a region it described as the “second front in the war on terrorism.”

At the same time, Hill fired a warning shot regarding “inclusivity,” noting that “the dynamism of the region means that our relationship is in a constant state of evolution, which has given rise to renewed debate and discussion about regional fora, and whether they should be inclusive or exclusive.” Hill characterized the debate as pitting “pan-Asianism” against “trans-Pacificism.”

The United States has no objection to East Asia regionalism per se. As Hill’s deputy, Eric John observed at Georgetown in December 2006, “every region in the world has developed its own institutions...the United States cannot take the position that Asia should be an exception.” It is not East Asia community-building per se that bothers Washington. In fact, according to Hill, the United States “welcomes it.” However, Washington also wants to keep the welcome mat out for trans-Pacific institutions. Warning of the danger of “meeting fatigue” and the “proliferation” of multilateral initiatives,” the goal, Secretary Hill argues, “should be to achieve synergy and avoid redundancy and duplication.”

Even after two EAS meetings, the fundamental objectives of this emerging community-building effort remain unclear. Nonetheless, Washington has been careful not to publicly object to or discourage this initiative. When pressed by Southeast Asia interlocutors to make a more definitive statement, a senior official in an off-the-record, not-for-attribution Honolulu conference replied, “Tell me what it is—what it plans to achieve—and then I’ll tell you what we think of it!” Until then, the United States will “watch with interest” how these pan-Asian efforts develop and, according to Hill, will work closely with ASEAN to ensure these new mechanisms “don’t dilute the effectiveness of [APEC and the ARF] and the important cooperation they foster.”

One must still wonder if Washington is betting on the wrong set of horses. While the Bush administration continues giving pride of place to the ARF

and APEC, the nations of East Asia, many of whom are close allies and supporters of the United States, have indicated a clear preference and priority for APT and the EAS.

## ASEAN Plus Three and the East Asia Summit

While Washington focuses on broader Asia-Pacific regionalism (the ARF and APEC) and on ad hoc or task-oriented multilateral initiatives (six-party talks and PSI), the states of East Asia have continued their community-building efforts. In December 2005, Malaysia convened the first East Asia Summit. It should be noted that the EAS was not the only summit taking place in Kuala Lumpur at that time. ASEAN leaders also met amongst themselves, with their Plus Three partners, and in individual ASEAN+1 meetings with their Australian, New Zealand, and Indian counterparts. This was the second time that Canberra and Wellington and the third time that New Delhi participated in this conclave. Russian President Vladimir Putin also made his first appearance on the ASEAN summit scene, conducting his first ASEAN+1 dialogue. He was invited to meet with, but not to join, the 16 leaders at the first annual East Asia Summit. The second so-called ASEAN+3+3 EAS meeting took place in January 2007 in Cebu, Philippines, with these 16 core members.

While it is impossible to predict just what the EAS will eventually become, an analysis of the first two meetings makes it fairly clear what it will not be: it will not form the base of the much-heralded but still dormant East Asia community. That role appears destined to be that of the more exclusive APT gathering. It is also highly doubtful that it will, or that it wants to, threaten US interests.

The host of the 2005 inaugural summit, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi of Malaysia, made it abundantly clear that the ten ASEAN countries and their Plus Three partners constituted the core, stating, “You are talking about a community of East Asians; I don’t know how the Australians could regard themselves as East Asians, or the New Zealanders for that matter.” “We are not talking about members of the community,” Badawi continued, even though Australia, New Zealand, and “our immediate neighbor” India have “common interests in what is happening in the region.” The architects of East Asia community-building, he implied, would all be Asians, with the APT (vice EAS) participants providing the base. While his comments indicated that India might one

day be able to slip its nose into the tent, Australia and New Zealand clearly would not. APT would drive the train (with ASEAN hoping to remain the conductor). The EAS would provide a vehicle for outsiders to endorse the community-building effort; it “could play a significant role,” but would not be an integral part, much less a driver of the process.

The EAS Chairman’s Statement underscored, twice, that ASEAN will be the “driving force” behind East Asia community-building. The KL Declaration on the Summit declares that future meetings “will be hosted and chaired by an ASEAN Member Country...and be held back-to-back with the annual ASEAN Summit.” Beijing had suggested that it host the second round but ASEAN remains as concerned about sharing driving privileges with its other community members as it does allowing outsiders a greater say in the community-building process.

ASEAN’s role as driver was reinforced at the January 2007 ASEAN, APT, and EAS heads of state meetings. The Chairperson’s Statement from the ASEAN Summit meeting reaffirmed that “ASEAN should consolidate its leading and central role in the evolving regional architecture” and that “the ASEAN Plus Three process would be the main vehicle toward achieving an East Asia community.” Likewise, the Chairman’s Statement from the APT Summit put ASEAN “at the center of our long-term pursuit of an East Asia community,” further noting that the APT process “could make positive contributions” and was “an essential part of the evolving regional architecture, complementary to the East Asia Summit and other regional fora.” The EAS Chairman’s Statement reiterated this point, expressing “our conviction that the EAS should remain outward looking, with ASEAN as the driving force working in close partnership with other participants of the East Asia Summit.”

Despite being “outward looking,” nothing was said about new members or about any changes to the membership criteria. As it stands today, there are three criteria for membership. Participants must be full ASEAN dialogue partners, they must have “substantial relations” with ASEAN, and they must sign the ASEAN TAC. Moscow’s lack of “substantial relations” with ASEAN, despite being a dialogue partner and a TAC signatory, precluded its early entry. Moscow continues knocking at the door, although EAS members agreed at the 2005 summit to freeze the member-

ship for the next two years, through the fall 2007 summit in Singapore.

Washington meets the first two criteria but the Bush administration, like its predecessors, has been reluctant to sign up for the TAC, which precludes Washington’s full membership, even after the door is reopened. Observer status appears possible, however and is more likely to be sought by Washington, if and when such a membership category is established by the EAS.

In an apparent attempt to respond to one of Washington’s potential concerns, the 2005 KL Declaration promised that the EAS would be “an open, inclusive, transparent, and outward-looking forum in which we strive to strengthen global norms and universally recognized values,” and that building an East Asia community is “a long-term goal.” Its first priority will be building “a strong ASEAN Community which will serve as a solid foundation for our common peace and prosperity.”

Still undefined after two meetings is how the EAS (or the APT) will interact with broader regional organizations such as APEC or the ARF. To its credit, the Chairman’s Statement from the second EAS “confirmed our view that the EAS complements other existing regional mechanisms, including the ASEAN dialogue process, the ASEAN Plus Three process, the ARF, and APEC in community-building efforts.” Details of how these efforts will mesh or work together is still lacking. The Chairman’s Statement did note that in doing its work, “our officials and the ASEAN Secretariat will use existing mechanisms to facilitate the implementation of [priority] projects,” again underscoring that the EAS was not going to develop a life of its own but would remain under ASEAN and APT.

As noted at the outset, the way in which the EAS relates to the region’s other multilateral organizations and initiatives—both institutionalized (like the ARF and APEC) and ad hoc (like the six-party talks and PSI)—will also be a key factor in Washington’s attitude, as will its adoption of global norms, especially in the areas of counterterrorism and counterproliferation. Will the EAS (or APT) reinforce or dilute these efforts? Will it help regional states rise to the growing transnational challenges...or provide another excuse not to? The answers to these questions will determine Washington’s attitude toward the EAS and any subsequent East Asian community.

## Assessing Multilateral Pluses and Minuses

In short, most American policymakers believe that Asia-Pacific multilateral organizations are useful vehicles both for promoting greater political and economic cooperation and for enhancing regional security. More inclusive trans-Pacific gatherings like APEC and the ARF are preferred over more narrow pan-Asian efforts such as APT and the EAS, although Washington to date has raised no serious objections to such gatherings. Nor has it expressed particular enthusiasm, however, out of concern that this might distract attention from what it sees as more important trans-Pacific efforts.

While East Asia multilateral organizations hold many promises for Asia, it is important to understand both their perceived limits and their opportunities. A comprehensive security arrangement or NATO-type alliance aimed at containing or responding to a specified threat simply does not apply to a post-Cold War Asia. Rather, East Asia multilateral security mechanisms should be viewed more as confidence-building measures aimed at avoiding or dampening the possibilities of (rather than reacting to) crises or aggression. Peacekeeping and disaster relief operations and nontraditional security issues (such as refugee problems, maritime safety, pollution, and other environmental and safety issues) also seemed well-suited to a multilateral approach. In many of these instances, the process is as important as the product.

Efforts that build upon and complement, and not replace, bilateral and ad hoc relationships in Asia are of particular value from a US perspective. Any effort that is perceived as undermining US bilateral dealings, and especially those that might diminish or replace America's key bilateral security alliances, are sure to be rejected by Washington both by the present and by any future administration.

More generally, Asian multilateral security mechanisms can promote long-term peace and stability. They provide a framework for continued direct US involvement in regional security matters. They offer a means for Japan, China, and Russia, among others, to become more actively involved in regional security affairs in a manner that is nonthreatening to their neighbors. They provide a forum for exposing North Korea to regional realities while facilitating dialogue between North and South Korea, Japan, and the United States. They also allow other regional actors to be heard, while contributing to a sense

of regional identity, a spirit of cooperation and building the confidence of the member states. Since September 11, 2001, these security mechanisms have also become increasingly valuable for coordinating regional views and mobilizing resources in the war on terrorism.

Nonetheless, the utility of these mechanisms remains limited, especially in the security arena, for two primary reasons. First, while steps have been taken since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks to put some operational substance behind cooperative efforts, these organizations still largely remain talking shops that cannot respond to or deal effectively with emerging security challenges. Second, Taiwan has been systematically excluded from many of these mechanisms and one of the region's greatest security challenges—cross-Strait relations—has been deliberately kept off the security dialogue agenda at Beijing's insistence. As long as these characteristics prevail, the prospects and promises of multilateral security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region, at least from a US perspective, will necessarily be limited.

## Future Institutional Architecture

From the above discussion, it is possible to develop a tentative outline of Washington's preferred future institutional architecture for East Asia. Washington's preference is for pride of place to go to trans-Pacific institution-building, creating mechanisms for cooperation that would include the United States as an active partner. Clearly, APEC and ARF should have priority over (or at least not be overshadowed by) pan-Asia community-building. This attitude is shared by other Asia "outsiders," especially Australia, and even some inside partners, such as Japan.

Insofar as East Asia community-building continues in parallel with the broader institution-building effort, Washington's main concerns will be related to the establishment (and subsequent willingness to honor and enforce) norms and objectives consistent with international (read: Washington's) standards. Washington is likely to prefer continued ASEAN leadership and, within ASEAN, sees Indonesia as the most logical driver of the train, both as the largest member and also given its commitment to democratic values. Indonesia's proposed ASEAN Security Community, for example, stresses the role of democracy and human rights and is no doubt music to Washington's ears (despite the objections of many of Indonesia's ASEAN partners).

Within East Asia, the APT appears destined to be the primary vehicle for East Asia community building, with the EAS as an important validation and support mechanism, aimed at endorsing the internal East Asia effort. This author's recommendations notwithstanding, it appears doubtful that Washington will push for full membership in the EAS any time soon, but may seek observer status, depending on the admission requirements. Basing participation primarily on logistical considerations—the difficulty of a second Asia trip annually—rather than an assessment of geopolitical costs and benefits does not appear to serve Washington's interests (or reputation), however. It also reinforces the perception that the Bush administration is so preoccupied with Iraq that it is neglecting Asia—a belief that is widely held and frequently articulated, especially in the wake of the decision to skip the stopover in Singapore during this fall's APEC trip to Australia, which was to then include the first-ever Bush summit with all of ASEAN. (Bush will instead hold his third summit with the “ASEAN Seven” (absent the three non-APEC members: Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar) in Sydney.

For that matter, the logistics argument appears misplaced or disingenuous. First, APEC does not always meet in Asia; this year's meeting is in the South Pacific and a third of its meetings take place in North or Latin America. Second, the APEC and ARF meetings could be placed back-to-back or as bookends for a presidential trip to Asia. Participation in the EAS meeting would help guarantee at least one presidential trip to Asia annually and this should be the minimum any administration should aspire to, given Asia's growing importance (and he needs to demonstrate America's continuing commitment to the region). In this regard, since the full ASEAN-US Summit must now be “rescheduled,” consideration should be given to coinciding an Asia visit with the Singapore EAS, which would allow the US-ASEAN Summit to take place and further permit President Bush to be invited as a special guest to the EAS, similar to President Putin's appearance in 2005.

Regardless of a decision to pursue EAS membership, Washington should be asking itself why it continues to resist acceding to the TAC. The oft-stated contention that this would somehow undercut America's Asian alliances appears unfounded: two of Washington's Asian allies—Thailand and the Philippines—are charter members of ASEAN, while the other three—Australia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea—have now acceded to the TAC without any perceptible impact on Washington's

network of bilateral alliances. As a member of the ARF, Washington has already endorsed the purpose and principles of the TAC “as a code of conduct governing relations between states and a unique diplomatic instrument for regional confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and political and security cooperation.” Perhaps it's time to take the next step, in order to demonstrate its commitment to regional prosperity and stability and to underscore its support for East Asia community-building.

To the extent that East Asia community-building efforts signal a willingness to coexist with Washington, and are not seen as threatening or attempting to undermine Washington's bilateral alliances, its own central role in East Asian security affairs, or the broader Asia-Pacific regional institutions in which it participates, there is little reason to expect objections from Washington or a serious effort to discourage or derail regional community-building efforts. But, while Washington continues to “wait and see” if this will indeed be the case, the East Asia community-building train is leaving the station. It's time for Washington to get on board.

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