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‘Patterns of Leadership in the Asia-Pacific’.

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Special Issue: Asia's Leadership Deficit?

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Abstract

Leadership at the regional level has come under the spotlight not only in the post cold War context but more recently following the global financial crisis. Yet, leadership by states within region-building and regional associations as leaders vis-a-vis other regions or powers, remains relatively new territory for analysis and consideration, even though the Association of South East Asian States (ASEAN) has attracted both admirers and sceptics. This introductory essay is intended to achieve two principal objectives regarding this symposium addressing Asia-Pacific regional leadership. First, we seek to put the ‘Asia-Pacific’ in historical context and identify some of the forces that have not only shaped but also hindered its realisation. Recognising China’s historical role and contemporary rise is important to understand the parameters within which ASEAN and its member states seek to define particular visions of regional identity and enact collective enterprises. The other key background consideration when thinking about contemporary leadership in the Asia-Pacific is that the United States is seemingly in decline. The Asia-Pacific’s two most consequential powers -- the United States and China – are pervasive considerations for any regional

organization that aims to lead and promote cooperation to solve collective action problems.

Keywords: ASEAN, China, United States, regional leadership, Asia-Pacific

Introduction

The contributors to this symposium are concerned with analysing aspects of leadership in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. While this may seem an uncontroversial goal, neither the region in question nor the nature of leadership processes are as straightforward as we might like to think. Not only are there a number of possible ways of thinking about the region and its membership—East Asia, rather than the Asia-Pacific, for example—but the nature of leadership itself remains equally contested. Should leadership be considered in terms of the actions of individuals, classes, organisations, states, civilisations or regions? Even if we can agree on how leadership should or could be exercised, do any of the potential leaders of the Asia-Pacific actually have the capacity or, indeed, the will to supply it? There are no easy, uncontested answers to these sorts of conceptual questions, but simply raising them helps us to understand what's at stake and whether the Asia-Pacific (or any other region, for that matter) will be able to play a role in shaping its own history. Although our discussion focuses upon leadership within the region, we do not confine our analysis to states or even key regional actors such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). On the contrary, the following papers draw upon different conceptual understandings of leadership and the sort of actors that try to supply it.

This introductory essay is intended to achieve two principal objectives. First, we seek to put the 'Asia-Pacific' in some sort of historical perspective and identify some of the forces that have shaped *and* hindered the realisation of the 'Asia-Pacific'. Saying something about China's historical role is important because it is a reminder of the changing and variegated nature of leadership, its possible rise and fall, and of the role key states can have in helping to define particular visions of regional identity. The key background consideration when thinking about contemporary leadership in the Asia-Pacific in particular is that it may be changing. That the United States is seemingly in decline and China is on the rise provides the context and the rationale for thinking about the nature and evolution of leadership in what is the world's most consequential economic and geopolitical region. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to suggest that way the Sino-American relationship plays itself out will have a profound influence on the global political economy and the conduct of international relations more generally in the twenty-first century.

While it is impossible to know how this relationship will play itself out, for our purposes it is significant because it highlights some of the regional forces, actors and processes that will help to determine its outcome. Not only is this an especially timely and illuminating moment to be considering the region analytically, but it also presents an unparalleled opportunity and challenge for other regional actors. At a time when there is widespread consensus that many of the key elements of the international institutional architecture are in a state of flux at best, crisis at worst, there is an opportunity for new actors, rising powers and regional institutions to offer new ideas, paradigms and answers to urgent questions of international cooperation and coordination. The key question for some of the Asia-Pacific's and/or East Asia's extant organisations' and actors' leadership credentials is: are they up to it?

After sketching some of the more important features of the Asia-Pacific's history, the second major issue we explore is the nature of leadership itself within the region. Here we distinguish between long-run 'structural' forces and the more contingent influence of norms and ideas. We argue that the changes currently underway in the Asia-Pacific offer a revealing insight into the nature of the international order more generally. Given that the countries which make up Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) account for 55% of world GDP, and 40% of the world's population, this is unsurprising. But the fact that it also contains the US and China—countries with very different histories and ideas about their international roles—suggests that however the Asia-Pacific resolves its leadership questions, it will have profound implications for the rest of the world.

The Asia-Pacific in context

The 'Asia-Pacific region' is a relatively new invention and a rather unlikely one at that (Dirlik 1992). All regions—at least in the formal, political sense with which we are primarily concerned here—are inherently artificial constructions, but some are more plausible than others.¹ As Barry Buzan (2012: 23) points out, 'a region that spans oceans and contains half of the world stretches the concept beyond breaking point.' As the Asia-Pacific contains so many different states with relatively little in common makes developing a common position or perspective difficult if not impossible. It is no coincidence that the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum has struggled to make much impression or develop commonly supported policies: even with India already seeking membership, its membership is already too diverse to unite around common causes or policies (Bisley 2012). The prospects for effective regional leadership under such circumstances appear remote.

Despite the difficulty APEC has experienced in attempting to represent, much less influence the behavior of, its members, interest in developing regional organizations continues to grow, nevertheless. Indeed, for a part of the world that has historically been associated with modest levels of transnational institutionalization, the East Asian part of the Asia-Pacific is currently experiencing a surfeit of regional initiatives. At one level the challenge facing the region's putative institutions is universal: trying to overcome the questions of capacity, identity and purpose that are such an increasingly prominent problem for inter-governmental institutions the world over (Schweller 2010). In East Asia and/or the Asia-Pacific's case, however, such problems are compounded by perennial and unresolved concerns about the possible diminution of national sovereignty. As Gill and Green (2009: 3) point out, 'Asia's new multilateralism is still at a stage where it is best understood as an extension and intersection of national power and purpose rather than an objective force in itself.' In other words, even if there was universal agreement on the membership of any nascent organization, there is still a good deal of anxiety about their possible impact.

It is no coincidence that Asia's most enduring multilateral organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), is best known for its particular form of consensus-based diplomacy that is entirely non-binding, and which consequently induces such skepticism in critics who cast doubt on its achievements (Jones and Smith 2007). Even ASEAN's admirers would have to acknowledge that, even where the geographic reach of any organization is relatively limited, translating potential into action has often been something of a challenge. And yet as both Richard Stubbs' and Mely Cabellero-Anthony's contributions to this symposium suggest, ASEAN has had an impact, and not just in Southeast Asia. It is especially noteworthy that many of the emergent organizations in the region such as APEC and the ASEAN

Plus Three grouping (which includes, Japan, South Korea and China as well as the ASEAN states), have felt obliged to adopt something approximating the ‘ASEAN Way’, in part, at least, to ensure that ASEAN’s concerns about its continuing importance are taken seriously.

Whether this represents an important indication of ASEAN’s continuing centrality and importance, or an unfortunate capitulation that is likely to undermine any regional organization’s capacity to act is a matter of some debate (see Beeson and Stubbs 2013). Nevertheless, the continuing interest in developing forms of East Asian/Asia-Pacific regionalism is an expression of a common international trend in which regional organizations are seen as providing an important arena in which to promote cooperation and solve collective action problems. That there have been quite so many proposals for regional groupings of one sort or another may suggest, as the skeptics claim (Ravenhill 2009), that the existing array might not be having much impact. Nevertheless, at another level, this flurry of cross-cutting, overlapping initiatives is arguably a manifestation of one sort of would-be leadership: the contest to define the region itself. At the center of this continuing competition are the Asia-Pacific’s two most consequential powers: the United States and China. To gain some sense of their very different perception of, and approaches to, regional cooperation, it is important to outline their different historical relationships with the region.

China at the centre?

For most of recorded human history, China was at the centre of what we now think of as East Asia. Indeed, as far as China was concerned, it was at the centre of the world—a geographical and geopolitical reality that reminds us of two things: first, regions are defined in relation to other regions. Second, given China’s remarkable

longevity and centrality in regional affairs, its leaders might be forgiven for thinking that—just like the US—China also occupies an ‘exceptional’ place in history (Zhang forthcoming). That both the United States and China suffer from something of a superiority complex when it comes to international relations is a striking and potentially unfortunate state of affairs: both countries cannot fulfill a unique historical destiny at the same time. Even if China’s leadership aspirations are currently seen as primarily pertinent in its own historical sphere of influence, the potential for conflict with the US is clear; especially when the US is in the midst of a much-discussed ‘pivot’ back to Asia (Ross 2012).

Before we consider the implications and motivations for this recent recalibration of US foreign policy and the self-conscious attempt to reinforce American leadership in the region, it is worth remembering what Chinese leadership looked like in its heyday—and how it might look in the future, some have argued (Jacques 2009). The tributary system in which China’s neighbors ritually acknowledged its dominance, status and influence provided a highly effective, stable and enduring international order. Not only did this Sino-centric regional order endure for hundreds of years, it did so by standing the prevailing Westphalian logic on its head. That is, the tribute system was marked by formal inequality but informal equality in practice, the precise opposite of the current system that has assumed such a prominent, seemingly immutable place in Western scholarship (Kang 2010).

At the very least, this suggests that other forms of international order led by other leaders are not unprecedented or unthinkable. On the contrary, not only did China’s neighbours such as Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma and Cambodia willingly acknowledge China’s ‘leadership’, but they also absorbed its profound civilisational influence in the process. For all the talk of the possible universalisation of ‘Western’

values, the influence of Confucianism in many parts of East Asia has been a powerful historical force (Rozman 1991), and one that helps to explain some of the continuing resistance to exogenous influences. An awareness of the *longue durée* draws attention to the potential importance of historically embedded contingent factors in determining how extra-regional influences are received and mediated (Acharya 2009). This is especially pertinent when we consider the historical role of the US, a country which has self-consciously attempted to exercise a rather different form of leadership in the region.

Long-distance leadership?

As Richard Stubbs' contribution to this symposium reminds us, there are a number of different ways of thinking about and actually exercising leadership—all of which are on display in some form or other in the Asia Pacific (also Dent 2008). In this context, there are aspects of the region's history in the period following the Second World War that are distinctive and merit emphasis. The most remarkable feature about the East Asian part of the larger Asia-Pacific region is just how much its post-war history has been shaped by a state that was not even in Asia. The United States exercised a form of long distance leadership that allowed it to exercise a decisive influence over the developmental trajectory of the entire East Asian region in the post-war period (Beeson 2008).

American leadership in the post-war was in part active and agential, in part a function of its structurally embedded dominance of the non-communist world in particular. It needs to be remembered that 'American hegemony' was established in the context of the Cold War and this created geopolitical imperatives that transcended all other considerations. Not that this was necessarily a bad thing for East Asia—or at least for

American allies in East Asia. On the contrary, America's active material support of its allies was a crucial component of, and precondition for, the East Asia's 'miraculous' development. Ironically, the 'strong man' leadership that was so characteristic of the authoritarian developmental states of northeast and southeast Asia occurred within the larger geopolitical context of Cold War confrontation and the struggle to defeat what still looked like a credible communist threat (Stubbs 2005; 2009).

There was one other widely noted consequence of America's Cold War policy in East Asia that continues to resonate. Unlike in Europe, American foreign policy in East Asia had the effect of reinforcing ideological and historical divisions (Beeson 2005). The distinctive 'hub and spoke' strategic architecture that was established as part of the so-called 'San Francisco system' is not just an historical curio (Calder 2004). On the contrary, America's post war alliance system remains the cornerstone of contemporary strategic relations in the region and is seen as a critically important part of, and rationale for, the US's 'pivot' to the region (Clinton 2011). Indeed, the American-led alliance network may actually expand to include former foes such as Vietnam as the region's smaller powers try to cope with, if not actively counter, the rise of China (Hookway 2011).

While China has been at pains to reassure its neighbors and emphasize the 'peaceful', and mutually-beneficial nature of its rise, recent events have undermined its carefully constructed regional 'charm offensive' and raised important analytical and policy-oriented questions in the process. The provocative decision to establish an expanded Air Defense Identification Zone around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands sent a powerful message to both Japan and the US about how far China was prepared to go in pursuit of what it saw as its legitimate historical claims. Whatever the merits of China's case (see Fravel 2011), its actions had an immediate impact on the entire

region and reinforced the doubts of many countries about its long-term ambitions. Significantly, it was not just China's foreign policy and leadership credentials that were subjected to renewed scrutiny, but its increasingly assertive actions cast an unfavorable light on the internal decision-making processes within China itself (see ICG 2012).

Under such circumstances, questions were also asked about the future of American regional leadership generally, and the credibility of its alliance relationships in particular. There is a long-standing and unresolved debate about the US's strategic role in the Asia-Pacific generally and in East Asia in particular. Many observers, especially in the US, think that the US plays a critical role as an 'off-shore balancer'—maintaining stability in a region that is otherwise 'ripe for rivalry' (Art 2003; Friedberg 1993/94). The implication is that East Asians are incapable of overcoming long-standing historical animosities or developing effective institutions that would allow them to manage their own intra-regional relations. In such circumstances, American leadership remains an indispensable component of maintaining peace, the argument goes. The rather paradoxical reality that this has necessitated fighting a series of bloody wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan is given less attention than we might expect. Whatever the merits of the argument about the stabilizing role played by America's military, a more fundamental question has recently emerged that casts doubt on the US's capacity to fulfill such a role: is America in decline?

Leadership transition?

When China was the dominant power in Asia, it was also the world's largest economy. Until as late as the nineteenth century, China in particular and 'Asia' more

generally (especially when India is included) were more significant centers of economic activity than the Americas or even Europe (Frank 1998). When the US belatedly assumed the leadership of the ‘free world’ in the aftermath of World War Two, it accounted for nearly a third of global GDP (Maddison 2007: 381). The point to emphasize, therefore, is that while economic development and dominance isn’t everything, leadership is unlikely without it. This makes the current debate about the possible decline of the American economy—to say nothing of its polarized and dysfunctional political system (Mann and Orstein 2012)—vital parts of any discussion about possible leadership in the Asia-Pacific.

While there are too few historical examples of ‘hegemonic transition’ for us to make confident predictions about the implications of either China’s rise or America’s relative decline (but see Chan 2008), a few points are worth highlighting as they form the backdrop for intra-regional relations (in any geographic context), and the case studies that follow. The first point to make is that we should exercise caution in assessing possible American decline because we’ve been here before: similar debates occurred in the 1980s when, not only was the US thought to be in serious decline, but—unbelievably enough, in retrospect—Japan was expected to eclipse the US as the world’s principal economic force.² As we now know, the Japanese challenge evaporated and the US went on to establish an era of ‘unipolarity’ that many expected to last indefinitely (Wohlforth 1999).

Nevertheless, circumstances really do look different this time. Although there are sharply divided opinions about the possible extent and impact of America’s apparent decline in the current period, too (Layne 2012; Joffe 2009), it is not simply America’s own well-documented economic and political problems that are leading commentators to question whether its any longer has the material capability or the political will to

exercise the same sort of influence it once did. On the contrary, the Chinese challenge is multifaceted, massive and with an apparent purpose with which the US has previously not had to contend. At one level China's domestic transformation is on such an epic scale that it is redefining economic relationships in the region and the wider world (Park and Shin 2011), making China an indispensable economic partner whose views cannot be easily ignored. Remarkably enough, and the territorial disputes notwithstanding, it has become commonplace to talk about Chinese 'soft power' in a way that was formerly exclusively associated with the US.

While it remains to be seen how substantive this ideational potential actually is (Shambaugh 2013), there is another aspect of China's rise that is already proving more consequential. One of the most significant aspects of China's evolving foreign and strategic policies is that its leaders are uninhibited by the self-imposed strategic constraints that have—until recently, at least—stopped Japan from playing a 'normal' role in the region's security architecture (Hughes 2005). China, by contrast, is not only beginning to modernize its defense forces as a consequence of its growing wealth, but it is also starting to deploy them in pursuit of its overall 'struggle for status' and its specific territorial claims in the South China Sea (Deng 2008; Fravel 2011). Even though the US continues to enjoy a massive lead in defense spending and capability, as we have suggested, many of China's neighbors have become increasingly nervous about its behavior and intentions. In such circumstances, not only are there grounds for questioning China's leadership capacity within the East Asian region, but it is making it more unlikely that any regional organization will be able to provide collective leadership either (Beeson 2013).

Perhaps the most illuminating example of this possibility has been the divisions that have emerged within ASEAN as it struggles to respond to China's increasingly

assertive behavior in the region's maritime territorial disputes. If ever there was a moment for the ASEAN grouping in particular and the countries of the wider East Asian region generally to act collectively in response to a common threat to security, this was it. As Mely Caballero Anthony discusses, ASEAN is especially well placed to act as it enjoys a degree of 'centrality' that other actors lack. However, the recent failure to engineer an agreement on regional maritime policy revealed how divided the grouping is and how effectively China has undermined ASEAN's celebrated consensus politics (Storey 2012). Thus far, however, the achievements of institutional initiatives, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which ought to be ideally placed to address regional security issues has been decidedly modest. The question, once again, is whether organizations like the ARF can actually seize the opportunity presented by the evolving regional strategic crisis in the way Stubbs argues they might in the following paper.

Given the problems that are currently afflicting the European Union—rightly or wrongly seen as the global benchmark for regional institutional development and leadership (Beeson and Stone, 2013)—there may be nothing surprising that institutionalized, collective leadership elsewhere is also underperforming. Does this open up the possibility that other rising powers might provide leadership in the absence of collective action and when the US is apparently in decline, or are rising powers actually symptomatic of and contributing to an international architecture in crisis? While China is the most obvious candidate given its historical role and economic weight in East Asia, there are a number of potential fatal obstacles to any leadership ambitions it may nurture (Beeson 2009).

First, the United States is attempting to reassert itself and by implication contain China, protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. This is the way policymakers in

China view American actions (Swaine 2012). At the very least, China's leadership ambitions are likely to be contested and actively resisted by the US for the foreseeable future. Second, leaders need followers. With the exception of North Korea and possibly Laos, China's friends are few and unreliable. Even Burma has seemingly swapped sides as part of its surprising, apparently genuine embrace of political liberalization (Robinson 2012). Finally, although China has rapidly assumed a prominent position in international forums, it remains a wary multilateralist and one with the power to block rather than lead to judge from its role in the recent abortive climate change negotiations (Conrad 2012). The key question, therefore, is whether the US will continue to enjoy a structurally embedded ability to exercise leadership through the institutionalized architecture it has done so much to create.

Institutionalized leadership

So far we have primarily considered leadership at the state level and the actions of national policymakers as they seek to influence international affairs. There is, however, another form of leadership, albeit one that is closely connected to the actions of one state, at least. We refer to the way in which a complex institutional architecture has emerged as part of what it has come to be referred to as 'global governance' (Schweller 2010). Although we are principally interested in the regional manifestations of institutionalized efforts to promote international cooperation, coordination and leadership, many of the organizations that have emerged as part of the post-war international order have reflected the sort of liberal principles that have been championed by the United States in particular. Importantly, the actual operation of the sorts of multilateral organizations that are becoming such a prominent feature of regional interaction can occur at a number of different levels or scales. It is not just 'track 1' diplomacy that is attempting to influence state behavior. In addition,

informal diplomacy, also called Track 1½ or Track 2 (Stone 2011), is of high intensity in the region and represents the third type of ‘intellectual leadership’ identified by Richard Stubbs in the next article. Indeed, non-state organizations composed of university institutes and think tanks, such as firstly the ASEAN-Institutes of Strategic and International Studies and then later, the region-wide Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) have long provided the sort of intellectual input and institutionalized coordination upon which the high profile, intergovernmental ARF has relied (Ball, Milner and Taylor 2006). As vehicles for regional confidence building, ASEAN-ISIS and CSCAP have been instrumental in developing innovative ideas, as well as tackling non-traditional security issues, to help push cooperative security processes forward and yet work within the constraints imposed by governments in the region. Taking the concepts of social network analysis outlined by Mely Caballero Anthony, these Track 2 networks can also be interpreted as part of the infrastructure of ASEAN ‘centrality’ by creating multiple venues for a ‘habit of dialogue’ and networking to build trust in the region.

Where ASEAN-ISIS could rely on its relative homogeneity of membership and the well established ‘habit of dialogue’ to act as an intellectual entrepreneur in Southeast Asian affairs, such a habit is weak in the rest of the region and among the wider and more diverse membership interests of CSCAP. In the case of both of these Track 2 initiatives, their intellectual leadership as agenda-setters is problematically dependent on the willingness of official actors to listen and accept advice and/or information. By contrast, the Shangri-La Dialogue -- Track 1½ process -- always had high-level official participation of defence ministers since its establishment in 2002, and then strengthened official participation by inviting chiefs of defence staff and permanent heads of defence ministries. Where ASEAN-ISIS and CSCAP represent regionally

endogenous or ‘home grown’ examples of intellectual leadership, the Shangri-La Dialogue was initiated outside the Asia Pacific in a British think tank (Capie and Taylor 2010).

Likewise, the enduring reality of international politics everywhere is that it continues to be influenced by the extant institutional architecture that was created under American hegemony. The story of America’s role in creating the post-war world has been told many times and it will not be repeated here (Latham 1997). However, it is important to recognize that many of the principal organizations that were established under the auspices of ‘American hegemony’ are still around and still helping to determine the way individual states are integrated into the international system. China’s accession to the World Trade Organization is, perhaps, the quintessential example of the potential importance of these institutions. Not only did China have to accept particular principles and changes to domestic regulations as part of the price of admittance, but many observers think that China’s participation in such forums has contributed to a long-run process of ‘socialization’ in which its policy-making elites have taken on board norms and practices formerly associated with ‘the West’ (Johnston 2008).

Somewhat ironically, the Chinese economy has benefitted enormously from WTO accession, not least in subduing any lingering opposition to going down the ‘capitalist road’ (Breslin 2007). It is precisely China’s enormous success as a state-capitalist economy that is underpinning its ‘rise’ and leading to speculation about its possible future leadership role. Although much attention has been paid to the comparatively diminished position of the United States, especially as a consequence of its reliance on China to fund its deficits (Cohen and DeLong 2010), the US still retains important advantages. Most obviously, China cannot easily use its economic leverage to

influence American policy without damaging its own economic interests (Drezner 2009). At another, more subtle level, however, it has been persuasively argued that when seen in the long-term the US continues to ‘lead’ China because China’s economy, business practices and social values continue to be transformed by a mode of economic organization that is primarily associated with the US. In short, ‘China today is growing not by writing its own rules, but instead by internalizing the rules of the advanced industrial West. It has grown not by conjuring up its own unique political-economic institutions but instead by increasingly harmonizing with our own.’ (Steinfeld 2010: 18).

The possibility that the Chinese economy and some of its principal institutions continues to be shaped by external forces is especially important when considering institutionalized forms of possible leadership. Some observers argue that the unprecedented success of the Chinese developmental experience will inevitably spawn a host of imitators (Halper 2010). The so-called ‘Beijing consensus’, which favors a non-doctrinaire, ‘pragmatic’ approach to development, in which powerful—not necessarily democratic—states are actively involved in the economy, has won many admirers. Although there are important variations in the precise institutionalized form capitalism may assume, it is less clear that there is a distinct ‘China model’ that can be easily emulated (Breslin 2011). Even if other states do try to copy China’s development practices, it is not obvious how this benefits China itself. Where the Chinese government or companies have been actively involved in foreign investment or aid packages, this has not always been a happy experience or an unproblematic vehicle for promoting Chinese influence (Alden 2009).

Seen in this context, claims about the possible significance of rising powers such as China and the other BRICs need to be treated with caution. Indeed, as Ralf Emmers

article outlines in the case of Indonesia, there have been significant changes in the relative standing of a number of states as economic activity has been restructured and power redistributed. However, the rising powers are largely working within an extant institutional architecture. The creation of new institutions with a real capacity to address particular issues, much less offer decisive leadership is clearly limited at this stage to judge from efforts to address critical issues such as financial sector reform and climate change (Wade 2011). In short, multilateralism itself is in difficulty as it adjusts to new powers and non-state actors as part of the evolving international architecture, and this is making leadership of any sort more difficult (van Langenhove 2010).

All of which brings us back the region as a whole and its capacity to either institutionalize or reflect leadership. The ability of even the most enduring organizations, such as ASEAN, to offer leadership is constrained by internal differences and the fact that potential partners are often far more powerful. The most frequently cited example of ASEAN leadership—the resolution of the Cambodian crisis in the 1970s—is also a reminder of its limits: without the willing compliance of China and the US, little would have been achieved. However, even in its subsequently ‘wider’ form, ASEAN has the great merit of a relatively coherent membership base: ‘Southeast Asia’ may also be something of an artificial construction, but by this stage it has strong brand recognition and its membership have undoubtedly undergone a process of mutual socialization (Ba 2009), even if they can’t always be sure of having the same impact on others. The same cannot be said of bodies such as APEC with its diverse membership, limited institutional capacity and restricted mandate.

Much the same criticism can be made of some of the other proposed initiatives, potentially the most important of which is the East Asia Summit (the EAS) (Camroux

2012). The EAS has become surprisingly prominent largely as a consequence of the US seeking to reengage with or ‘pivot’ back to the region. Whatever one thinks about the merits of or necessity for such a policy, that these institutions are seen by the Obama administration as potentially important ways exerting influence is significant and in marked contrast to the Bush era. The principal attractions of the EAS for the US are firstly, that it is a member and so are key allies like Australia; and secondly, it potentially offers a way of curbing China’s influence. China’s preference, by contrast, is to develop the ASEAN Plus Three grouping, which it might have hoped to dominate precisely because it excluded the US (Terada 2012). The point to emphasize once again is that the definition and the subsequent institutionalization of regions are inter-connected, highly politicized processes.

This is why the idea of a possible ‘Indo-Pacific’ region remains controversial, with some observers equating it with a strategy to curb China’s role and status (Medcalf, 2012). As part of the ‘pivot to Asia’, the US Quadrennial Defence Review 2014 is expected to emphasize the geo-strategic importance of India with its new Indo-Pacific policy language. This discursive shift does not preclude traditional Asia-Pacific partners such as Japan, the ASEAN states and Australia, but the inclusion of India potentially further dilutes and balances Chinese influence. It also allows states like Australia to create a region which reflects their specific geopolitical and geographical interests (Bishop, 2013).

Thus we find ourselves in a situation where the definition of the region remains contested, and where there is no clear leader either ‘internally’ or ‘externally’: the rise of China clearly is changing both its *and* the US’s relationship with East Asia and the Asia-Pacific. The US may still be the most powerful state in the world, but its ascendancy is not as complete as it was, especially in a part of the world where China

has been the preponderant power historically. Even so, China's capacity to lead is also highly circumscribed, in part by the actions of the US, in part by its historical rivalry with Japan, and in part because of its own increasingly aggressive foreign policies which are causing such consternation among its neighbors. In such circumstances, it is entirely possible there will be an absence of effective leadership at the very moment when the region faces major strategic, economic and political challenges

The following articles in this symposium on Asian regional leadership pick up a number of themes raised in this introductory article. However, each article takes different routes in considering leadership in terms of the actions of states and regional organisations. Richard Stubbs revisits the literature on leadership to highlight ASEAN regional leadership. Mely Anthony follows by interrogating 'taken-for-granted' notions of 'ASEAN centrality' in the region despite the obvious lack of resources commanded by this group of small states. Ralf Emmers analyses the regional leadership aspirations of one particular state that has been the first among equals in ASEAN, and which some expect to play a major role in the wider region's future—Indonesia (Brooks 2011).

The focus of this symposium has primarily been about the capacity of states to offer leadership, whether acting alone, as in the case of American hegemony and a newly-empowered China, or collectively, as in ASEAN. In this first article we have sought to elucidate the wider geo-political context embedding the following papers which have a more exclusive focus on ASEAN related dynamics. As Richard Stubbs in particular stresses—a position with which Mely Caballero-Anthony and Ralf Emmers broadly concur—leadership in the Southeast Asian part of the region, at least, has been and remains a “collective enterprise” resting upon a pattern on “intellectual and entrepreneurial leadership” whereby challenges are addressed by all,

with one state or a group of them taking lead depending on the problem at stake. Our contributors also note, each in different ways, that the growth of overlapping regional and international organisations creates a complex web of institutions. At this stage, it is unclear which—if any—of these potentially competing institutions with their different goals and champions is likely to emerge from the pack and exert a clear and discernible influence on the region as a whole, however it is defined.

In this regard the implications for ASEAN at the level of its own organizational interests and future relevance are potentially quite promising. At the broader East Asian/Asia-Pacific level, it is difficult to see how either China and the US, or China and Japan can overcome their leadership rivalries and cooperate to offer some sort of regional leadership, whether acting as individual nation states, or as a part of an institutionalized collective endeavour. Indeed, at this point in history, it is far from clear whether the East Asian region in particular will even remain at peace as unresolved territorial disputes and long-standing historical animosities threaten to erupt into outright conflict.

And yet, absent a major war that would inevitably devastate the developmental prospects of the entire region, ASEAN's relevance could actually increase. Not only does it continue to have the potential to offer leadership in the absence of alternatives, as our contributors demonstrate, but the tide of history may actually be flowing in ASEAN's direction. As Stephan Haggard (2013: 13) has pointed out, "As the major multilateral institutions become more diverse, the deepening of cooperation is likely to occur among smaller groups of likeminded countries rather than through global agreements or broad regional ones incorporating many members". Institutional inertia or gridlock under the panoply of formal and informal multilateral agreements creates new challenges of leadership as well as imposing sovereignty costs. But it can also

propel innovation. This symposium of papers has suggested that regional leadership in the Asia Pacific has been an overlooked realm of analysis.

Fruitful avenues for future analysis of Asia Pacific regional leadership can head analytically both upstream and downstream. If regional leadership is to be effective, it might be more productively projected into major new international fora such as the Group of 20 and alignments such as the BRICs/BRICSAM rather than traditional inter-governmental entities like the UN Security Council or World Trade Organisation. With both China and India as Asian anchors in BRIC global summitry, it could conceivably become a caucus of large emerging market economies within the G20; or some kind of counterweight to the traditional and dominant states in the fashioning and future organization of the global economy—if they can find common cause and overcome their potential rivalries..

Again, ASEAN could play a creative role in this regard, *if* its members can overcome their reluctance to enact difficult, contentious or—most critically of all, perhaps—binding actions. Given the region’s continuing, strategic, development, environmental and political challenges, there is plainly an important opportunity for policy entrepreneurship to be exercised by ASEAN official actors in coalitions with experts, professionals and industry representatives in issue-specific domains such as certification regimes and international standard-setting. The multi-stakeholder Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO, Nesadurai, 2013) is a case in point.³ ASEAN policy communities have also taken leading roles in certain areas of international regulation or regional cooperation for issue-specific policy domains such as maritime piracy (Storey, 2009) or infectious diseases (Caballero-Anthony, 2008). While the papers in this symposium have focused primarily on traditional state based

actors, the challenge for future research is to link state-based analyses to the growing literature on regional policy networks.

Whether we call it East Asia, the Asia-Pacific or even the Indo-Pacific, it contains some of the world's most important centres of economic activity and some of its most combustible and seemingly irremediable strategic flashpoints. The region in all its guises continues to challenge our analytical and policymaking powers. Enlightened and productive leadership, whether it is provided by states, formal institutions, or even ad hoc, informal sub-national actors, is desperately needed if a region that is widely seen as the key to the twenty-first century's economic and strategic future, is to actually reach its potential.

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¹ For an exploration of the different ways of conceptualising regions, see Agnew (2013).

² The most influential and representative volume was Kennedy (1989).

³ . Established in 2004 as an industry-NGO initiative, has developed fairly comprehensive socio-environmental regulation through its certification regime for palm oil. The palm oil industry is a major economic sector in Southeast Asia. Although Malaysia and Indonesia currently account for 85% of global palm oil production, other Southeast Asian states are moving into this sector as they see it as a vital source of growth, rural development and

poverty alleviation, and food security. The palm oil sector is also a controversial industry, associated with forest destruction and land rights violations.