Why ASEAN needs to ‘decentralize’ regionalism

The 31st ASEAN Summit and its related meetings, including the East Asia Summit (EAS), will take place on Nov. 10-13. Lost in the brouhaha over Donald Trump’s attendance and ongoing tensions on the Korean Peninsula, is the critical agenda of ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC) reform.

Prompted by the infamous 2012 Cambodian chairmanship, regional leaders declared at the 2014 ASEAN Summit in Myanmar that they were committed to “strengthening ASEAN’s institutional capacity to support ASEAN Community building, through streamlining and improving its work processes and coordination among ASEAN Organs and Bodies, enhancing the conduct of ASEAN’s external relations and strengthening the ASEAN Secretariat.”

Analysts and policymakers have since proposed various institutional reform policies to fulfill this commitment. The problem of ASEC reform, however, has been particularly difficult to address. The complexities surrounding its budgetary structure, professional staff development, to the empowerment of the Secretary-General have been herculean at times.

One area to further consider is perhaps the more “banal” problem of having too many meetings. The ASEC organizes more than a 1,000 meetings a year. It must do so with a small staff of around 300 people with a miniscule budget of about US$20 million.

Some of these meetings should be aligned with the local host (i.e. ASEAN chair), which further raises the complexity and cost. As ASEAN chair this year, the Philippines hosted and organized 283 meetings at a cost of about $300 million. It’s not surprising that some believe we could see almost 1,600 ASEAN-related meetings by 2020.

If we’re not willing to review and amend the ASEAN Charter to revise the “equal contribution” article that finances the ASEC, then we should at least consider reforming the meetings. After all, the meetings have become cumbersome and often move in their own separate rhythms without an integrated framework to assess strategic outcomes.

We could consider two broad directions as far as the meetings go. First, we could simply reduce the number of meetings. A radical version of this reduction would be a disbandment of some ASEAN-related forums. If one were to further build and institutionalize the EAS, for example, as the premier regional high-level summit, we could ask whether the ASEAN Regional Forum is worth keeping around.

Second, if ASEAN leaders insist that “reducing meetings” is somehow equal to “reducing centrality” — as questionable as this sounds — then we could consider keeping the current list and number of meetings, but changing how they are organized.

I propose a “decentralized regionalism” mechanism in this regard. The idea is to diffuse the organizational authority and financial capacity to organize the meetings to different member states rather than running everything through the ASEC and the ASEAN chair. This diffusion can be considered in several ways.

Institutionally, we could evenly diffuse (or distribute) the “local hosting” of various ASEAN organs and sectoral bodies to different ASEAN national secretariats beyond a few countries.

Non-essential policy issues would then have their meetings organized more by the respective ASEAN national secretariats located in each member state. The prioritization of meetings could be coordinated rotationally in a three-year mechanism under the outgoing and incoming ASEAN chair and be subject to review each year.

Geographically, we might consider moving ASEAN-related meetings and organizations. Different countries still champion national rather than regional causes. But if the challenges of the South China Sea in recent years have taught us anything, isn’t it the case that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few?

After all, if reforming the meetings must go hand in hand with asking members to contribute more to the ASEC’s budget, a decentralized regionalism in this sense could “bring back” each country’s contribution to their own localities. In effect, ASEAN might even be an indirect conduit — no matter how small — to gradually ease intra-regional economic development gaps and inequalities.

The problems with these proposals are of course political in nature, especially given ASEAN’s consensus-building decision-making process. Different countries still champion national rather than regional causes. But if the challenges of the South China Sea in recent years have taught us anything, isn’t it the case that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few?