

BACKGROUND

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Employing Asia's Diplomatic Framework in the Pursuit of American Interests

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Abstract

There is broad bipartisan support in Washington for America's commitment to the Asia-Pacific. The United States is, after all, a Pacific nation, and for more than 60 years has been the guarantor of peace and stability in the region. Any successful effort to maintain a presence befitting its resident superpower status there requires getting the diplomatic engagement framework right. That means sorting through the mix of regional multilateral organizations and prioritizing the roles that the U.S. plays in them. Walter Lohman and Robert Warshaw provide—and explain—the details here.

While there are problems with parts of the Obama Administration's Asia policy, particularly its tepid commitment to free trade and defense budgets, the Administration deserves credit for regularizing and institutionalizing America's regional diplomatic engagement. Its approach has emphasized involvement in various regional fora, some of which the Administration initiated, some of which predate it. What exactly is this network of organizations, or "architecture," and how can it best be used to the benefit of American interests?

From the security-oriented ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Regional Forum (ARF) to the head-of-state level East Asia Summit (EAS), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings to the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), there exists a dizzying array of multi-member institutions, each with their own set of goals and objectives. In addition, Asia is home to a range of multilateral initiatives, such as the Lower Mekong Initiative; trilateral dialogues, such as the U.S.–Japan–Australia and U.S.–Japan–India

TALKING POINTS

- There is no substitute for a robust forward-deployed military and network of treaty allies and security partners to safeguard U.S. interests.
- U.S. interests and objectives in Asia—ensuring regional stability, protecting freedom of navigation, countering proliferation, liberalizing trade and investment, and promoting human rights—can benefit from regional multilateral engagement.
- The political and economic opportunities presented by Asia's emerging multilateralism demand that the U.S. remain actively engaged.
- Asia's existing multilateral institutions—ASEAN-centric fora—are often unable to address hard security challenges and promote core U.S. interests, due to ASEAN's consensus-based modus operandi.
- Promoting U.S.-led "minilateral" initiatives, such as new trilateral and quadrilateral dialogues, initiatives on proliferation, new economic groupings, and ad hoc arrangements on maritime security are an increasingly effective means to secure U.S. interests.

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Trilateral Strategic Dialogues; and ad hoc groupings, like the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear program.

The political and economic opportunities presented by Asia's emerging multilateralism demand that the U.S. remain actively engaged, participating in the numerous meetings and attempting to shape the agendas in a more results-oriented direction wherever possible. Through an analysis of Asia's multilateral architecture, the U.S. can ascertain which institutions best serve its interests, and how best to achieve them.

U.S. Interests and Objectives

America's economy is increasingly reliant on a stable Asia-Pacific, and with some 80,000 U.S. troops spread out across the region,¹ not to mention the 90,000 U.S. soldiers currently in South Asia (Afghanistan),² the U.S. has a demonstrated interest in guaranteeing regional security.

Simply put, there are certain actions that can be taken bilaterally, and there are results that are better achieved as a group. With that in mind, the U.S. should seek to achieve a specific set of objectives and interests through multilateral engagement. Increased participation and engagement should be evaluated based on the impact on the objectives below:

- **Preventing the rise of a regional hegemon.** This does not mean explicitly balancing against China, but creating a system that encourages responsible behavior and discourages belligerent actions or unilateral adventurism by the Chinese.
- **Integrating India into East Asia's architecture.** Bringing India into the fold should be a top priority for any U.S. Administration, as it creates enormous potential for opening India's marketplace, achieving geopolitical stability, spreading democratic values, and increasing cooperation across numerous areas.
- **Trade and investment liberalization.** The U.S. stands to gain tremendously from increasing economic ties to the region, most notably through the Trans-Pacific Partnership and related pursuit of a Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP). However, Asia's economic freedom, aside from a few bright spots, lags behind the rest of the world,³ and the U.S. should push for increased trade liberalization wherever possible.
- **Freedom of navigation, maritime security, and peaceful resolution of maritime border disputes.** Territorial disputes over the South China Sea, in particular, threaten to stymie the region's economic development. Safeguarding freedom of navigation and preventing any actor from limiting that freedom is a critical effort.
- **Nonproliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.** The U.S. has a vested interest in working with regional actors to ensure that North Korea, or any other state, does not proliferate weapons of mass destruction (WMD) technology.
- **Counterterrorism cooperation.** With al-Qaeda being targeted globally, the U.S. must not forget the danger posed by regional terrorist groups, such as Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Sayyaf, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, and others.
- **Demonstration of commitment to presence in Asia and steadfastness toward treaty allies and partners in the region.** The continued preponderance of U.S. power and presence in the region depends on its reliability. The recent emphasis on America's commitment to Asia by way of the "Asia pivot" may have temporarily assuaged concerns about America's long-term future in Asia, but in a dynamic region, the U.S. must continue to demonstrate that commitment. The U.S. must also demonstrate commitment by fully funding its rhetorical commitment to Asia.
- **Promotion of liberty and human rights.** U.S. power in Asia lies not only in troop numbers and gross domestic product (GDP), but also in the universal values at the heart of American foreign policy.

1. Department of Defense, "Active Duty Military Personnel Strengths by Regional Area and by Country," December 31, 2011, <http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/MILITARY/history/hst1112.pdf> (accessed April 24, 2012).

2. International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan, "Troop Numbers & Contributions: United States," <http://www.isaf.nato.int/troop-numbers-and-contributions/united-states/index.php> (accessed April 24, 2012).

3. Terry Miller, Kim R. Holmes, and Edwin J. Feulner, *2012 Index of Economic Freedom* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation and Dow Jones & Company, Inc., 2012), <http://www.heritage.org/index>.

Multilateral Institutions in Asia

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

Members: Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam

Primary Function: "To accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region; to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law; and to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest" (from the ASEAN website).

ASEAN Plus Three (APT)

Members: ASEAN members, China, Japan, South Korea

Primary Function: The primary conduit between ASEAN and Northeast Asia. Cooperates on political-security, economic-finance, and socio-cultural issues. Most important function relates to the implementation and management of the Chiang Mai Initiative.

ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)

Members: ASEAN members, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, China, East Timor, the European Union, India, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, North Korea, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Russia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, the United States

Primary Function: Ministerial-level, ASEAN-hosted meeting that deals heavily with political and security issues. Brings together numerous actors, fostering discussion on a broad array of topics. However, measures are non-binding and consensus-based, and ARF has proven ineffective at handling hard security challenges in the past.

ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (Plus)

Members: ASEAN members, Australia, China, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Russia, the United States

Primary Function: Currently held once every three years, ADMM+ focuses on five cooperation areas: disaster relief, counterterrorism, maritime security, peacekeeping, and military medicine.

East Asia Summit (EAS)

Members: ASEAN members, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, the United States

Primary Function: The overall mission of the summit is still somewhat undefined, with the U.S. aiming for a security-oriented mission. The U.S. and Russia participated for the first time in 2011.

Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)

Members: Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, the United States, Vietnam

Primary Function: The premier regional institution for dealing with regional economic issues and promoting trade and investment liberalization. Involves meetings at various levels, involving business and government leaders. Classifies members as economies, allowing Taiwan and Hong Kong to participate.

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

Members: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka

Primary Function: Promotes cooperation on regional issues. Promising on paper, but in the past, SAARC meetings have devolved into empty promises and feuds between India and Pakistan.

Multilateral Institutions in Asia (Cont.)

Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)

Members: Australia, the Cook Islands, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Fiji (suspended), New Caledonia (associate), French Polynesia (associate)

Primary Function: Increasing in significance in recent years, the PIF provides the Pacific islands an opportunity to discuss regional issues, mostly relating to health and disease, trade, and climate change. The U.S., China, and several other nations participated as observers in the 2011 PIF, with the U.S. sending its largest delegation to the meeting to date.

Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)

Members (Asia): Afghanistan, Australia, Cambodia, Fiji, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, the United States, Vanuatu

Primary Function: To stop trafficking of weapons of mass destruction, their delivery systems, and related materials to and from states and non-state actors. Has seen renewed interest since the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit.

Lower Mekong Initiative

Members: Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, the United States, Vietnam

Primary Function: Promote energy efficiency, water conservation, education, and development.

Especially as ASEAN's balance tips in favor of "free" countries over "not free," alignment along value lines becomes a geopolitical strength for America.

Regional Roundup: A View of the Institutions

Asia's array of multilateral groupings is a confusing web of initiatives and institutions. The Asia-Pacific comprises half the world's population and, when the U.S. is added, almost half of global GDP. It is a region of highly varied histories, values, and religious traditions, as well as nearly every conceivable form of government, with monarchical, democratic, and communist governments existing side by side. Asian multilateral diplomatic architecture faces the challenge of being as diverse as its environment.

For brevity's sake, analysis in this paper will revolve around three

categories: the ASEAN-centric institutions, such as ASEAN summits, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus, and the East Asia Summit; non-ASEAN regional groupings, like the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings and South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation; and then various initiatives, ad hoc coalitions, trilaterals, and so on.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

The 10-nation ASEAN has emerged as one of the principal drivers of Asian multilateralism in recent years as it seeks to anchor itself at the center of Asia's architecture through its array of inward and outward looking meetings.

Created in 1967 as a five-nation anti-Communist bloc, ASEAN has grown to include Brunei, Burma,

Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam and evolved along with the geopolitics of the region away from its early anti-Communist context. Its principal purpose, according to its founding documents, is

to accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region; to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law; and to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest.⁴

Naturally, with any regional order comprising world-class economies, such as Singapore's, alongside underdeveloped Laos, and democratic Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia alongside authoritarian Vietnam, Cambodia, and Burma, the

4. Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "About ASEAN: Overview," 2011, <http://www.asean.org/64.htm> (accessed April 25, 2012).

prospects for action-oriented regional cooperation greatly diminish. Instead, ASEAN has been defined by the “ASEAN Way.”

On paper, the ASEAN Way, as documented in the 1976 ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), refers to the guiding principles of interaction between ASEAN member states, characterized by the pillars of mutual respect for state sovereignty above all else, non-interference in other countries’ domestic affairs, consensus-building on any decisions, peaceful resolution of disputes, and the renunciation of force.⁵ This has led to an ASEAN that, to outsiders, appears constantly gridlocked, more interested in talking about issues than tackling them.

More important, scholar Amitav Acharya highlights that “the ‘ASEAN way’ is not so much about the substance or structure of multilateral interactions, but a claim about the process through which such interactions are carried out.”⁶ Indeed, the ASEAN Way is at the heart of ASEAN’s approach to regional architecture as a whole, as the institution, driven by a rotating chairmanship, has sought to position itself at the center of the region and carefully balance both internally and externally.

Partly by virtue of being the most prominent multilateral organization in Asia for decades, ASEAN is well

placed to determine regional multilateralism through its expansion in scope beyond just 10 members, as well as by both hosting a multitude of events aimed at drawing in other actors, most prominent of which is the ASEAN Regional Forum, and serving as the nexus of numerous regional trade agreements. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton threw her support behind an ASEAN-centric system by declaring that the Obama Administration views ASEAN as “a fulcrum for the region’s emerging regional architecture” across Asia, seeing it as “indispensable on a host of political, economic, and strategic matters.”⁷

Yet ASEAN does have important shortcomings. Despite its diplomatic energy, the ASEAN Way limits ASEAN’s efficacy in dealing with certain issues. ASEAN has developed an excellent record for fostering cooperation between member states, hosting educational exchanges and sponsoring goodwill missions, yet when it comes to handling disputes, its record is poor. Due to its policy of non-interference in domestic affairs, and since all coordinated action must be consensus-based, ASEAN as an institution is often unable to even put disputes on the agenda for its meetings, and is forced to broker diplomatic exchanges on difficult issues solely by providing space for sideline dialogue. Should substantial

disputes arise between members, ASEAN lacks the adequate dispute resolution mechanisms to handle them.

Human rights have also been a traditional victim of the ASEAN Way. Despite ASEAN establishing an Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in September 2009, and adding the promotion of human rights to the ASEAN charter, little has been achieved for the same two reasons noted above. First, any action must be consensus-based, meaning that the least democratic countries wield veto power over any measures. Second, since ASEAN operates on the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, there exists no neutral arbiter of human rights violations, creating an unsustainable contradiction between promoting human rights and adhering to the non-interference principle. In this light, non governmental organizations and civil society groups have lambasted ASEAN’s human rights mechanisms as “secretive” and “toothless.”⁸

Another issue is the ASEAN chair. ASEAN rotates the chairmanship between its 10 member states annually, on an alphabetic basis with a few adjustments. As mentioned, ASEAN members are extremely diverse in their strategic outlooks and are increasingly fracturing

5. Association of Southeast Asian Nations, “Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia,” February 24, 1976, <http://www.asean.org/1217.htm> (accessed April 25, 2012).
6. Amitav Acharya, “Ideas, Identity, and Institution-Building: From the ‘ASEAN Way’ to the ‘Asia-Pacific Way?’” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1997), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09512749708719226> (accessed April 25, 2012).
7. Hillary Clinton, “America’s Engagement in the Asia-Pacific,” remarks at Kahala Hotel, Honolulu, HI, October 28, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/10/150141.htm> (accessed April 25, 2012).
8. See “ASEAN’s Toothless Council,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 29, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203517304574303592053848748.html> (accessed May 8, 2012); “ASEAN Human Rights Commission ‘Toothless’: NGOs,” *The Jakarta Post*, May 8, 2012, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/05/08/asean-human-rights-commission-toothless-ngos.html> (accessed May 8, 2012); and “Joint Statement: The ASEAN Human Rights Declaration,” Freedom House, May 2, 2012, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Joint%20Statement%20on%20AHRD%20May%202012%20FINAL%20WITH%20LOGOS.pdf> (accessed May 8, 2012).

internally over critical issues, with a few distinct, and often overlapping, camps—such as states that actively encourage a greater Chinese role in the region and those that are more cautious, states that have outstanding territorial disputes with countries outside ASEAN and those that do not, maritime and mainland states, or developing and developed economies. The ASEAN chair has a great deal of influence on the agenda for key ASEAN meetings throughout the year. However, because the chairmanship can bounce between opposite spectrums in these different camps, over time, ASEAN meetings, particularly heads of state meetings and meetings of the foreign ministers, lack continuity.

AS GEOPOLITICS IN ASIA IS INCREASINGLY IMPACTED BY ECONOMICS, ASEAN'S ROLE AS A REGIONAL ECONOMIC CENTER WILL ONLY GROW IN SIGNIFICANCE IN COMING YEARS. IT IS THUS IMPORTANT FOR THE U.S. TO BE INVOLVED IN ASEAN'S COLLECTIVE ECONOMIC LIFE.

For example, Vietnam chaired ASEAN during 2010, resulting in several successful meetings addressing the critical issues at stake in the South China Sea. Home to considerable expertise on the issue,

Indonesia, the 2011 chair, continued this endeavor—albeit from the perspective of a non-claimant in the dispute. However, the next four chairs, Cambodia, Brunei, Burma, and Malaysia, are all unlikely to risk antagonizing China by taking too concerted an interest in the dispute. The April 2012 ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh provided a prime example of such reticence—Hu Jintao's initiative to visit Cambodia on the summit's eve drew widespread claims that China's relationship with Cambodia was unduly influencing the agenda, which ended up including the increasingly tense South China Sea dispute only after a fierce lobbying effort from the Philippines.⁹ In the same way that the rotating chairmanship complicates high-level U.S. engagement, U.S. engagement will continue to be shaped significantly by its relationship with the chairmanship nation—which will inevitably impact the consistency of U.S. engagement year to year. This constraint should be calculated into America's strategic approach.

ASEAN's economic achievements and its role as the nexus of regional free-trade architecture also merit highlighting. With a combined GDP of over \$1.8 trillion¹⁰ and almost \$200 billion in trade with the U.S., making it America's fourth-largest trading partner in 2011, collectively, the ASEAN markets are important for both economic and geostrategic

reasons.¹¹ In 1992, member nations created the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), lowering tariffs on nearly all goods, and since then have sought to tie the region together through various free trade agreements with Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. Currently, ASEAN members are working toward launching the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by 2015, an approximation of a single ASEAN market.¹²

An ASEAN that can promote greater trade and investment liberalization, spur regional economic growth, and economically hold its own vis-à-vis China is certainly in the U.S. interest, and America should continue to support ASEAN's role as the organizational center of Asia's economic architecture. However, as a single market, ASEAN faces myriad problems—the economic freedom of most its members lags behind the region, and implementing the AEC is fraught with difficulty. Nevertheless, as geopolitics in Asia is increasingly impacted by economics, ASEAN's role as a regional economic center will only grow in significance in coming years.¹³ It is important for the U.S. to acknowledge this and be involved in ASEAN's collective economic life.

ASEAN Regional Forum

To handle security issues in the Asia-Pacific, ASEAN created the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a

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9. Luke Hunt, "ASEAN + China and Bhutan?" *The Diplomat*, April 10, 2012, <http://the-diplomat.com/asean-beat/2012/04/10/asean-china-and-bhutan/> (accessed May 7, 2012).
 10. The World Bank, World Development Indicators, "GDP (Current US\$)," <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD> (accessed April 26, 2012), and International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database, April 2011, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2011/01/weodata/index.aspx> (accessed February 29, 2012).
 11. News release, "U.S. International Trade in Goods and Services, February 2012," April 12, 2012, http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/Press-Release/current_press_release/ft900.pdf (accessed May 7, 2012).
 12. Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "ASEAN Economic Community," 2009, <http://www.aseansec.org/18757.htm> (accessed April 26, 2012).
 13. Walter Lohman and Anthony B. Kim, "Enabling ASEAN's Economic Vision," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2101, January 29, 2008, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2008/01/enabling-aseans-economic-vision>.

ministerial-level forum that includes nearly every country in the Asia-Pacific, stretching from Pakistan to North Korea, as well as Canada, the U.S., and the European Union. The notable exception is Taiwan, which, due to its unsettled international status and China's sensitivity over that status, does not participate in any ASEAN-centric fora.

ARF is tasked with an ambitious mission—"to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern; and to make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region." While this mission statement is vague, it does reveal two important facets of ARF's modus operandi.

First, although the ASEAN Regional Forum is a venue tasked with fostering consultation of security issues, the aforementioned ASEAN Way dictates that nearly all discussion be consensus-based, addressing issues of "common interest." The consequence of such a policy is that important discussions on critical security-related issues rarely make it on the meeting's agenda, as motions can be easily blocked. Although the rotating chair largely sets the agenda, politicking between various nations oftentimes results in meetings that are heavy on rhetoric but low on substance.

An example of this tyranny of the agenda revolves around the South China Sea dispute and the 2011 ARF summit in Bali. In the months leading up to the meeting, a series of clashes in the South China

Sea—claimed in its entirety or partly by six countries—escalated regional tensions. Going into the ARF meeting, some observers had hoped that the ASEAN members would put the dispute on the agenda, thereby forcing a discussion of the issue in a multilateral context, contrary to the Chinese desire to deal with claimant states on a bilateral basis. Yet in an 11th-hour concession, and to avert a political backlash from China, ASEAN and China signed the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Declaration of Conduct in the South China Sea, a practically meaningless document that did nothing to resolve the dispute.¹⁴ ASEAN effectively shirked responsibility and delayed real action, rather than include a politically sensitive topic on its official agenda.

Second, ARF is generally not action-oriented, as its mission statement only mentions fostering dialogue and consultation. In the past, ARF summits have seen members deliver statements and discuss security issues, even agreeing on low-level forms of cooperation like joint scientific explorations and disaster relief exercises, but at the end of the day, actionable results remain elusive, as most measures passed are non-binding guidelines and declarations.¹⁵

It should be noted that, for this reason, the ASEAN Regional Forum was overlooked in its efforts to stem the North Korean nuclear program—the Six-Party Talks were created instead. Its penchant for consensus makes ARF ineffective at handling crises or any issues that require extensive engagement. Territorial

disputes in the South China Sea and at the Thai-Cambodian border are other examples of where there appears to be no effective role for ARF—or other ASEAN-centric organizations.

ASEAN EFFECTIVELY SHIRKED RESPONSIBILITY AND DELAYED REAL ACTION (ON THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE), RATHER THAN INCLUDE A POLITICALLY SENSITIVE TOPIC ON ITS OFFICIAL AGENDA.

The real value of the ASEAN Regional Forum lies in its being a venue for interaction between diverse groups of nations, providing an opportunity for them to coalesce and state various policy points. After all, it was at the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi that the U.S. waded into the South China Sea dispute, when Secretary Clinton offered to mediate confidence building among the parties. In addition, the meetings on the sidelines can be more important than the official summits, where the agenda is neutered to address common denominator challenges. During the 2011 ARF summit, for instance, unofficial discussions on the sidelines prompted expressions of resolve on Burmese reforms and North Korea nuclear negotiations.

In this light, the ASEAN Regional Forum must be taken for what it is. It is a useful forum for interaction and gathering delegates from various nations in the same room. It is not a useful institution for handling

14. Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "Guidelines for the Implementation of the DOC," <http://www.asean.org/documents/20185-DOC.pdf> (accessed April 25, 2012), and Walter Lohman, "The U.S. Cannot Rely on ASEAN in the South China Sea," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3335, August 5, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/08/asean-south-china-sea-dispute-and-us-policy-on-east-asia>.

15. U.S. Department of State, "ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Exercise a Significant Milestone," *Fact Sheet*, July 15, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/2009/126073.htm> (accessed April 25, 2012).

pressing security matters and fostering actionable results. Such issues, like the South China Sea dispute, will never lend themselves to consensus on comprehensive solutions, but if put on the agenda, open discussion can at least foster a better understanding of various positions and help clear up misperceptions.

East Asia Summit

The East Asia Summit is an ASEAN-led annual summit that brings together the leaders of 18 different Asia-Pacific nations—the 10 ASEAN members, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and, for the first time in 2011, Russia and the United States, after the latter met the requirement to sign ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2009. Created in 2005, the EAS has covered a broad range of issues, from energy and finance to environmental concerns and disease prevention. Yet, with the addition of the U.S. and President Obama's 2011 attendance, the U.S. has pushed for the EAS to focus on political and security challenges—such as maritime security, disaster response, and nuclear nonproliferation.¹⁶

However, the jury is still out on what exactly the East Asia Summit is and can do—it is an institution emerging from its infancy, beginning to find a purpose. During its first few years, debate largely centered on the issue of membership and identity, with some states, such as Malaysia,

favoring limiting membership to “ASEAN Plus Three” countries, so as to truly keep it “East Asian” in nature. Yet others, such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam, were concerned over excessive Chinese influence, and so Australia, India, and New Zealand were invited to join. In 2011, ASEAN, ever mindful of balancing outside powers, invited the U.S. and Russia to participate as full members. That the U.S. was prepared to accept the invitation also played a role in ASEAN's decision to extend it.

Stemming from the differing views on EAS identity, various members have different interpretations of the East Asia Summit's purpose. The U.S. views the EAS as a political and security forum, with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) as the region's primary economic institution, but this view is not shared by all. Only recently has the EAS discussed security and strategic issues writ large, as the EAS has largely focused on its five priority areas of energy, finance, disaster management, education, and global health issues, common-denominator issues primarily intended to foster regional connectivity.¹⁷

Yet U.S. participation in the East Asia Summit can, and should, change that dynamic, making the EAS more than just another venue to tackle transnational issues. If anything, U.S. participation will make other members more comfortable discussing security issues and challenges with the Chinese. For instance, during

the 2011 EAS, seven different nations raised concerns about the ongoing South China Sea dispute, despite China's opposition to multilateral discussion of the issue, largely attributable to the diplomatic balance brought by the United States.¹⁸

The 2011 East Asia Summit was certainly a positive sign that the institution is becoming more open to debate, fostering more discussion on key challenges, and tackling more than just common-denominator issues. The EAS has the potential, as a heads-of-government forum, to connect leaders across a number of issues, finding common purpose, after which the work will largely trickle down to lower-level working groups.

Symbolically, the East Asia Summit represents U.S. commitment to Asia at the highest level, an important consideration as the ASEAN chair rotates between U.S.-friendly states and those less well disposed to it. The U.S. President cannot necessarily drop in on any and every country that happens to be chairing ASEAN, and so the consistency of continued U.S. engagement at this level must be accounted for.

ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus

The ASEAN Regional Forum is for foreign ministers; the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) brings together defense ministers from the same countries as the East Asia Summit—the 10

16. News release, “Fact Sheet: East Asia Summit,” The White House, November 19, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/19/fact-sheet-east-asia-summit> (accessed April 25, 2012).

17. Association of Southeast Asian Nations, “Chairman's Statement of the 6th East Asia Summit,” November 19, 2011, <http://www.aseansec.org/documents/19th%20summit/EAS-CS.pdf> (accessed April 25, 2012).

18. News release, “Background Briefing by a Senior Administration Official on the President's Meetings at ASEAN and East Asia Summit,” The White House, November 19, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/19/background-briefing-senior-administration-official-presidents-meetings-a> (accessed April 25, 2012).

ASEAN member states and the eight ASEAN Dialogue Partners, which include the U.S.¹⁹

The ADMM+ provides a venue for the U.S. Secretary of Defense to interact with his counterparts in the region, a vital component to strengthening military-to-military relations. For example, during the inaugural ADMM+ in 2010, then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates met with his Chinese counterpart, Liang Guanglie, helping to reduce tensions following U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.²⁰ Military-to-military relations oftentimes lag behind diplomatic relations in Asia, and so this forum has a key role to play in bettering these relations.

The ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus does have two notable shortcomings, however. First, it is currently slated to be held only once every three years. This is simply too infrequent to foster meaningful ties between defense ministers and their respective institutions. Recent reports have indicated momentum to increase the frequency of these meetings.²¹ Second, ADMM+ is an ASEAN-centric institution, meaning official meetings will be guided by the ASEAN Way, emphasizing building consensus, discussing issues of common interest, and

non-interference in domestic affairs. Any results will mostly come through the Experts' Working Group (EWG) level, such as the ongoing EWG on Maritime Security.²²

Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)

Moving on from the ASEAN-led organizations, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation is a broad-reaching institution aimed at promoting trade and investment. It comprises 21 "economies" on both sides of the Pacific, including Canada, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and the U.S., along with Australia, Brunei, China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, as well as, notably, Taiwan and Hong Kong. One of APEC's unique features is that the organization does not recognize statehood, but rather refers to its members as economies. This feature affords various nations flexibility in its engagement with APEC, and it means that Taiwan, despite its unsettled international status, is allowed to participate, albeit as "Chinese Taipei."

Created in 1989, APEC is economic in substance—its three pillars are (1) trade and investment

liberalization, (2) business facilitation, and (3) economic and technical cooperation—but also geopolitical in effect.²³ Bringing together nations on both sides of the Pacific, it keeps the U.S. anchored in Asia and prompts East Asia to look outward, moving beyond its insular, spaghetti bowl of regional trade agreements toward broader economic integration.

Central to that is the proposed Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP is a high-standard trade agreement that includes Australia, Brunei, Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, and the United States, which joined TPP negotiations late in the second Bush Administration. At the 2011 APEC summit, TPP nations agreed on broad outlines toward implementing the agreement—ambitiously set for APEC 2012—and Japan, Canada, and Mexico expressed interest in joining the agreement.²⁴

The Trans-Pacific Partnership relates to Asian multilateralism by way of the 2010 APEC Leaders' Declaration wherein member economies affirmed that the APEC-wide Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific would be built from TPP, along with possible ASEAN+3 and ASEAN+6

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19. Association of Southeast Asian Nations Secretariat, "Chairman's Statement of the First ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus: 'ADMM-Plus: Strategic Cooperation for Peace, Stability, and Development in the Region,'" October 12, 2010, <http://www.aseansec.org/25352.htm> (accessed April 25, 2012).
 20. Daniel Ten Kate, "Gates Says U.S. Committed to Asian Security Amid China Claims," Bloomberg, October 11, 2010, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-10-11/gates-rejects-china-demand-for-u-s-to-stay-out-of-asian-maritime-disputes.html> (accessed April 25, 2012).
 21. "ASEAN Defence Senior Officials' Meeting Plus Dialogue Partners Kicks Off in Cambodia," Xinhua News Agency, February 23, 2012, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2012-02/23/c_131427230.htm (accessed April 25, 2012).
 22. Dte Defence Policy, "2nd ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting Plus Experts' Working Group on Maritime Security," Brunei Ministry of Defense, February 11, 2012, http://www.mindef.gov.bn/MOD2/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1244:2nd-asean-defence-ministers-meeting-plus-experts-working-group-on-maritime-security&catid=1:news&Itemid=70 (accessed April 25, 2012).
 23. Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, "Scope of Work," <http://www.apec.org/About-Us/How-APEC-Operates/Scope-of-Work.aspx> (accessed April 25, 2012).
 24. Demetrios Marantis, "Hearing on The Trans-Pacific Partnership," testimony before the Subcommittee on Trade, Ways and Means Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, December 14, 2011, <http://waysandmeans.house.gov/UploadedFiles/MarantisTR91411.pdf> (accessed April 25, 2012).

agreements.²⁵ Indeed, APEC-sponsored research highlighted that the TPP, wholly complementary to APEC, is an attractive stepping stone toward FTAAP, and TPP members, including the U.S., have embraced a Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific with the Trans-Pacific Partnership as its core.²⁶

If the U.S. becomes the driving force in TPP, overcoming myriad domestic obstacles in creating an agreement that sheds protectionism in favor of trade liberalization, then it can also help steer APEC toward achieving its goal in FTAAP, creating an action-forcing alternative to the long-stalled Doha Round of the World Trade Organization. Otherwise, APEC, which has a history of effectively handling the minutiae of trade and investment facilitation but not at achieving its larger free trade goals, may lose significance as members pursue alternative trading arrangements.

South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

A less-well-known regional grouping that merits mentioning is the South Asian Association for Regional

Cooperation (SAARC), comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, with the U.S., China, Japan, the EU, and a few others as observers. Founded in 1985, its primary purpose is to promote regional cooperation across a number of issues, namely economics, finance, and a limited range of security issues.²⁷

U.S.-LED "MINILATERALS" ARE AN INCREASINGLY EFFECTIVE MECHANISM FOR HANDLING ISSUES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC.

SAARC is a promising institution on paper, but meetings have devolved into feuds between India and Pakistan, slowing its ability to fulfill its mission.²⁸ Furthermore, SAARC members and outside observers have criticized the institution for failure on its central objective—promoting intra-regional trade. While intra-regional trade accounts for 65 percent of total EU trade, 51 percent of NAFTA trade, and 25 percent of ASEAN trade, it only accounts for 5 percent of total trade in the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA),

which includes all eight SAARC members.²⁹ Finally, SAARC agendas are often so broad that meetings decline into lofty rhetoric and empty promises, becoming a talk-shop with no results.³⁰

Its value may be limited, but the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation can be useful in promoting clarification of opposing views, if not some mutual understanding, on the India–Pakistan–Afghanistan triangle, and catalyze limited cooperation on terrorism issues.³¹ In addition, with the U.S. and China acting as observers, SAARC can also foster dialogue on the role of outside powers in South Asia, and the U.S. can use summits to promote increasing its trade and investment in the region and help SAARC reach its free intra-regional trade targets.

Minilaterals—An Alternative to Multilateralism

Generally, the larger the group of countries, the more difficult it is to foster consensus, solicit meaningful dialogue, and produce actionable results. As is the case with many of Asia's multilateral institutions, the countries represented are too diverse, whether politically or

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25. Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, "2010 Leaders' Declaration," Yokohama, Japan, November 13-14, 2010, http://www.apec.org/Meeting-Papers/Leaders-Declarations/2010/2010_aelm.aspx (accessed April 25, 2012).
 26. Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, "Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Trade Ministers' Report to Leaders," November 12, 2011, <http://www.ustr.gov/about-us/press-office/press-releases/2011/november/trans-pacific-partnership-tpp-trade-ministers%E2%80%99-re> (accessed April 25, 2012).
 27. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, "SAARC Charter," December 8, 1985, <http://www.saarc-sec.org/SAARC-Charter/5/> (accessed April 25, 2012).
 28. Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "India–Pakistan Relations and SAARC," *Insight on Conflict*, January 16, 2012, <http://www.insightonconflict.org/2012/01/india-pakistan-saarc/> (accessed April 25, 2012).
 29. "South Asia Summit Opens with Self-Criticism," *Voice of America*, April 3, 2007, <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/a-13-2007-04-03-voa7.html> (accessed April 26, 2012) and Ritesh Kumar Singh, "Time Intra-SAARC Trade Improved," *The Hindu Business Line*, January 8, 2012, <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/article2785679.ece> (accessed March 21, 2012).
 30. R. K. Radhakrishnan, "SAARC Should Take on Modest Projects First: Peiris," *The Hindu*, November 3, 2011, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/article2595217.ece> (accessed April 26, 2012).
 31. News release, "SAARC Meeting on Strengthening Anti-Terror Mechanism Begins," Government of India, February 9, 2012, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=80221> (accessed April 26, 2012).

economically, to come together on every issue. In lieu of all-encompassing organizations, Asia has seen a growth of “minilateralism.”

Minilateralism distinguishes itself from multilateralism by one key factor. Whereas multilateral organizations try to include as many actors as possible, minilateralism strives to include the smallest number of countries needed “to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem.”³² Where multilateral organizations produce stalemates and non-binding votes, minilaterals are far more action-oriented.

In the last decade, Asia has seen a surge in minilateral groupings, mostly with U.S. support, a move some scholars attribute to America’s frustration with Asia’s multilateral architecture and its aforementioned problems.³³ Some examples of minilateralism in action are the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), the Six-Party Talks, Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP), and various trilateral dialogues.

U.S.-led minilaterals are an increasingly effective mechanism for handling issues in the region. The Lower Mekong Initiative brings together the countries of the Mekong River delta, making strides to improve health, environment, and infrastructure, in the face of worrying Chinese control upstream. The Proliferation Security Initiative, which is more global in scope, joins several states across Asia into a web of actors seeking to prevent the proliferation of nuclear material by

interdicting suspect shipments. The Six-Party Talks, aimed at dismantling North Korea’s nuclear program, were created in lieu of larger regional consultation through the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Finally, the U.S. has sponsored multiple trilaterals, such as U.S.–Japan–Australia, U.S.–Japan–India, and U.S.–Japan–South Korea, in an attempt to foster better relations among America’s allies and emerging partners. The U.S. has traditionally relied on its hub-and-spokes system of bilateral alliances to maintain stability in Asia, but relations between the various spokes have oftentimes lagged behind. Catalyzing better relations between allies, as the U.S. did with Japan and Australia,³⁴ should be a critical component of U.S. strategy in Asia and merits further analysis when discussing how Asia’s multilateral architecture fits U.S. interests.

How Can These Institutions Best Serve U.S. Interests?

Essentially, the U.S. must analyze, and then judge, these various institutions primarily on their ability to serve the broad array of U.S. interests discussed earlier. As it stands, diplomatic engagement with Asia’s multilateral institutions will yield primarily intangible gains, such as increasing U.S. credibility and promoting interaction, and hopefully, regional cooperation. These potential outcomes do merit U.S. engagement, as simply attending various meetings expends little political capital. Yet because of the previously

discussed institutional shortcomings, primarily revolving around the inability to resolve disputes or tackle hard challenges within a formal multilateral setting, the U.S. should continue to rely on its bilateral alliances and minilateral initiatives to yield more tangible results and better promote key U.S. interests, such as preserving stability and a rules-based regional order, preventing the rise of an Asian hegemon, and protecting freedom of navigation.

In general, America can further its interests and maximize its benefits from these institutions by working within the individual institutions to have members address hard challenges. Having a seat at the table is important, and the U.S. can use its considerable influence to leverage institutions to discuss territorial disputes, cross-border counterterrorism cooperation, maritime security, and human rights issues—even if such issues brush against the “ASEAN Way.”

In addition, a key component of such engagement from within is to maintain close relations with fellow democracies in the region and further activate a democratic lobby within Asia’s multilateral architecture. One of America’s primary strengths in the region, and one that is often underestimated, is its democratic values and emphasis on human rights, so forming coalitions of like-minded nations within larger institutions can lead to enhanced progress on these issues.

Moreover, the U.S. is right to promote ASEAN centrality in Asia’s

32. Moisés Naím, “Minilateralism,” *Foreign Policy* (July/August 2009), <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/06/18/minilateralism?page=full> (accessed April 26, 2012).

33. Michael Green and Bates Gill, *Asia’s New Multilateralism: Cooperation, Competition, and the Search for Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

34. Lisa Curtis, Walter Lohman, Rory Medcalf, Lydia Powell, Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, and Andrew Shearer, “Shared Goals, Converging Interests: A Plan for U.S.–Australia–India Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 99, November 3, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/11/Shared-Goals-Converging-Interests-A-Plan-for-U-S-Australia-India-Cooperation-in-the-Indo-Pacific>.

multilateral order. An ASEAN-centric system already exists, the framework is established, and it is a non-controversial way to approach multilateralism and achieve some of the non-tangible outcomes outlined above. As a whole, it is neutral territory in the geopolitical struggles East and South Asia.

But the U.S. should remember that ASEAN does not always have America's best interest in mind. ASEAN as an institution is dominated by a desire to carefully balance the region. During China's mid-2000s "charm offensive," ASEAN was not as amenable to U.S. interests vis-à-vis China as it is now. Whereas individual states, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, may find their relationships with the U.S. key to their security interests, there is nothing that ensures a broader ASEAN alignment with U.S. interests over the long term. That said, ASEAN will also continue to welcome an increased U.S. presence in Southeast Asia to balance an increased Chinese influence, playing one against the other.

While both the U.S. and ASEAN have reaffirmed their commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes and promoting regional connectivity, that will not be enough for the U.S., whose interests in preserving regional stability and a rules-based system go beyond the non-controversial challenges that ASEAN typically handles.

Regarding ARF and ADMM+, the U.S. should continue to participate at its current level, institutionalizing its commitment and dispatching ministerial-level delegations. Building relationships with regional counterparts is important, but at the same time, the U.S. cannot overly

rely on these institutions for actionable results, and must push these organizations to address potentially controversial topics or risk losing relevance. ADMM+ also must be held more frequently, lest each country send a different defense minister to each meeting.

HAVING A SEAT AT THE TABLE IS IMPORTANT, AND THE U.S. CAN USE ITS CONSIDERABLE INFLUENCE TO LEVERAGE INSTITUTIONS TO DISCUSS TERRITORIAL DISPUTES, CROSS-BORDER COUNTERTERRORISM COOPERATION, MARITIME SECURITY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES—EVEN IF SUCH ISSUES BRUSH AGAINST THE "ASEAN WAY."

The nascent East Asia Summit represents the greatest opportunity for the ASEAN-centric meetings. One key driver of U.S. policy must be maintaining credibility in a region known to constantly question America's commitment.³⁵ Presidential-level commitment, especially across Administrations, would further demonstrate the longevity, and bipartisanship, of U.S.–Asia policy. The EAS has already demonstrated that with U.S. participation it can address certain key issues, making it a promising venue for promoting American interests on political and security issues. Yet with the rotating ASEAN chair, the U.S. should not automatically, unconditionally, or uncritically commit to presidential attendance when troubled regimes host the EAS.

With APEC, as long as the U.S. continues to promote open trade

and steers away from dangerous protectionism, a robust commitment to APEC serves U.S. interests of increased trade and investment liberalization. American leadership in the Trans-Pacific Partnership will enable it to concretely shape APEC's most concrete achievement as progress is made toward the oft-discussed Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific.

SAARC can play a vital role helping to stabilize South Asia and cooperation on this issue should be fully explored.

For security, the U.S. must rely on its forward deployed military and cooperation with its treaty allies and strategic partners. Despite ASEAN's talk, Asia's multilateral system, in its current form, is no substitute for a robust military presence to safeguard U.S. interests, like freedom of navigation and security of allies. Coordinating with partners in the region to rotate more U.S. ships and soldiers, increase joint exercises with the U.S., and provide U.S. forces with a berth in the region, similar to recent agreements struck with Australia and Singapore, will contribute far more to regional stability, and stymie Chinese aggressiveness, than relying on multilateral institutions. Security gains can be achieved by further enmeshing China into the region's architecture, thereby raising the cost of unsanctioned adventurism, but at the end of the day, only peace through strength will maintain an environment conducive to American interests.

What the U.S. Should Do

To maximize gains from engaging Asia and make the most out of existing regional structures, the United

35. Simon Montlake, "Clinton Stresses US Commitment at ASEAN Forum," *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 23, 2009, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2009/0723/p06s04-woap.html> (accessed April 26, 2012).

States should pursue the following courses of action, thereby establishing a framework to best promote its national interests in Asia. Such a bottom-up reassessment of U.S. policy, touching on political, military, and economic engagement, is critical as the U.S. moves to consolidate its commitment to Asia. The U.S. should:

- **Shape ASEAN-centric meetings to be more policy oriented.** The U.S. has little direct control over ASEAN's agendas, but it can strongly encourage friends and partners to seek stronger policy-oriented and binding actions that will promote peace and economic development in the region, if necessary on a sub-regional, or, as ASEAN calls it, an ASEAN-x basis.
- **Maintain a robust security presence in the Asia-Pacific, which means exempting defense forces from absorbing even more budget cuts.** The U.S. must engage regional architecture from a position of strength, as forward deployed U.S. forces remain the primary security guarantor in the region and indeed create the conditions under which multilateralism can survive. Such a position of strength is being undermined by draconian defense cuts, and reducing our military footprint will cause U.S. allies and partners to question our long-term credibility.³⁶
- **Prioritize the U.S.-led "hub-and-spokes" alliance system and connections between them over multilateral arrangements.** The U.S. should use its alliances to make the most of multilateral arrangements, and create relationships between the spokes. Fostering better relations between allies and partners also creates a larger web of partners to further U.S. interests both inside and outside multilateral structures. Specifically, the U.S. can seek to better Japan–South Korea and Japan–Australia relations through existing trilaterals, and help further Australia–India relations through establishment of a U.S.–India–Australia dialogue and revival of the "Quad" dialogue among the U.S., Australia, India, and Japan.
- **Temper its expectations for any security-related gains from multilateral fora.** Except for certain transnational threats—disaster relief, disease, and, to some extent, trafficking—the mechanisms simply are not in place to handle larger issues.
- **Remain economically engaged in the region and commit robustly to free trade.** The U.S. should not acquiesce to domestic protectionist pressures, and must follow through on its commitment to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, as well as craft new free trade agreements and other initiatives to promote economic freedom. Economic statecraft, and providing the region with an alternative to the Chinese market, is critical.³⁷
- **Make clear that presidential-level participation in the Cambodian-hosted East Asia Summit cannot be taken for granted, and cannot proceed without American comment on the human rights situation there.** According to Human Rights Watch, Cambodian authorities continuously "restrict free speech, jail government critics, disperse workers peacefully protesting, and silence opposition party members," with the State Department noting that Cambodian security forces are guilty of committing "arbitrary killings and acting with impunity."³⁸ An uncritical presidential visit is a wasted opportunity. The way the President handles participation at the East Asia Summit in Cambodia's host year will set the precedent for how it deals its engagement in ASEAN under other difficult regimes.
- **Precede any presidential visit to Cambodia by an official visit to America's treaty ally, Thailand.** The U.S.–Thai alliance, robust at the operational level, has long suffered from a lack of attention at the highest levels of the U.S.

36. Dean Cheng and Bruce Klingner, "Defense Budget Cuts Will Devastate America's Commitment to the Asia-Pacific," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2629, December 6, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/12/defense-budget-cuts-will-devastate-americas-commitment-to-the-asia-pacific>.

37. Hillary Clinton, "Economic Statecraft," remarks at the Economic Club of New York, October 14, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/10/175552.htm> (accessed April 26, 2012).

38. Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2011: Cambodia," 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2011/cambodia> (accessed April 26, 2012), and U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2010 Human Rights Report: Cambodia," April 8, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/eap/154381.htm> (accessed April 26, 2012).

government.³⁹ In addition to helping shore up the alliance, a visit to Thailand will have the demonstrable effect of prioritizing American alliances. A failure to visit will give the opposite impression, and given the strategic drift in U.S.–Thai relations, could irreparably damage the alliance.

- **Support more Track 1.5 government–non governmental dialogues.**⁴⁰ **These fora involve exposing government officials to nongovernment experts from different states, as opposed to Track 2 dialogues which involve no participation from government officials.** Track 1.5 dialogues promote broader thinking on different issues and can lead to outside-the-box ideas on issues that may be too politically difficult to raise in an official multilateral setting.
- **Encourage India's involvement in regional architecture, starting with membership in the APEC.** As the world's most populous democracy, India possesses tremendous amounts of political capital and diplomatic leverage, and the U.S. needs to work more closely with India to promote shared interests in the development of effective regional multilateral institutions.
- **Promote unofficial Taiwanese observer status representation in other regional meetings besides APEC, including in the**

East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus, and others. Taiwan, with whose defense the U.S. is bound by law to concern itself, is a military and economic power and de facto independent political presence in the region. It is also at the center of an active sovereignty dispute with the region's fastest modernizing military—one of the two most contested issues in East Asia, the other being the Korean Peninsula. The fact that Taiwan is entirely outside the region's evolving security architecture is not conducive to regional peace and stability. Making Taiwan an observer of regional consultations will limit the prospects for miscalculation on its side, as well as China's, and raise the political cost of conflict on all sides. American advocacy will also signal America's continued interest in Taiwan's security.

- **Ensure a place for human rights on the agenda of ASEAN-centric institutions.** The U.S. must work through the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit to more directly challenge the status quo on human rights issues in Asia. Through the U.S. Ambassador to ASEAN, the U.S. should offer every possible support to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights in an advisory capacity, and regularly consult with NGOs in the region. In

addition, NGOs are critical watchdogs, so continuing to promote, and even fund, strong NGO activity in Asia is paramount.

Conclusion

Asia's multilateral architecture is evolving, and the U.S. should not dismiss the current state of affairs, particularly its inability to promote certain American interests, as permanent. In recent years, ASEAN has made strides in regional leadership, through creating the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus, strengthening the East Asia Summit, and expanding the ASEAN Regional Forum's agenda. Through spearheading the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the U.S. has driven APEC toward supporting the goal of a Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific, a long shot just a few years ago. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation has promised, as it has in the past, that it will become more action-oriented.

But as it stands now, results are primarily delivered by U.S.-backed minilateral groupings and various initiatives, as their record suggests. Emerging trilateral dialogues, and a revival of the Australia–U.S.–India–Japan quadrilateral dialogue, are among the most promising avenues for promoting regional stability, guaranteeing the conditions that have prevented conflict and allowed robust economic growth across the Asia-Pacific.

With Asia's diversity, it should not be surprising that various actors have myriad interests, sometimes

39. Walter Lohman, "Reinvigorating the U.S.–Thailand Alliance," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2609, September 28, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/09/reinvigorating-the-u-s-thailand-alliance>.

40. Track 1.5 refers to informal dialogue between policymakers and nongovernment experts, oftentimes using off-the-record Track 2 approaches, such as conferences and panels. For more information, see Oliver Wolleh, "Track 1.5 Approaches to Conflict Management: Assessing Good Practice and Areas for Improvement," Berghof Foundation for Peace Support, May 2007, http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/publications/MED_Documentation_Hueningen_Retreat.pdf (accessed April 26, 2012).

aligning and conflicting with America's own interests. Asia's multilateral system has proven adept at aligning common denominator interests shared by all parties involved, but for the time being, the U.S. cannot rely on the current system to promote its interests on security challenges. Ultimately, America's interests will best be promoted through a robust military presence and the preponderance of

a U.S.-backed system of interlocking webs of partners and allies. But active engagement and shaping of the regional architecture can be a useful supplement and context for its unilateral and bilateral efforts.

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