

## **ASEAN's and Asia's continuing lack of leadership**

Mark Beeson  
UWA

It has become commonplace these days to bemoan the absence of effective leadership (Bremmer 2012). Whether it is the domestic variety, or at the even more demanding international level, 'great' leaders are in short supply, it seems. The dramatic decline in the reputations of international leaders such as Angela Merkel and Barak Obama is indicative of the way the fortunes and standing of even popular leaders can rapidly turn. Given the ever-expanding list of problems confronting the world, corrosive cynicism about politics generally and leadership in particular—especially among the western democracies—continues to grow (Hay 2007). The rise of populists and demagogues is an important morbid manifestation of the seemingly inability of 'normal' political leadership to address complex problems that defy easy resolution (Porter 2016). The likes of Donald Trump may not have plausible or palatable answers to contemporary problems, but their rhetoric cuts through to at least some disaffected individuals despairing of conventional democratic politics.

In authoritarian regimes the picture is more complex. Although there are many despots who survive not because they are popular leaders, but because they are ruthlessly effective in curbing opposition, some authoritarians do enjoy widespread support. The East Asian region has provided illustrations of every variety of political system and leader, so one generalizes at one's peril, but for the purposes of the current discussion one point is central: whether leaders are popular or unpopular, effective or ineffective domestically, East Asia collectively is synonymous with a noteworthy absence of leadership at the regional, much less the international level (Beeson and Stone 2014). For all the attention given to the region's well-known post-independence generation of 'strong men leaders' (Haggard 1990; Gilley 2014), there has been a striking lack of leadership at the regional level. The key question is whether this leadership deficit in Asia as a whole and as a potential collective actor actually matters.

Given that the East Asian region has attracted international attention primarily because of its remarkable economic development, the intuitive answer to this question seems to be ‘perhaps not’. And yet it is also clear that the East Asian region’s problems are multiplying and threatening to trigger outright conflict (Kaplan 2014). In such circumstances the question to ask is whether the so-called ‘long peace of East Asia’ was something of an aberration and a function of the United States’ long distance leadership of the region (Beeson 2008; Kivimäki, 2014). This is an especially important and timely question given that US’s relationship with East Asia appears to be changing as China challenges American dominance and the US becomes increasingly preoccupied with its own problems. In the absence of American leadership can Asia provide its own? If there is no unambiguous leadership from either a single state such as China or a collective such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), what implications is this likely to have and what does it tell us about leadership in the contemporary international order more generally?

In order to try and answer these questions, I initially consider the nature of leadership itself, especially in the context of the American variety that has had such a major impact on East Asia in the postwar period. I then illustrate the way leadership has—and hasn’t—mattered in the cases of the Asian financial crisis (AFC) and the more recent global financial crisis (GFC).

### **Leadership: does it matter? How would we know?**

Deciding what leadership is and whether it actually makes a difference is more difficult than it might seem. There are a number of well-known, long-standing difficulties with the notion of leadership that are not easily resolved (see Ahlquist and Levi 2011). For a start, should we be focusing on individual leaders or the office they inhabit? Is leadership something attributable to the proverbial ‘great man of history’, or is it the collective product of a particular set of circumstances or moment in history? Are political, economic, and especially strategic or military forms of leadership essentially different? Do different times and issue areas call for fundamentally different ‘skill sets’ as they say? Keynes might have been rather good at figuring out what was wrong with the international economy, for example, but it took a politician in an especially powerful office to put some of his ideas into practice.

Even then, the likes of Roosevelt's or Churchill's undoubted leadership qualities might not have been quite as apparent in less existentially fraught times.

What we can say with some confidence, however, is that the nature of leadership seems to have evolved over the course of history, and that specific historical circumstances make a difference to the sort of leadership that occurs (Ikenberry 1989). Even leaders in the most autocratic states these days are decidedly less 'charismatic' than the likes of Napoleon, Hitler or Mao. The leaders of the United States in the postwar period when America became the so-called leader of the free world and the architect of an institutionalized form of hegemonic authority, were more technocratic and 'wonkish' than earlier generations of leaders (Henderson 2000). It is striking that only at moments of national crisis is the desire for such charismatic leadership apparently increased (Bligh et al 2004). It is equally noteworthy that the leadership of the Soviet Union became more technocratic and unremarkable in the wake of Stalin's tyranny, something that has also happened in China following Mao's excesses (Bialer 1982; Chang and White 1998).

Given China's significance in the context of a discussion about leadership in Asia, it is worth noting at the outset that the leadership since Deng Xiaoping has been the antithesis of charismatic, reaching its technocratic and colorless nadir under Hu Jintao (Lampton 2014). The underlying principle of 'collective leadership' and the avoidance of 'personality cults' made this sort of outcome both likely and desirable. For all the attention given to Xi Jinping's efforts to concentrate power in his own person, he presents a remarkably bland façade to the world and many think claims about an incipient personality cult in his case are overstated. What is clear is that the leadership process and the purposes of government in China are very different to those that apply to their strategic rivals in the US. As David Lampton (2014: 49) points out, 'For Americans government is a danger; for Chinese, government ought to be the solution.... Chinese political discourse revolves around what government can and should accomplish and how it can do so effectively.'

In America's case an existing, historically determined sense of 'exceptionalism' was reinforced by the rise of the United States as the world's preeminent economic and military power (McDougall 1997; Smith 1994). Significantly, however, America's

leadership potential remained latent while it was ‘isolated’ and unwilling to take up the mantle of international leadership between the wars. When the US eventually did become the world’s leading capitalist power and architect of the postwar international order, its impact on East Asia was profound and helps to account for the subsequent and continuing regional leadership deficit. Before detailing this impact, however, it helps to sketch the theoretical debate that emerged around America’s hegemonic influence, especially on East Asia.

### *The consequences of long distance leadership*

One of the most influential ideas to have emerged from what might be broadly described as the political-economy tradition is the idea that leadership matters. Charles Kindleberger’s (1973) pioneering study of the Great Depression famously argued that its duration and intensity could be explained in large part by the absence of a leader prepared to provide indispensable collective goods. Without such leadership, states might retreat into the sort of autarchy and beggar-thy-neighbor policies that helped precipitate the Great Depression. American leadership in the aftermath of the Second World War—itself a direct consequence of the economic cataclysm of the interwar period—was explicitly designed to ensure that such ‘mistakes’ were not repeated and the economic order remained open and essentially liberal.

This is now a well-known story, the moral of which was enshrined in the Keynesian-inspired demand management that became the economic orthodoxy for the first few decades following the war. The possible importance of economic and political leadership seemed to be borne out in, and epitomized by, the concomitant elevation of the United States to the leadership of ‘the free world’. Those parts of the world fortunate enough to be on the ‘right’ side of the great geopolitical struggle between capitalism and the Soviet Union’s version of ‘communism’ found their economic prospects greatly enhanced. For all the criticisms that have been subsequently made about some aspects of the so-called Bretton Woods institutions,<sup>1</sup> there is no doubt that the recovery and/or the rapid economic development of large parts of Europe and East

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<sup>1</sup> The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, later replaced by the World Trade Organization.

Asia would not have happened in quite the way—or at the unprecedented speed—in which it did (Beeson and Breslin 2014).

While the ‘East Asian miracle’ may have happened eventually, perhaps, it is clear that it owes a great deal to the fortuitous and supportive environment created by American leadership. This is not to suggest that the US role was without its problems; the wars in Korea and Vietnam are hardly minor historical footnotes. But it is also clear that these conflicts had a major catalyzing impact on the economies of those countries in the capitalist camp. War can make the state, but it can also help to make successful industrial economies, too (Stubbs 1999).

There are three interconnected aspects of America’s hegemonic influence in East Asia that are especially important when considering either leadership at a distance or the absence of an indigenous variety. First, the fact its leadership was institutionalized within the Bretton Woods institutions meant the American influence was pervasive, not solely dependent on the impact of the foreign policy priorities of one administration or another, and enduring (Agnew 2005). Even the administration of George W. Bush and the ‘war on terror’, which had such a divisive impact in Southeast Asia in particular (Beeson 2004) did not entirely negate the impact of America’s ‘soft power’. Indeed, the spread of a capitalist mode of production to China arguably marked the high point of American influence and the promotion of market-oriented policies. Even if we recognize that the way capitalism has evolved in China and even Japan has been very different to what the US might have hoped and expected (Beeson 2009a), it is a profoundly important long-term indicator of American influence, nevertheless.

The second point to emphasize about American leadership is its strategic impact, which has been more ambiguous as far as East Asia has been concerned. The ‘hub and spoke’ system of alliance relationships established by the US in the aftermath of the Second World War endures to this day, and has actually enjoyed something of a renaissance as a consequence of the recent territorial disputes in the South China Sea—something even prominent Chinese observers recognize (Yan 2015). The net

effect of America's hitherto dominant strategic presence as an 'off-shore balancer'<sup>2</sup> in Asia was to divide the region along ideological lines making any prospect of region wide political cooperation or economic integration well nigh impossible. America's geopolitical strategy also curtailed any ambitions Japan may have had to provide the sort of political leadership its remarkable economic rejuvenation might have warranted in other circumstances. As Pyle (2007: 349) points out, 'the purpose of the alliance was not only to defend but also to restrain Japan'.

This leads to a third, rather more surprising and inherently implausible consequence of American influence: the rise of ASEAN as a provider of regional leadership in East Asia. ASEAN owes its existence to the geopolitics of the Cold War and the existential threat this posed to the newly independent states of Southeast Asia. Individually, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and even Indonesia<sup>3</sup> counted for little during the Cold War standoff between the superpowers; collectively they might have a greater, less vulnerable presence on the regional stage. While there is no doubt that ASEAN has proved to be a durable organization and a fixture in regional affairs, assessments of its impact and capacity to provide leadership are strikingly divergent, and to some extent reflect some of the well known theoretical differences among observers of regional politics.

For constructivists, ASEAN is a prominent example of the way even states that are conventionally seen as weak can provide leadership through the promotion of norms and practices that influence the behavior of even the most powerful states (Acharya 2009). Realists argue that the likes of China and the United States will only go along with ASEAN norms when it suits them to do so—a possibility that was demonstrated in the resolution of the Cambodian conflict, which ASEAN boosters (and ASEAN itself) see as the organization's finest diplomatic hour (Jones and Smith 2001). What is less in doubt, perhaps, is that the so-called 'ASEAN Way' of diplomacy has some potential weaknesses that make the exercise of leadership inherently problematic. Consensus, voluntarism and face-saving may have their uses in getting participation in various regional forums, but there are major questions about the effectiveness of

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<sup>2</sup> See Layne (1997) for a discussion of this idea.

<sup>3</sup> ASEAN's initial membership has subsequently expended to include Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam.

this approach when it comes to actually dealing with difficult or contentious issues. Given that the ASEAN Way of diplomacy has subsequently become the default modus operandi of other regional organizations such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, the same sorts of questions are raised about these organizations and *their* capacity to offer leadership, too (Beeson 2009b).

As is often the way with academic debates, this one remains unresolved. We are currently seeing an important test of the varying arguments, however, as ASEAN struggles to influence its own members behavior, let alone China's, as the latter destabilizes the extant security order in the wider Asia-Pacific region.

#### *Multilateralism with Asian characteristics*

Regions have become a focus of scholarly attention because they remain an important and distinctive feature of what has long been seen as an otherwise increasingly 'global' system (Coe et al 2004; Hurrell 2010). In reality, even in a supposedly global era economic processes—arguably the driver and principal manifestation of 'globalization'—remain highly uneven. Institutional development is even more marked in this regard, and there are consequently significant differences in the style, depth and impact of regional organizations in different parts of the world as a consequence. In Europe—until recently, at least—the EU has been distinguished by a deeply institutionalized, a powerful and effective inter-governmental capacity, and an ability to develop innovative responses to governance challenges (Sabel and Zeitlin 2010). Member states were not only willing to 'pool sovereignty' and trade off autonomy for collective gains, but such efforts were facilitated by a 'thick' layer of private sector organizations, inter-governmental agencies and a complex array of non-state actors.

This is a crucial consideration and important difference between Europe and Asia: Asian states are much more leery about compromising national autonomy and there is nothing like the same number of non-state actors to help with the process of overall governance. In short, certain relationships and initiatives simply cannot be undertaken in quite the same way in Asia and they can (or could) in Europe. Some observers,

such as Luk van Langenhove (2010: 267) think that in the current era there is ‘increased room for nongovernmental actors at all levels ...this is perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of Multilateralism 2.0 but also the most difficult one to organise’. If this claim is correct, which I think it is, this is plainly a major difference between regions and a potential problem for the states of Asia: the ability of states to cooperate and implement policy is constrained by the absence of a facilitating institutional architecture (Beeson 2001). As Gill and Green (2009: 3) argue, the overall implication of attitudes toward institutionalized cooperation in Asia is that ‘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.’

Such important caveats notwithstanding, however, this has not stopped policymakers from coming up with a plethora of initiatives revolving around the idea of regional cooperation in some form or other. Paradoxically enough, for a region that is arguably synonymous with limited and/or ineffective multilateral cooperation, there is no shortage of regional bodies in existence, on the drawing board, or in the imagination of one prominent regional leader or another. Indeed, it seems to be almost *de rigueur* for regional elites to come up with their preferred ‘vision’ for the region. Among the various initiatives that are currently vying for the limelight and policy relevance are APEC, the EAS, the ARF, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), ASEAN Plus 3, the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI)/Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralized (CMIM), the Asian Bond Market Initiative (ABMI), the Asia Europe Summit (ASEM), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM+), the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP), to name only some of the more prominent that have actually assumed some momentum (see Dent 2013).

It is also possible to cite a number of initiatives that have fallen by the wayside, such as Kevin Rudd’s Asia Pacific Community (Lee and Milner 2014), not to mention others that trundle on with little evidence of influence, such as the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC). The point should be clear: despite a remarkable number of organizations and initiatives, their collective impact has arguably been remarkably small. True, economic integration in East Asia has gathered pace, but this has



generally been achieved as a consequence of the efforts of multinational corporations and their integrated transnational production networks, rather than because of the impact of regional trade agreements (Ravenhill 2008). The record of regional organizations in the security arena is even less impressive: despite being the geographic epicenter of some of the world's most pressing and combustible strategic challenges, regional organizations have had remarkably little direct influence on such problems.

The ARF is the most glaring and disappointing example of this possibility. Although there are equally divided opinions about whether the Asia-Pacific/East Asia regions are models of stability or about to tip into conflict at any moment, there is little question that however the region is defined it contains some long-standing, unresolved potential flashpoints. If any organization ought to be in exactly the right place at the right time, therefore, it is the ARF. The status of Taiwan, the destabilizing behavior of North Korea—which is actually a member of the ARF—and most importantly of all, perhaps, the growing friction between the US and China, are all things that the ARF looks well placed to consider, if not resolve. In reality, however, all of these issues are off the agenda as they might prove too discomforting for the member states concerned and violate the ASEAN principles of facing saving and consensus. As Emmers and Tan (2011) suggest, it is difficult not to conclude that the ARF was 'built to fail'.

This claim is a telling indictment of Asian regionalism at the best of times. At a moment of growing rivalry between the world's two most consequential powers, it is a potentially fatal weakness. It has taken the so-called rise of China and the election of an American administration that sets little store by multilateralism to make this apparent even to those who might not wish to believe it. This situation has come about in part as a result of a misreading of the importance and impact of Asian institutions. It is entirely possible that brute historical reality will provide a telling empirical verification of this possibility and searching test of regional organizations that history suggests they are very likely to fail.

*Putting Asian regionalism to the test – and the sword?*

There is a widely held belief that ASEAN and its numerous organizational offshoots have played a unique and decisive role in maintaining the ‘long peace of Asia’ (Kivimäki 2014). The argument is that Asian institutions are responsible for a process of socialization and confidence building that has led to a radical decline in the incidence of inter-state war. There is one fundamental problem with this argument: inter-state war has declined everywhere (Pinker 2012). If Asian institutions really have played such a decisive part in making Asia peaceful, how do we account for similar declines in inter-state conflict elsewhere? By contrast, if the decline of inter-state war is a universal phenomenon, as seems to be the case, why would we attribute any special powers or influence to ASEAN or any other regional organization?

This was an important and generally neglected question even before the rise of China and its subsequent involvement in a series of territorial disputes with some of its East Asian neighbors. Now, when the possibility of outright conflict appears to be growing by the day (Freedland 2017), such claims are being put to a searching theoretical and—more importantly, of course—empirical examination. Although it is too soon to say quite how the growing rivalry and tension between China and the US will play out one thing is already abundantly clear: ASEAN is unlikely to play a major role in deciding its outcome. On the contrary, ASEAN as a grouping has been effectively divided and marginalized by China’s skillful diplomacy, as it has simply bought off key ASEAN states such as Cambodia (Kynge et al 2016). The net result is that ASEAN has been unable to arrive at a coherent, much less a joint position toward what is arguably the most important security challenge in its history. If ASEAN cannot come up with a collective response to an issue that directly impinges on the sovereignty, security and standing of its member states, one may be forgiven for asking what its continuing purpose actually is (Callick 2016).

The two countries that will actually play a decisive part in determining the course of geopolitical development in the East Asian or the more broadly conceived Asia-Pacific region are China and the US. This is what makes their respective attitudes toward multilateralism, contested or otherwise, so important. At this stage it seems as if the Trump administration does not have the sort of the principled commitment to multilateralism as an idea that former regimes have had, even Republican ones (Daalder and Kagan 2016). Given the wild fluctuations in rhetoric and the lack of

policy coherence that have characterized the Trump administration's first period in office (Erlanger 2017), it is unwise to try and predict what form American engagement with the region will take. One point has become clear, however: as the US has pulled back from former commitments to institutionalized regional and global engagement, China has rapidly moved to capitalize on this abrupt change in America's long-standing foreign policy consensus (Browne 2017a).

It is equally unclear at this stage whether Xi Jinping's remarkable suggestion that China may become the new champion of multilateralism, free trade, climate change mitigation and much else will be realized. To judge by the region's historical record, and the ambivalence of China's leaders about taking on open-ended commitments to provide the sorts of collective goods that hegemon's traditionally have been supposed to do, a healthy degree of skepticism seems warranted. And yet, it is also clear that Xi in particular sees this a potentially unique opportunity to reposition China and enhance its reputation and 'soft power' at America's expense (Browne 2017b). If this is to happen, though, China's leaders will have to find some way of simultaneously reconciling national goals with regional and possibly global obligations. It was a task that frequently proved beyond the Americans, especially at moments of crisis (Beeson and Broome 2010); there is even less reason to expect a still inexperienced Chinese diplomatic cadre will find it any easier.

Such caveats notwithstanding, it is already evident that China may have both the will and the wherewithal to at least stake out a claim for a greater leadership role at both the regional and global levels. On the one hand, China is beginning to establish organizations that reflect its preferences and over which it has greater influence. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was something of a pioneer in this regard, and one that has been built upon by potentially even more important initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). On the other hand, the AIIB is likely to prove welcome in a region still short on infrastructure, especially if it plays a pivotal role in financing China's hugely ambitious One Belt One Road (OBOR) project. OBOR may enhance China's economic leverage over its neighbors and reinforce its importance at the centre of deeply integrated regional production structures (Miller 2017).

This material transformation may, in fact, ultimately prove more consequential than any institutional or ideational change. It is important to remember that that China's rapid economic ascent and concomitant strategic importance has been the basis for its challenge to the extant order that the US helped create and over which it has enjoyed unquestioned ascendancy until recently. It is not necessary to be an unreconstructed realist to recognize that material power will be both an important source of influence and the means to underwrite different, potentially competing 'visions' for regional order. In the absence of war, geoeconomics is becoming as, if not more, important, than conventional military power, especially for China (Norris 2016). The striking feature about the Trump administration in this context is that the primary expression of material power is still likely to be geopolitical rather than geoeconomic, at least as far as engagement with East Asia as a whole is concerned (Shear and Steinhauer 2017). Although the Trump's economic advisors seem to believe they can pressure China into behaving in ways that suit them, this belief seems predicated on an entirely inaccurate reading of the nature of the economic relationship and the level of economic interdependence that exists between China and the US (Mufson 2017).

Space precludes a detailed analysis of this relationship (see Cohen and DeLong 2010), but a few simple points can be made that are germane to the present discussion. First, however the relationship plays out between the US and China multilateral institutions look likely to play a less, rather than a more important role. Regional security organizations are not capable of, and seemingly not seriously interested in, influencing the behavior of the two giants. Similarly, the Trump administration's emphasis on bilateralism and 'America first' does not suggest that they are willing to be voluntarily constrained by the very institutions they built, as so many liberals believe and/or hope. On the contrary, the second point to make is that historically neither China nor the US has been willing to be bound by institutionalized rules and norms unless it suited them to do so. Failing to recognize this historical reality has caused generations of liberals and especially constructivists to overestimate the influence of institutions as a consequence.

### **Concluding remarks**

The great question about East Asian institutionalism is: how can so many organizations and so much diplomatic effort achieve so little? ASEAN is the quintessential embodiment of this paradox. Despite holding more than 1,500 meetings in some years on ASEAN-related affairs, the organization's actual impact on key economic, political and strategic issues has arguably been very modest. The limited number of officials and diplomats from some of the region's more impoverished states means that there are fundamental questions about the ability of states to participate meaningfully and effectively, much less actually implement any initiatives that might emerge. While this limited, omnipresent group of officials may be good for regional 'confidence building', it is less impressive when it comes to actually dealing with specific problems.

This counter-intuitive outcome, in which much effort and energy is expended for seemingly little return is unlikely to change for three principal reasons. First, once established organizations are very difficult to kill off. 'Stakeholders' develop a vested interest in keeping such organizations going long after their original purposes have been overtaken by events or—more likely in an Asian context—a competing body emerges with a similar purpose. In a situation where different organizations vie for authority and responsibility in similar issue areas, it is all too likely that no one will act decisively—with or without the additional handicap of the ASEAN Way.

The second reason for being pessimistic about the capacity for regional organizations to address key problems is the nature of some of the problems themselves and the powerful vested and different interests that are likely to stymie even genuine (rather than rhetorical) efforts at cooperation. Southeast Asia's inability to address the 'haze problem' that afflicts the region every year with calamitous impacts on its population is perhaps the clearest example of this possibility (Varkkey 2012). There are fundamental capacity constraints and conflicting interests that make agreement, much less effective cooperation, all but impossible.

The final reason for being skeptical about the impact of regional institutions is the competing aims and agendas of the region's—in this case the Asia-Pacific region—two great powers. True, China and the US may support the development of

regional organizations, but they will inevitably be different organizations and the principal motivation is likely to be the pursuit of national rather than regional interests. China's support of ASEAN Plus 3, which it hopes to dominate, and the US's support of the EAS, which it hopes use to nullify Chinese influence, are important examples of this possibility. The point to emphasize is that institutional development in East Asia/the Asia-Pacific has always been constrained, or even driven by, wider geopolitical concerns that invariably have national rather than regional origins. China's recent initiatives and its determination to pursue a nationalist agenda of territorial expansion and assertion is a potentially destabilizing example of this possibility of one the region looks incapable of addressing collectively. Nor can we derive any confidence or optimism from the behavior of the incoming Trump administration. On the contrary, the dominant discourse emerging from Washington is one that unambiguously and proudly puts 'America first' in a way that augurs badly for the future of multilateralism everywhere. In a region where institutionalized cooperation has always been viewed with a degree of nervousness and/or skepticism, the arrival of Trump, the rise of nationalism worldwide, and the apparent demise of the EU as the benchmark of successful regionalism may result in regional cooperation going backwards rather than forwards.

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