



U.S.-ASEAN LEADERS SUMMIT

# The Missing Link: Multilateral Institutions in Asia and Regional Security

By Michael H. Fuchs and Brian Harding May 2016

Center for American Progress



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# Introduction and summary

Asia's security situation is changing: China is aggressively asserting its claims to disputed territories; Japan is simultaneously redefining its security posture; the United States is expanding its military presence in the region; and challenges related to North Korea and the South China Sea are only becoming more complex.

The economy of the Asia-Pacific is also evolving: goods and labor are moving more freely; megatrade deals are competing to set regional standards; and foreign investment is moving south as wages in China rise. Despite a regional economic slowdown, Asia continues to be a critical driver for global growth.

Recognizing that the Asia-Pacific is the world's most dynamic region and is essential to long-term U.S. security and economic interests, the Obama administration has attempted to rebalance the U.S. government's attention and resources to meet this challenge.

This effort has included a robust, multipronged approach to security issues. The core of U.S. policy has been to deepen long-standing treaty alliances with Japan; the Republic of Korea, or ROK; Australia; the Philippines; and Thailand.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these traditional alliances, the United States now has significant bilateral ties with every country in the region except for North Korea. Emerging partnerships with countries such as Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia can even sometimes be as dynamic as traditional alliances. A deeper and broader U.S.-China relationship, while complex, is also a critical component of regional engagement and has produced areas of groundbreaking cooperation, such as climate change.

The Obama administration has also invested in trilateral mechanisms, such as a U.S.-Japan-ROK dialogue to improve coordination and relationships among U.S. allies in the region. In order to bolster strategic coordination with India in Asia, the Obama administration also created a U.S.-Japan-India dialogue.

Last week, President Barack Obama traveled to Japan for the G-7 summit and made his first visit to Vietnam as president. This trip, his 10th to Asia, included an historic stop in Hiroshima—the first ever by a sitting U.S. president—and marked the beginning of the Obama administration’s final push to solidify the gains of this rebalancing policy.<sup>2</sup> The trip will be followed by a flurry of activity over the summer, culminating in President Obama’s final trip to Asia in September for the G-20 summit in China and the East Asia Summit and U.S.-ASEAN Summit in Laos.

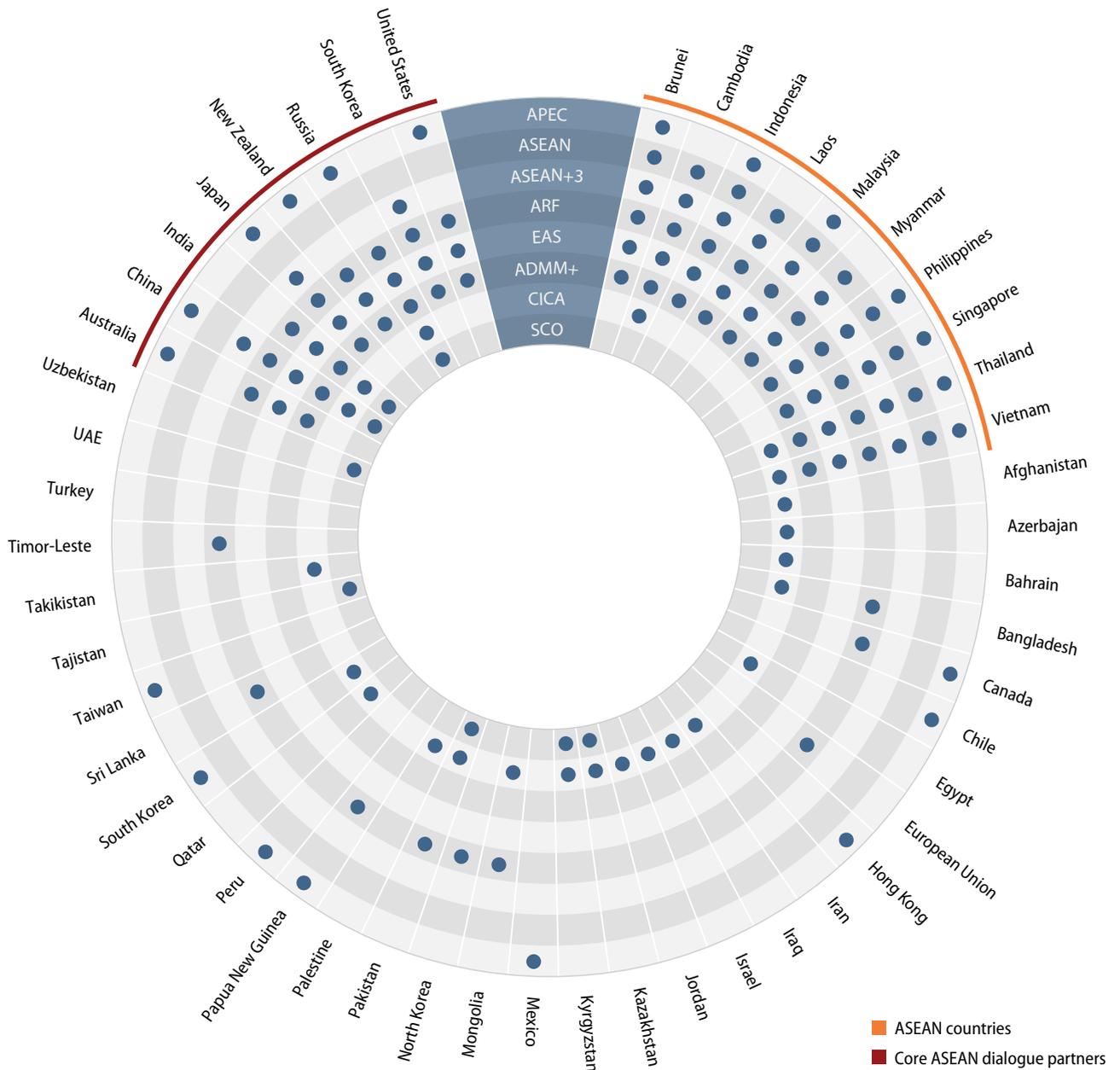
As Asia has become more complex, addressing challenges increasingly requires cooperation with a wide group of countries in multilateral settings. The Obama administration has consequently prioritized multilateral institutions, which are now the main driver of presidential travel to the region.

Unfortunately, while the United States has now invested in engaging multilateral institutions in the Asia-Pacific, many of those organizations are not operating to their full problem-solving potential, despite the major security challenges and disagreements facing the region today. The challenge for the next U.S. administration, therefore, is to build on the success of the Obama administration in engaging with these critical institutions to make them capable of effectively handling a new security environment.

This report outlines the landscape of regional institutions and their perspectives, describes and explains questions and challenges for the United States in its engagement with multilateral institutions in the Asia-Pacific, and offers policy recommendations for the next U.S. administration. While it touches upon the wide range of regional institutions that exist, the conversation focuses largely on the ASEAN-centered regional security institutions that include the United States. These regional security institutions are the primary platforms for formal U.S. engagement on transnational issues in the Asia-Pacific.

The Obama administration has consequently prioritized multilateral institutions, which are now the main driver of presidential travel to the region.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Asia-Pacific regional institutions membership**



Sources: Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, "Member Economies," available at <http://www.apec.org/about-us/about-apec/member-economies.aspx> (last accessed May 2016); ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN Member States," available at <http://www.asean.org/asean/asean-member-states/> (last accessed May 2016); ASEAN Secretariat, "Overview ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation", available at [http://www.asean.org/?static\\_post=asean-plus-three-cooperation-2](http://www.asean.org/?static_post=asean-plus-three-cooperation-2) (last accessed May 2016); ASEAN Regional Forum, "About the ASEAN Regional Forum", available at <http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/about.html> (last accessed May 2016); Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "East Asia Summit," available at <http://dfat.gov.au/international-relations/regional-architecture/eas/pages/east-asia-summit-eas.aspx> (last accessed May 2016); ASEAN Secretariat, "About the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM-Plus)," available at <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/about-admm/about-admm-plus.html> (last accessed May 2016); Secretariat of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, "About CICA," available at [http://www.s-cica.org/page.php?page\\_id=7&lang=1&article\\_id=104](http://www.s-cica.org/page.php?page_id=7&lang=1&article_id=104), (last accessed May 2016); Asia Regional Integration Center, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)," available at <https://aric.adb.org/initiative/shanghai-cooperation-organization> (last accessed May 2016).

## Key regional institutions

*Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, or APEC*, forum, is the main vehicle for inclusive, leaders-level conversations on economic issues. The U.S. president attends the annual summit.

*Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN*, aims to enhance cooperation among its 10 members on just about every economic and political issue, with a focus on spurring economic integration. There are approximately 1,000 annual meetings, from leaders to working levels.

*ASEAN Plus Three, or ASEAN+3*, was founded in the 1990s to strengthen cooperation amongst the 13 countries and became a key mechanism for economic cooperation in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. There are annual leaders meetings on the sidelines of East Asia Summit.

*ASEAN Regional Forum, or ARF*, is the most expansive of the region's security institutions, and focuses primarily on confidence-building measures intended to boost cooperation on transnational threats, such as nonproliferation and maritime security. The U.S. secretary of state attends the annual foreign ministers meeting.

*East Asia Summit, or EAS*, is a leaders-led forum that formally includes six pillars—health, energy, education, finance, connectivity, and global health—but has little infrastructure to drive cooperation on those issues. Most of the senior-level discussions in EAS focus on strategic political and security issues. The U.S. president attends the annual summit.

*ASEAN Dialogue Partners* are the non-ASEAN countries with formal partnerships with ASEAN, including the United States, Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Australia, India, the European Union, and Canada. A key element for formal dialogue partners are ASEAN+1 summits on the sidelines of EAS and/or Asia-Europe meetings.

*ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus, or ADMM+*, is a defense ministers-led process with the same membership as the EAS that holds biannual ministerial meetings and regular working group that organize joint military exercises among members.

*Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum, or EAMF*, is a new, lower-level forum made up of EAS member states that focuses on fostering cooperation on maritime issues.

*ASEAN Community* was inaugurated in 2015 by the 10 members and comprises an ASEAN Economic Community, ASEAN Political-Security Community, and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. In many cases aspirational, this initiative fosters greater regional integration and identity.

*Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or SCO*, is focused primarily on security issues in Central Asia. China and Russia drive agenda, and annual leaders meetings are held.

*Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, or CICA*, focuses on promoting cooperation on a wide range of transnational issues, but only meets rarely at high levels; foreign ministers have met five times in CICA's 25 years of existence.

# What has the Obama administration done?

The Obama administration has invested significant time and resources strengthening U.S. engagement with regional institutions in the Asia-Pacific with an emphasis on ASEAN, which forms the core of multilateralism in Asia. This represents a significant change in how the United States approaches the region: From the end of World War II through the 1990s, American policies treated U.S. alliances as the only regional institutions worthy of consistent, high-level engagement.

The initial shift in U.S. policy toward regional institutions began during the final two years of the George W. Bush administration.<sup>3</sup> However, progress has accelerated since 2009, in line with the Obama administration's renewed global focus on multilateralism. At the end of eight years in office, the Obama administration will have firmly embedded the United States within the fabric of the main regional institutions addressing political and security issues.<sup>4</sup>

Until this recent investment in regional institutions, the United States only selectively engaged, often showing up warily or not showing up at all. The United States first joined the ASEAN Regional Forum when it was created in 1994. However, the secretary of state did not attend every year, and then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's absences in 2005 and 2007 are still regularly mentioned in the region. Similarly, ASEAN states inaugurated the East Asia Summit in 2005, yet the United States appeared uninterested until 2009.<sup>5</sup> While regional countries expanded their economic integration and emphasized ASEAN-centric institutions as forums for discussing regional security issues, the United States appeared unengaged. Presidential attention was limited to annual trade-oriented Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, or APEC, summits with countries on the Pacific Rim, in line with global efforts to liberalize international trade.<sup>6</sup>

The Obama administration recognized that a deeper relationship with ASEAN was vital for the rebalance policy due both to the inherent importance of this region of more than 600 million people and the bloc's potential to be a critical element of a balance of power in Asia that serves U.S. interests. Upon taking office, former

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton traveled to Asia on her first trip as secretary, which included a visit to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. During that stop, Secretary Clinton stated that the “region is vital ... to the world’s common interests: a significant and trade-oriented regional economy; a critical strategic location; and a set of countries that will be key to any solutions we pursue on climate change, counterterrorism, global health, and so much else.”<sup>7</sup> The Obama administration saw engagement with ASEAN as a necessary way to promote a so-called rules-based order in the region, meaning an international system governed by international law and established norms, as well as to improving bilateral ties with the countries of Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup> The United States also signed ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation—which is an important confidence-building mechanism for ASEAN countries—and also sent its first resident ambassador to ASEAN, and announced that it would join, and the president would attend, the East Asia Summit.<sup>9</sup>

Since then, the United States has not only actively engaged in these institutions from the presidential to the working level, but it has also helped create new ASEAN-based forums to address critical regional issues. With U.S. support, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus, or ADMM+, construct—a defense ministry track of dialogues with the same membership as the East Asia Summit—was inaugurated in 2010, and in 2012, the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum, which has the same membership as EAS, began to address the thorny set of regional maritime challenges.<sup>10</sup>

## How ASEAN works

Five Southeast Asian countries—Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines—joined together in 1967 to found ASEAN to promote regional stability and build closer economic ties. ASEAN now includes 10 Southeast Asian countries, and addresses economic, political, security, and sociocultural issues. The region’s broader multilateral groupings—including the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus—are ASEAN institutions in which all other countries, such as the United States, China, and Japan, are termed dialogue partners. ASEAN meets regularly with each dialogue partner country in a 10+1 format, meaning there are 10 ASEAN countries and one dialogue partner represented. While dialogue partners actively participate in all of these processes, ASEAN directs the agenda for discussions. The annually-rotating chair country of ASEAN coordinates internal ASEAN processes and hosts all of the minister and leaders level meetings.

# What do countries want from Asia's regional institutions?

While countries from across the Asia-Pacific participate in these institutions, there are a variety of perspectives as to what the institutions should do—the United States, for example, wants them to solve security challenges, while China wants them to foster economic development. To understand how best the United States can engage in these institutions to make them more effective and to help support U.S. interests, it is important to understand the perspectives of all participating regional actors involved.

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## What does the United States want?

Stated U.S. goals for ASEAN engagement focus on advancing economic growth, cooperating on transnational threats, expanding maritime cooperation, cultivating emerging leaders, and promoting gender equality for women in ASEAN.<sup>11</sup>

More fundamentally, goals for U.S. engagement in regional institutions can be described as follows: establish and strengthen rules and norms as the foundation for solving regional problems; improve relations with the countries of Southeast Asia; bring China into this collaborative, rules-driven process of tackling shared challenges; and ensure that the United States is a part of regional discussions of key security issues to protect its interests.<sup>12</sup>

For the United States, strengthening ASEAN-based institutions is central to the goal of promoting a rules-based order in the Asia-Pacific. In order to tackle the region's most difficult challenges—whether maritime disputes, nuclear nonproliferation, or trade—the Obama administration believes that multilateral institutions must play the key role in fostering and enforcing those rules.

Engagement with ASEAN institutions provides an effective way to improve relations with the Southeast Asian countries that comprise ASEAN. When the Obama administration took office, U.S. bilateral relations in the region varied greatly from deep, longstanding relations with two treaty allies—the Philippines

and Thailand—to an isolation policy for Myanmar, which was then ruled by a military junta. As the United States has ramped up its participation in ASEAN meetings, deeper partnerships have developed, replacing ties that were previously riddled with tension, including those with Vietnam and Laos.

The United States also aims to employ regional institutions as a means to work with China constructively in the region while also blunting the assertive, worrying aspects of China’s regional policies, such as its drive to establish de facto control over disputed areas of the South China Sea. Bolstering ASEAN-centered institutions strengthens a platform independent of the United States or China and provides a diplomatic buffer between the two countries that tones down what could otherwise be a more destructive dynamic. In addition, engaging regularly in forums such as the East Asia Summit provides incentives for both the United States and China to find regional initiatives to collaborate on.

From the U.S. perspective, China has singular choice: It can work within regional frameworks to find cooperative solutions to challenges, or it can face the collective pressure of these same organizations when it flaunts rules and norms.

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## What does China want?

China has officially claimed to interact with Southeast Asian counterparts in accordance with its 2+7 Cooperation Framework, which covers security, economic, and development issues.<sup>13</sup> But, whether in its ASEAN+1 summits with the bloc’s leaders, ASEAN+3, or East Asia Summit contexts, China’s primary focus across the board in regional institutions is to advance cooperation on development, finance, and trade. China’s focus in the East Asia Summit over the last five years, for example, has been on implementing the “Phnom Penh Declaration on the EAS Development Initiative,” which focused on advancing cooperation on a wide variety of development issues.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, China tries to avoid security discussions in multilateral settings and focuses instead on promoting economic and development cooperation, which are the elements of China’s enhanced engagement in the region that Southeast Asian countries broadly welcome, as opposed to its rising military profile and approach to the South China Sea. While China accepts that the ASEAN Regional Forum focuses largely on strengthening regional cooperation on security issues, China has strongly objected to security topics driving the agenda in the East Asia

Summit, and—in particular—has strongly objected to addressing contentious issues such as the South China Sea at these multilateral forums in the past. Over time, however, as the rest of the region has agreed on the need to discuss security issues—including the South China Sea—Chinese officials now recognize that they cannot avoid these discussions and engage vigorously in the conversations.<sup>15</sup>

In recent years, Chinese officials have frequently called on Asian nations to address regional problems among themselves without bringing in outside powers; U.S. observers widely understand this line of argument as a challenge to the legitimacy of the U.S. role in the region. In 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping highlighted this Asia-only focus in a high profile speech that emphasized the need for “a new regional security cooperation architecture” and made clear that “it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia.”<sup>16</sup> This focus emphasizes China’s concerns in regard to deepening bilateral and multilateral American involvement in Asia, including direct criticism of U.S. alliances, as President Xi made clear: “To beef up and entrench a military alliance targeted at a third party is not conducive to maintaining common security.”<sup>17</sup> While the United States often states that these alliances are not directed at China, China remains extremely dubious.

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### What do U.S. allies want?

U.S. allies share most of the U.S. approach to regional institutions—including a strong desire for robust American engagement—though the opinions vary from country to country.

Japan and the Philippines are the U.S. allies that are most vocal about proactively pushing the wider ASEAN institutions—such as ARF and EAS—as mechanisms that may encourage China to play a constructive regional role. In recent years—driven largely by assertive Chinese actions in the East and South China Seas—both Japan and the Philippines have wanted the United States to use the ASEAN institutions as vehicles to push China to change its behavior on maritime disputes that involve the two countries.<sup>18</sup>

Australia and the Republic of Korea largely share similar views about focusing discussions on key security issues.<sup>19</sup> They, too, promote the use of the ASEAN institutions as essential tools for building cooperative solutions, including between the United States and China. ROK, in particular, is usually focused primarily on addressing North Korea in all forums—as is natural, given that North Korea represents an existential threat to the ROK.

While Thailand strongly supports U.S. engagement in ASEAN institutions, it also shies away from taking a strong stance on issues that might place it between conflicting U.S. and Chinese interests, including in the South China Sea or North Korea.<sup>20</sup>

A major distinction between the United States and its allies is that U.S. allies want to use these ASEAN institutions to address regional economic and development issues in addition to security, a point on which the United States does not generally agree. The United States and these allies do not disagree that the primary focus of institutions such as the East Asia Summit should be security challenges.<sup>21</sup> However, the divide between U.S. allies over how to approach regional discussions on trade and economics—reflected in U.S. reticence over joining the regionwide Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, or RCEP, negotiations—will continue to be a hotly debated regional issue and could contribute to the slower-than-optimal evolution of ASEAN-based security institutions.<sup>22</sup> Parallel forums, such as APEC, already exist and are a more useful venue for the United States on the discussion of these issues.

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## What does ASEAN want?

ASEAN's role in regional institutions is perhaps the most pivotal, as it controls the agenda for the region's main multilateral security institutions.

From its founding days, ASEAN's primary goal has been regional security and economic strength: to band together as a means to prevent outside powers from meddling in its internal affairs and to force external powers to consider Southeast Asian goals and needs when making decisions on regional policies.

Most of ASEAN's attention now, as in the past, is focused on promoting economic growth. At the end of 2015, ASEAN launched the ASEAN Community, the center of which is an ASEAN Economic Community that intends to lower barriers to trade amongst the 10 members and increasingly create an economic bloc.<sup>23</sup>

While ASEAN is mostly focused on internal affairs and economic integration, it has increasingly sought to play a larger role in the region through the creation of institutions such as the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum, which include the region's bigger countries.<sup>24</sup> Today, ASEAN sits in an awkward position: It is stuck between its desire to play a leadership role in the region and the increasing, and often competing, demands by dialogue partners.

As the pressure on ASEAN from dialogue partners mounts, fissures within ASEAN over how to approach the broader regional institutions are expanding. ASEAN members Vietnam, Philippines, and—to a certain extent—Singapore want ASEAN to play a more proactive role in setting the agenda for regional security issues. Other member states—including Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei—want ASEAN to play a low-key role on regional security matters. Meanwhile, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia are somewhere in the middle. These dynamics are predominantly shaped by these member states' willingness to risk China's ire by providing a platform for discussion of issues such as the South China Sea. The end result of these internal ASEAN dynamics is usually a middle-of-the-road path as ASEAN tries to balance both internal divisions and external relationships.<sup>25</sup>

There are, however, a few things that are usually reflected in ASEAN's approach in its engagements with the dialogue partners: encouraging the United States and China to work together; ensuring that ASEAN does not get stuck between competing demands by China and the United States; and maintaining ASEAN's central role in charge of the regional institutions, agendas, and decisionmaking.<sup>26</sup> ASEAN members also universally prefer to see existing ASEAN-centric institutions flourish rather than creating new Pan-Asian institutions.

# Challenges for U.S. policy

Now that the United States has a seat at the table at the major Asian regional institutions, the objective of the next U.S. administration should be to make these institutions more effective. The United States must address the following three key challenges.

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## China's opposition to strong regional security institutions

China looms large over Asia's regional institutions. China regularly makes clear its position that the U.S. rebalance to Asia has undermined regional security; that Asian countries should be able to handle their own problems without U.S. interference; and that regional institutions like the East Asia Summit have no place addressing security issues, such as the South China Sea dispute. And while the rest of the region has, over time, pushed China to engage in discussions of security issues, China continues to steer the agenda toward cooperation on issues such as development. The challenge is to get China invested in the system of regional institutions in a way that enables the institutions to focus on difficult, thorny issues, including those involving China.

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## Economics and development

The United States approaches trade and economic conversations in a much different way than most Asian countries. The United States sets a very high bar for entering into trade agreement negotiations; currently, the Obama administration has focused its attention in Asia on the Trans-Pacific Partnership and setting the agenda for APEC. Meanwhile, Asian countries tend to participate in myriad series of trade negotiations and want trade and economic issues to be consistently addressed at most regional institutional meetings. Development issues are also key

agenda topics for many East Asia Summit participants. The U.S. position, however, is that there are other, more appropriate forums to address these issues—such as APEC, WHO—and the region would be better served if institutions such as the East Asia Summit were solely focused on regional security.

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### The ASEAN paradox

One of the major built-in weaknesses of ASEAN-based institutions is their organizational basis: ASEAN itself. While each year the chair of ASEAN plays the lead role in setting the agendas for the various organizations, ASEAN protocol requires collective decision making and ASEAN consensus to develop those agendas, especially on controversial issues. ASEAN countries work hard to present a unified position even if there are internal disagreements. This arrangement works precisely because it removes what would inevitably be a contentious question of which country sets the agenda, but it also limits the ability of ASEAN-centered institutions to develop into robust, effective organizations for tackling difficult issues that require ASEAN to go up against bigger countries in the region because members fear harming their relations with dialogue partners. ASEAN centrality is therefore key both to the widespread acceptance of the regional institutions, as well as their inefficacy. This inherent contradiction will be a difficult challenge to overcome.

# Policy recommendations

A new U.S. administration will have an opportunity to build on President Obama's strong track record of engaging deeply in Asia-Pacific multilateral settings; however, it must also set clear priorities to make these institutions more effective. To do so, the authors recommend the following policies.

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## Attend everything

First and foremost, a new U.S. administration must commit from the outset to attend every relevant ASEAN meeting at all levels—from the presidential level on down, as attendance is widely seen as a measure of commitment. Without sustained U.S. engagement, these institutions will develop along other nations' interests. While the attendance of the U.S. president at the annual East Asia Summit and the secretary of state at the annual meetings surrounding the ASEAN Regional Forum are essential, the new administration must also ensure that appropriate U.S. officials participate in a substantive fashion at the wide variety of other ASEAN institutions to which the United States is invited regularly—from ministerial meetings on energy and finance to working group meetings of the ADMM+. The United States cannot shape the regional conversation unless it shows up. If staffing and resources in the Asia sections of the U.S. Department of State, Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, Office of the Secretary of Defense, and other arms of the U.S. government remains static, increased attendance will require rebalancing resources from traditional bilateral management to multilateral engagement.

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## Make the East Asia Summit the regional center of gravity

While also attending all ASEAN meetings, the bulk of U.S. time and energy should be spent investing in making the East Asia Summit a robust institution rather than simply an annual meeting of leaders. The East Asia Summit is the only mechanism in the region that meets at the head of government level; is comprised

of all the countries necessary to address regional challenges; and has buy-in from all of the key regional nations. It is not perfect, but the East Asia Summit has the ingredients necessary to evolve into an institution that could effectively address the region's security problems. In order to work toward this goal, the United States should work closely with ASEAN and its dialogue partners to do the following:

- **Change the format.** The United States has long tried to make the formal meetings between U.S. and ASEAN officials more interactive. Currently, most meetings involve only a single, scripted set of short remarks by each official, as opposed to sustained discussion and given and take. The East Asia Summit meetings should be much longer than the current few hours, providing time for leaders to discuss specific issues in depth. Annual ASEAN+1 summits and ministerial meetings between dialogue partners and ASEAN—which take place immediately before or after the East Asia Summit—should be rescheduled to the sidelines of the annual U.N. General Assembly meetings or downgraded to be handled by senior officials, which may open up schedules and expand opportunities for discussion. This would allow sufficient time for leaders and foreign ministers to focus on the East Asia Summit meetings. The EAS would then become more like the G-7 meetings, with leaders having more informal discussions of specific regional challenges with targeted outcomes in mind. It should be noted, however, that the United States should not unilaterally alter its ASEAN+1 level of engagement; this would require similar changes by other ASEAN Dialogue Partners in order to foster a more robust EAS. Similarly, the ASEAN Regional Forum should meet at the senior official level only, not the ministerial level, thus freeing up the ministers to focus on the East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' meetings while continuing the confidence building activities of the ARF at lower levels.
- **Empower an EAS Council in Jakarta.** Like most Asian regional institutions, one of the main challenges for the East Asia Summit is its lack of structure and authority to carry out activities in between the annual senior level meetings. Consequently, there is no strong mechanism to prepare for annual meetings, to follow up on decisions made, or to handle urgent issues when they arise. An overlooked agreement embedded within the EAS Leader's Statement in 2015 on the 10th anniversary of the EAS may be the solution to this problem.<sup>27</sup> The agreement authorizes EAS country ambassadors to ASEAN, who are stationed in Jakarta—where the modestly staffed ASEAN Secretariat is located—to convene in order to discuss follow up to leaders' decisions at EAS meetings, as well as other regional issues. This grouping of ambassadors, while now constituted,

should be formalized into an EAS Council and endowed with a specific set of responsibilities to implement leaders' decisions, prepare for annual meetings, and, most importantly, to address urgent regional security issues when they arise. While the authority now exists to move forward with this, in practice, it will take serious time and energy to make it real, as countries are nervous about ceding too much authority to ambassadors in Jakarta. Currently, decision-making power resides in each nation's capital, with summits providing the venues for meaningful diplomacy.

- **Connect institutions to one another.** There are a series of institutions and meetings—the EAS Foreign Ministers meeting, the ADMM+, and the EAMF—born in recent years that have the same membership of countries as the East Asia Summit but have little if any connection to the annual summit meeting attended by leaders. The EAS Foreign Ministers meeting is already connected to the leaders meeting, but as suggested above, the meeting should be longer in order to prepare for the summit and tackle pressing challenges. At the moment, the EAS Foreign Ministers meeting too often acts like its own set of discussions, divorced from leaders. The ADMM+ and the EAMF are not connected at all to the EAS, and this dynamic must change. Those two organizations—which cover defense and maritime issues, respectively—are key to operationalizing policy guidance from leaders, and they should both tee up issues for the leaders to address and implement the decisions the leaders make.
- **Focus on setting regional policy guidelines.** Formal institutions, such as the EAS, will need time to develop into entities capable of forging solutions to specific disagreements—including maritime disputes or issues relating to North Korea. The United States should focus its efforts within the EAS and its affiliated institutions on developing specific policy guidance on pressing challenges in the region. In the past couple of years, the EAS has taken steps in this direction, with leaders agreeing to statements on cyber security, maritime cooperation, and countering violent extremism.<sup>28</sup> Going forward, the United States should push for concrete approaches to contentious issues, including how to prevent incidents at sea; actions to uphold existing agreements, such as U.N. Security Council resolutions regarding North Korea; and other transnational threats, such as drug and human trafficking.
- **Do not advocate for EAS expansion.** While several long-standing U.S. partners, such as Canada and the European Union, often ask the United States to advocate on their behalf for membership in the emerging regional structures in Asia like the EAS, it should be not the role of the United States to assist in their

entry. With U.S. policy clear that ASEAN should be at the center of regionalism, advocacy would diminish U.S. credibility on this issue and further reduce China's faith that the existing forums can be used to safeguard its own interests. Furthermore, expanded membership would reduce opportunities for the type of substantive discussions in these forums that could lead to real problem solving due to the dilution of membership.

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### Prioritize cooperation with China

Too often in regional forums, tensions between the United States and China are the elephant in the room—especially when it comes to regional security issues. That tension needs to be handled in a multifaceted way—including by finding ways to use multilateral institutions to tackle controversial issues peacefully—and an essential component must be initiatives on which the United States and China can cooperate. One such example is a series of workshops and statements that the United States, China, and other nations initiated and implemented in the 2014 ASEAN Regional Forum in order to respond to oil spills.<sup>29</sup> Finding more areas of tangible cooperation on political- and security-related issues in the multilateral context can build trust between the two countries and lay the groundwork for more substantial regional cooperation.

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### Do not rigidly defend the status quo

As we have outlined, the region is changing rapidly, and the U.S. rebalance—and engagement in multilateral institutions—in many ways is an attempt to adapt to this transforming region. But there have been a few instances where the United States has responded with knee-jerk opposition to a Chinese-initiated regional project in no small part because it was initiated by China. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is the most prominent example of this reaction.<sup>30</sup> Within the ASEAN-based institutions and beyond, the United States must keep its eye on its interests in the region—security, prosperity, and a rules-based order—and measure Chinese policy initiatives against those bars. It should be a U.S. priority to find ways to complement China's initiatives that have potential to enhance regional prosperity and connectivity, such as its One Belt One Road strategy.

# Conclusion

As the United States attempts to deepen the rebalance policy and invest more time and energy in Asia in the coming years, the region's multilateral frameworks will require increased attention by policymakers. While the United States has strong alliances and is rapidly strengthening its bilateral partnerships across the region, Asia's multilateral security institutions remain the weakest link in the fabric of regional security. The rapidly changing political and economic dynamics in Asia will only make strong regional institutions even more important, as strains between China and its neighbors increase and transnational threats become more pressing. Strengthening these multilateral institutions will be a generational challenge for the United States and its partners—but it is an absolutely necessary endeavor.

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