

East Asia Summit in Manila

Many countries appreciated Trump's gesture of extending another day to stay in Manila to attend the EAS



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The East Asia Summit (EAS), hosted by the Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, was held in Manila on 14 November. Besides twenty-one nations, the United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres attended the meeting.

The Asia-Pacific hosts many regional initiatives. These include: Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP)/Comprehensive Progressive Trans Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), Free Trade Area for Asia-Pacific (FTAAP), East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN-Regional Forum (ARF).

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's East Asian caucus as expounded in 1991, could not come into fruition for one or the other reason. He wanted to form a pure East Asian forum excluding of all external forces. The primary objectives of these initiatives are mostly overlapping and fulfilling similar goals of political cohesion, economic integration, liberalisation, and security conversion etc.

The oldest of these initiative is ASEAN, which aims to achieve political and economic harmony in South East Asia that came into being in 1967. East Asian Summit (EAS) is ASEAN's off-shoot that also extended membership to ASEAN Plus Three (Japan, South Korea, China), along with Australia, New Zealand, United States, Russia and India. The 18-member EAS is almost APEC with the exception of India. The decision to hold the EAS forum reached in 2004 and came into practice in 2005 at the ASEAN meeting in Laos. The force behind EAS is Malaysia but the ideals of Mahathir were not fully absorbed, and the domination of external forces continues to influence EAS. The early Cold War alliances saw a Communist tide sweep across East Asia. With the exception of North Korea, there is no Communist threat. China leads in free trade and globalisation and fully stands by the United States and ASEAN, APEC, ARF, and EAS. Chinese President Xi Jinping attended the EAS, China-ASEAN meeting, and ASEAN Plus Three meeting at Manila.

All countries are jointly tackling the North Korean threat especially posed to Japan and South Korea. Focusing on North Korea, EAS stressed compliance with chemical weapons ban. Malaysia has already cut-off diplomatic and trade ties with North Korea following Kim Jong-Nam's murder on 13 February at Kuala Lumpur airport by using chemical weapons. The EAS summit denounced this act in the interest of public safety. The EAS put pressure on Pyongyang to shun its aggressive postures.

Many countries appreciated Trump's gesture of extending another day to stay in Manila to attend the EAS. Trump's image has been viewed positively by the Asia-Pacific countries and greatly dispelled his negative impressions that were held for a year since his election campaign. His attendance on the EAS enhanced American role in the Asia-Pacific. His engagement during his Asian tour with strengthening ties with Japan, improvement with South Korea on North Korean issue, further nourishing trade relations and political understanding with China, and overall progress of US ties with a number of East Asian countries is considered a thrilling chapter in the American agenda. He articulated a new vision of American role in the Asia-Pacific.

Russia joined the EAS in 2011 to take up issues deemed crucial to strengthen strategic role. The EAS is a good opportunity for Russia to pay attention to the Asia-Pacific and to further coordinate with powers and strengthen security alignment of the Asia-Pacific. Russian Far East makes it possible to actively engage there.

Pakistan is related to the ASEAN, ARF, and APEC but it is far behind in the EAS compared to India. Pakistan along with a dozen countries have applied for seeking APEC membership. Pakistan's relations with China and Malaysia could yield dividends for Pakistan to become a member of APEC and EAS. Pakistan needs to adopt a strong East Asia diplomacy toward ASEAN and other members.

Trump skipped the second day plenary session of the summit and he left a bit earlier. As a whole, his tour to Asian countries was "tremendously successful" and he sorted out differences on a number of issues.

At Da Nang and Manila Trump met with Duterte for the first time. Both exchanged harsh notes earlier with regard to drug trafficking in the Philippines and Duterte's strong action, which Trump termed as against human rights. Duterte is building a drug-free society in the Philippines. In his Manila trip, Trump has improved ties with Duterte that might be useful for the U.S.-Philippines alliance, and to create stability in the region.

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