

## What can we expect from this year's East Asia Summit?

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As ASEAN leaders descend on Bangkok for the ASEAN Summit, regional leaders such as Shinzo Abe, Moon Jae-in and Scott Morrison are expected to join them for the East Asia Summit (EAS). First held in 2005, the EAS is a meeting of 18 leaders for strategic dialogue and cooperation on key political, security and economic challenges. It brings together the major regional players — China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand and newest members Russia and the United States — to meet with the 10 ASEAN leaders annually on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit.



While the G20 and APEC summits receive significant coverage, the EAS barely rates a mention in most media outlets. It is hard to point to a set of concrete initiatives and impact it has delivered. Despite its low profile, the EAS has the potential to be a valuable forum.

It is leaders-led. As Nick Bisley [points out](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, the EAS' leader-level format accurately 'reflects the reality that, in statecraft, there are some things that only leaders can do'. While there is now also an EAS [Foreign Ministers' Meeting](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, an Economic Ministers' Meeting and other ministerial meetings, its main value is the leaders' meeting.

It is inclusive. Hosted by the current ASEAN chair, it provides a voice to a diverse range of countries in the region, not just to those that have set the agenda in the past. The [18 EAS participating countries](#) <sup>[3]</sup> collectively represent 54 per cent of the world's population and 58 per cent of global GDP.

It has a broad remit. Unlike some other regional forums, the EAS aims to cover political, security and economic challenges facing the region. It has covered many different topics. [Last year](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, EAS leaders discussed the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, the situation in Myanmar's Rakhine State, counterterrorism, regional economic integration, maritime cooperation and connectivity. This year, it is [expected](#) <sup>[5]</sup> that US–China tensions, the South China Sea and the [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership](#) <sup>[6]</sup> (RCEP) trade deal will be high on the agenda. Last year, RCEP participating states expressed their eagerness to sign off on the deal at this year's summit, though it may still [not be finalised in time](#) <sup>[7]</sup>.

The EAS has some of the right conditions to be the region's premier forum for dialogue, but can it achieve this? As Bisley [said in 2014](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, 'In spite of its potential, in its near decade of existence the summit has failed to carve out a distinctive identity and it has had little purchase on regional cooperation'.

The EAS has been derided for simply being [a dinner and set speeches](#) <sup>[9]</sup>. But the rotating chairmanship means each host brings its own approach to how engagement is structured. Some chairs have hosted retreats, in addition to plenaries, to encourage more free-flowing discussion among leaders.

The [Chairman's Statement](#) <sup>[10]</sup> released following the summit is often vague, filled with lofty aims and hopes for greater cooperation. In reality, a statement can't reflect the full extent and substance of discussion. Thematic leaders' statements are also adopted each year reflecting EAS consensus on topics including counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation, maritime, cyber and transnational crime. There is still significant scope to improve the communications strategy around the EAS. The EAS has had little institutional support, with no standalone secretariat, member fees or annual budget in contrast with other regional forums. To make up for this, EAS Ambassadors in Jakarta meet regularly to prepare for EAS meetings while a dedicated EAS Unit in the ASEAN Secretariat also supports monitoring and the implementation of decisions. Senior officials meet three times during the year to facilitate strategic discussion and build momentum towards the Summit.

Despite criticisms, the EAS continues to be viewed positively. Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper refers to the EAS as the region's premier political and security forum while former head of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Peter Varghese famously described it as one of [Australia's two most important multilateral meetings](#) <sup>[11]</sup>. [Japan](#) <sup>[12]</sup> is also a vocal supporter and India is increasingly actively engaged. It is of benefit to ASEAN that world powers and significant regional players come to the EAS and play by ASEAN's rules.

To realise its potential, what would need to happen in 2019 to show that the EAS is being taken seriously?

As for any international forum, attendance is paramount. Minimal engagement of the great powers with the EAS in its early years has meant 'it never built up the kind of political significance to advance its larger ambitions or play a significant role in Asia's international relations', [says](#) <sup>[13]</sup> Bisley and Malcolm Cook. China has always been represented by its premier, rather than its president. US President Donald Trump again will [not attend](#) <sup>[14]</sup> in 2019,

sending lower level officials.

Another indication that the EAS is being taken seriously would be if leaders enter into genuine dialogue. This would require a change of tone where leaders come together to work through issues. A commitment to more secretariat resources would help support this shift.

As Bisley and Cook [suggested](#) <sup>[15]</sup> five years ago, ‘the Summit has remarkable potential, but its ability to live up to this is dependent on the EAS developing a sharper sense of purpose, maintaining a clear division of labour with the other elements of the regional security architecture and establishing the means to develop policy initiatives and political momentum between the actual summits’.

The EAS has made progress, but it is not yet entrenched. In the end, its success depends on whether states choose it as the preferred forum to address regional concerns. While some EAS members are keen, others are yet to commit to EAS as an important summit to invest in and develop.

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Article from the East Asia Forum: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org>

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<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/11/03/what-can-we-expect-from-this-years-east-asia-summit/>

[1] points out: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/44683768?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/44683768?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

[2] Foreign Ministers’

Meeting:

<https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-9th-east-asia-summit-foreign-ministers-meeting/>

[3] 18 EAS participating countries:

<https://dfat.gov.au/international-relations/regional-architecture/eas/Pages/east-asia-summit-eas.aspx>

[4] Last year: <https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-13th-east-asia-summit/>

[5] expected:

<https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/south-china-sea-free-trade-deal-feature-asian-leaders-summit>

[6] Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership:

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/10/06/rcep-leverages-political-security-through-economic-security/>

[7] not be finalised in time:

<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/economic-diplomacy-auditing-globalism-trade-woes-asean-s-future>

[8] said in 2014:

<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/how-east-asia-summit-can-achieve-its-potential>

[9] a dinner and set speeches:

<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/5675/the-u-s-and-the-east-asia-summit>

[10] Chairman's Statement: <https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-13th-east-asia-summit/>

[11] Australia's two most important multilateral meetings:

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/chief-diplomat-spells-out-australias-rules-of-engagement-20130128-2dgse.html>

[12] Japan:

<http://www.siiaonline.org/abes-vision-for-east-asia-summit-masterstroke-or-wishful-thinking/>

[13] says:

[https://www.academia.edu/15338682/How\\_the\\_East\\_Asia\\_Summit\\_can\\_achieve\\_its\\_potential](https://www.academia.edu/15338682/How_the_East_Asia_Summit_can_achieve_its_potential)

[14] not attend:

<https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/us-to-downgrade-east-asia-summit-participation-in-2019/>

[15] suggested:

[https://www.academia.edu/15338682/How\\_the\\_East\\_Asia\\_Summit\\_can\\_achieve\\_its\\_potential](https://www.academia.edu/15338682/How_the_East_Asia_Summit_can_achieve_its_potential)