



U.S.-ASEAN LEADERS SUMMIT

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

By Michael H. Fuchs and Brian Harding May 2016

# 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.

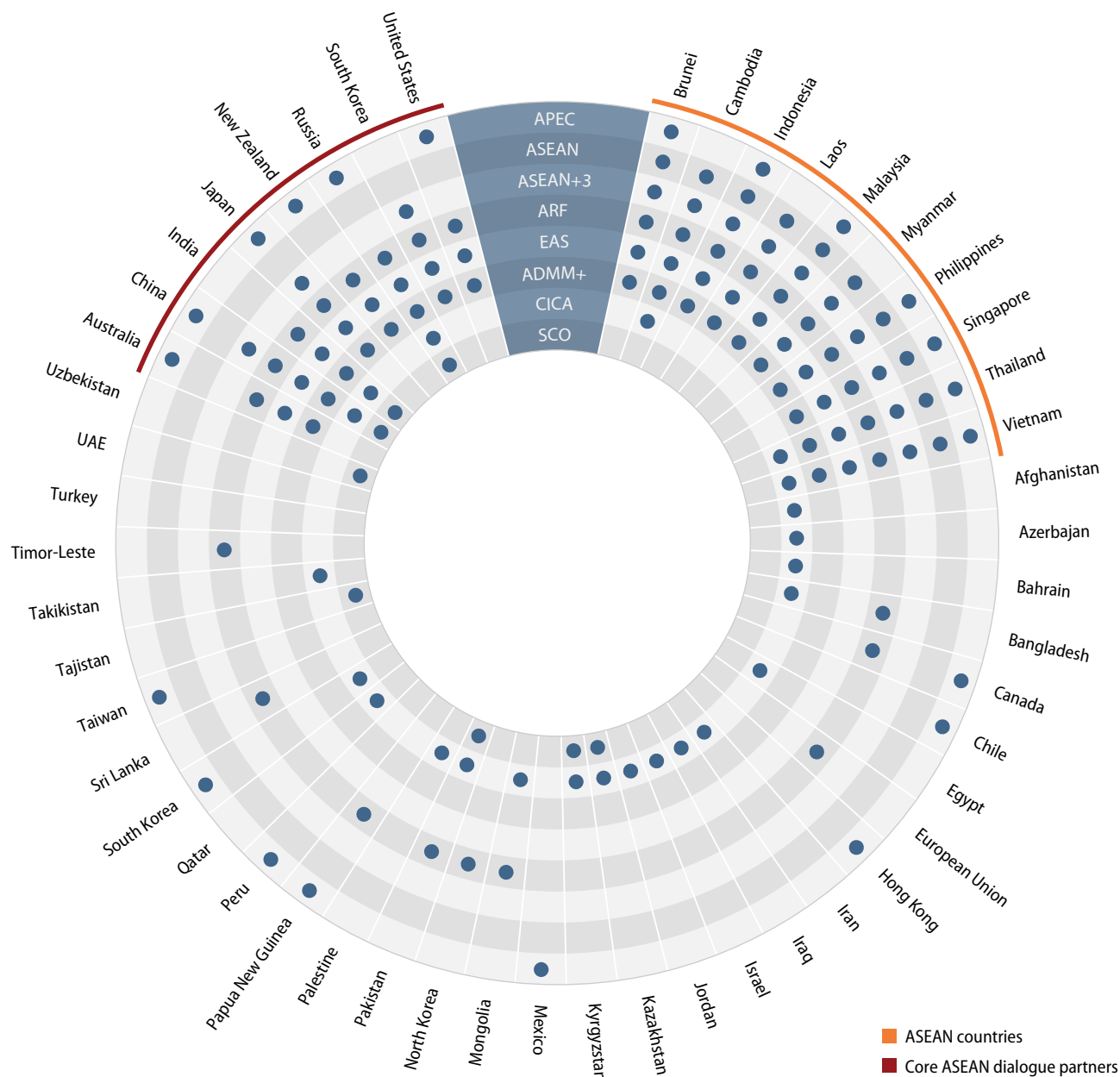
As Asia has become more complex, addressing challenges increasingly requires cooperation with a wide group of countries in multilateral settings. The Obama administration has consequently prioritized multilateral institutions, which are now the main driver of presidential travel to the region.

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.

---

## Our Mission

The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

## Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

## Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

---

Center for American Progress

