The launch of the ASEAN Regional Forum resonated with the ideas of comprehensive security enshrined in ASEAN processes and the new ideas of co-operative security developed in Europe in the late 1980s. That fusion, what might be called ‘Co-operative Security 1.0,’ has been an integral part of a system that has enjoyed peace for a generation. But it is no longer enough to address increasing nationalism and the tensions produced as the rise of China challenges the predominance of the US. It’s time to develop “Co-operative Security 2.0.”
The security architecture of the Asia-Pacific (or the Indo-Pacific, depending on how one names the region), that emerged at the end of the Cold War has eroded and is in serious need of a rethink. This is for a number of reasons.

First, the existing system was conceived in the early 1990s, when major power relationships in the region were relatively free of conflict. Today, tensions among the major powers, especially the US and China and Japan and China, are much greater, sometimes reaching crisis proportions.

Second, in the 1990s, China was a smaller economy, ranked behind Japan, and an even smaller military power. Today, its economy is the largest in Asia and the second-largest in the world, with substantially more resources to spare for bilateral and multilateral aid initiatives. Its armed forces are much more modern and more capable of long-range deployment. America’s GDP (in current dollar terms) relative to China’s declined from being eight times higher in 2000 to less than three times in 2010. US defense spending (in constant 2011 dollars) was 18.5 times greater than China’s in 1995, but only three times in 2014.

Third, the existing system came about when the South China Sea territorial conflicts seemed to be “under the carpet.” Today, they have resurfaced as a principal flashpoint for armed conflict. Last but not least, the existing system was conceived with the principle of ASEAN centrality as its bedrock at a time when ASEAN was a smaller group with a creditable record of unity in conflict management (especially over its role in the Cambodia conflict settled in 1991). ASEAN then was primarily concerned with security issues within Southeast Asia. Today, ASEAN is larger, and its agenda has expanded considerably to extra-regional issues and actors covering the wider Asia-Pacific region. The grouping is both more diverse and divided. As a result, the principle of ASEAN centrality has increasingly come under stress.

To compound matters, the purported steps to ensure regional stability coming from the various powers seem to be working at cross-purposes. Take, for example, the recent policies of the US and China. Washington insists that its rebalancing strategy enhances regional stability. Sure enough, the military dimension of rebalancing may contribute to the balance of power in the region. But the economic aspects of rebalancing, principally the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, excludes China and makes managing US-China economic interdependence more challenging.

Similarly, while China professes a deep interest in enhancing regional economic interdependence, its own initiatives — such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the “One Belt One Road” — challenge existing and long-standing modalities of regional economic co-operation, such as APEC. The US has not joined the AIIB, and India, while a member of the AIIB, has not been consulted by China on the so-called Silk Road initiative. Meanwhile, Japan has increased its investments in Asian infrastructure while developing a more balancing strategic posture towards China.

And both the US rebalancing strategy and China’s new initiatives (which also include the idea of a Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, or CICA), while pledging support for the principle of ASEAN centrality, actually seriously threaten it.

Yet, viewed in a longer-term context, Asia has also witnessed some remarkable positive changes since the Second World War. Intra-Asian trade has in recent years accounted for more than 50 percent of Asia’s total trade, twice the level of 1955.

Asia has moved from a largely bilateral hub-and-spoke system geared to containment of the Soviet Union and China to an overlapping bi-multilateral security architecture; Asia had no multi-lateral bodies in the 1950s; today they outnumber bilateral alliances.

Asia’s authoritarian-democratic divide has been blurred by the shared commitment to capital development by all states (except North Korea), despite variations such as state-led capitalism. Rapid economic growth has helped state consolidation, regime legitimation and ideological moderation.

Asia has also seen a limited but meaningful change from patron-client authoritarianism to performance legitimacy, and democratization. In 2010, Asia’s “free” and “partly free” countries outnumbered its “not free” countries by 17 to seven compared to 13 to 11 in 1972.

Against this backdrop, how best to reform and strengthen the Asia-Pacific security architecture to cope with the changed context and challenges? One should first reconceptualize the architecture with the idea of “security pluralism,” then develop measures consistent with that idea. This need not mean the replacement or “reboot” of the existing system, which is both impractical and unnecessary, but undertaking serious adjustments that would better reflect the changing political, economic and strategic environment in the region.

**What is security pluralism?**

Security pluralism holds that security requires multiple conditions and approaches and a positive relationship among them. The main conditions for security pluralism in Asia are: Interdependence: While not a guarantee for peace, economic interdependence increases the
cost of war and acts as a check on competitive geopolitics. Asian interdependence is broad and multidimensional, not only in trade, but also in investment, production networks and financial flows, as well as in common transnational challenges.

Equilibrium: Stability in the balance of power is undermined by pre-emptive containment, while hedging, soft balancing (alliances overlapping with multilateral institutions), defense over offense in military doctrines, and strategic restraint create longer-term equilibrium.

Institutions: Regional institutions may lack a role in conflict resolution, but are important in promoting norms such as co-operative security (“security with” rather than “security against”), and mitigating the tensions arising from economic interdependence and alliance exclusivity and moderating great power competition.

Ideology and Domestic Politics: The liberal model of democratic peace is not applicable to Asia as long as China remains authoritarian. Whether a proliferation of democracies translates into peace remains contested, given disagreements over what is a democracy and the availability of alternative explanations, such as common security threats during the Cold War, behind the peace among democracies. A more relevant factor in Asia is a tradition of ideological pluralism and tolerance. Asia has multiple cultures and values, but also some cross-cutting and overlapping norms and values that reflect a long process of cultural diffusion, mutual learning and accommodation among its major civilizations. No Asian nation offers a singular, monolithic set of ideas and ideologies. The ideological makeup of ancient China and ancient India were remarkably pluralistic; each offered a variety of worldviews that contained elements of competition, balance and co-operation, such as Legalism and Confucianism in China, and Kautthiyans realism and Ashokan idealism in India. Such cultural and ideological diversity can discourage hegemony and foster regional stability.

Security pluralism embraces the core principle of “co-operative security” that holds that security is best achieved in an inclusive (“security with”) multilateral framework, instead of deterrence and containment (“security against”) strategies. But security pluralism also recognizes the importance of bilateral measures and the balance of power achieved through defensive postures (consistent with “defensive realism”).

Security pluralism also requires other aforementioned drivers rooted in balance of power, economic interdependence and ideological tolerance for ensuring stability. For the same reason, security pluralism cannot be a purely balance of power system. It is less realistic than the idea of a “security community” where war becomes “unthinkable” and a collective identity emerges. Under security pluralism, national identities and competition remain, but are controlled by the interplay of interdependence, institutions, norms, and military equilibrium, and a shared imperative for avoiding a system collapse.

Security pluralism differs from the familiar Asian notion of “comprehensive security,” which is essentially an extension of national security doctrines, and refers to different dimensions of security, without clarifying how they relate to each other, and specifying the institutions needed to realize it at the regional level. Finally, security pluralism is not a Concert of Powers, a great power club. It respects the autonomy and role of smaller nations such as ASEAN’s members, and fosters accommodation among not only the great powers but also restraint towards the weaker actors.

AN ASIAN SECURITY ECOSYSTEM

Security pluralism in the Asia-Pacific region can be likened to an ecosystem whose components are highly interdependent. The loss or erosion of a key component can undermine the stability of the entire ecosystem, thereby increasing the danger of its collapse.

The ecosystem perspective focuses on the mutual dependence not only among the regional countries, but also among the environmental conditions/drivers within which the actors interact. The stability of Asia’s security ecosystem depends on maintaining a positive relationship among its key above-mentioned drivers: interdependence, equilibrium, institutions and ideological tolerance. Stability cannot rely on a single element, whether it is the distribution of power (hegemony, balance or concert of great powers), or multilateral institutions and norms — such as co-operative security underpinning ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) — but also on other elements such as economic interdependence, ideology and domestic politics. The challenge for Asia is to ensure that the four components reinforce each other and do not work at cross-purposes.

Realists believe that regional stability requires a stable balance of power. But a purely balance-of-power approach can undercut the pacific effects of economic linkages and undermine co-operative institutions. At the same time, economic interdependence and institutions cannot sustain regional stability on their own without a power equilibrium.

Economic interdependence through trade, financial linkages and production networks, acts as a check on security competition, contributes to state consolidation and regime legitimation, and encourages strategic and ideological accommodation, especially between China and the US. Interdependence also necessitates and supports regional institutions, which not only help to manage frictions arising from trade protectionism or financial crises, but also dampens great power rivalry, pushing...
them towards soft balancing instead of pre-emptive containment and expansionism. Hence, the weakening of regional interdependence and institutions would aggravate regional instability and rivalries and destabilize Asia’s security ecosystem.

Asian institutions may not resolve conflicts, but they develop norms and peer pressure to pursue restraint and accommodation. Those who dismiss them as talking shops need to be reminded counterfactually what might be the regional security environment if institutions such as ASEAN were not around? Most likely, a much greater degree of uncertainty, unpredictability and security dilemmas than exists now.

DIRECTIONS FOR POLICY
Contrary to a popular and traditional understanding, ecosystems are not self-sustaining. Their stability requires careful and co-operative management. Moreover, ecosystems are not mechanical constructs but relational entities that depend on a positive interdependence among the various components. The following, though not exhaustive, deserve consideration and elaboration as the source of policy ideas, from which specific recommendations can be derived:

1. Maintaining the openness, transparency and inclusiveness of regional economic arrangements, which could be affected by new arrangements such as the TPP and AIIB, to ensure that they do not undermine economic interdependence and engender conflict. There is a need for more information and analysis of the TPP and the relationship and overlap among various regional arrangements, such as the TPP, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), APEC, and the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP). There should be greater co-ordination among economic and security officials in the region (as well as between security and trade officials within countries such as the US, which is not always evident). Meetings of security and economic ministers or senior officials should be convened under the auspices of the EAS.

2. Nascent crisis management measures in the region that are undertaken primarily on a bilateral basis, such as those between China and the US and between China and Japan, should be multilateralized, as happened in the financial domain, where the initially bilateral currency swap arrangements were accompanied by a multilateral component called the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (CMIM).

3. China and the ASEAN claimants in the South China Sea should set up both bilateral and multilateral defense hotlines (as hinted at by the Chinese defense minister) to deal with crisis situations. They should provide prior notification of all military deployments or exercises in the entire South China Sea area.

4. Air Defense Identification Zones should not be expanded and no new ones be created.

5. A multi-nation surveillance and search-and-rescue system over the East Asian, Southeast Asian and Indian Ocean transport routes should be established; this being a key lesson of the tragic MH170 episode.

6. Aside from hotlines for crisis communication, countries could be encouraged to unilaterally provide prior notification of large-scale military deployments and maneuvers through common maritime and air spaces.

7. China and the US should consider an implicit or informal understanding whereby the US reduces or stops its surveillance flights that are too close to mainland Chinese territory and Hainan Island, while in return, China should stop any further land reclamation in the South China Sea and accept Freedom of Navigation Operations by US and other nations such as Australia.

8. Restructuring regional institutions to create manageable priorities and avoid duplication of tasks. It is also important to avoid mission creep in regional institutions, by co-ordinating their activities more closely with relevant global bodies, civil society groups, and the private sector to address transnational challenges.

9. While the EAS should not become bureaucratic, either it or the ARF could develop a convening mechanism, such as a meeting of foreign ministers or their representatives that could gather within a short period at the onset of a crisis.

10. ASEAN centrality should not preclude giving non-ASEAN members more voice (hence stake) in setting the agenda and the direction of the ARF and the EAS. To this end, the Annual ARF Ministerial could have a “Friend of the Chair” which might rotate among non-ASEAN members.

11. Track 2 discussions should be geared more toward developing empathy, and less towards national advocacy. Track 2 leadership should regularly introduce new blood; for example, the Council for Security Co-operation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) could establish a steering committee, a third of whose members are rotated every year.

12. Regional intergovernmental institutions should receive input from expert groups in substantive issues such as climate scientists, international lawyers, humanitarian aid specialists, and energy economists, etc.

13. A new, nuanced and pluralistic understanding of values and ideology should be brought into Asian policy debates. The overwhelming empirical evidence from human history is that no civilization has a monopoly over good ideas, and contrary to the views of Samuel Huntington, that civilizations are more likely to learn from each other than clash with each other. Hence, there is a need for exploring the common ground and promoting mutual learning of the norms and practices of pluralism, restraint and co-operation in Asian and Western civilizations, including ideas such as Democratic Peace, Liberal Internationalism, empathy, strategic restraint, universalism, Dharma (Hindu-Buddhist), Harmony, and the New Model of Major Power Relations.

14. Regional educational initiatives, such as the Nalanda University (backed by the EAS), could be set up in Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia, as well as North America, to promote the study of civilizations.

15. Other educational initiatives could include establishing institutions similar to the European University Institute in Florence and scholarship and fellowship schemes funded jointly by their members (similar to those offered by the EU).

As noted, the security pluralism and ecosystem approach need not mean abandoning Asia-Pacific’s existing institutions and norms, but rather reforming, adjusting and updating them to fit new realities. Conventional geopolitical wisdom sees the rise of China as reshaping the regional order. The security pluralism framework employing the region’s positive drivers, such as economic interdependence, institutions, domestic politics and ideology and the balancing context, along with the above policy measures, can shape the rise of China and ensure the stability of the Asian security ecosystem.

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