



The US stake in greater Asian integration

By Samuel R. Berger

The United States has been a staunch supporter of the creation of regional institutions in the Asia-Pacific region for almost two decades, and of intra-Asian groupings since the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) three decades ago.

With the recent wave of new institutions and organizations, that policy needs to be updated.

HOWEVER, UNLESS THESE NEW organizations subscribe to an agenda designed to exclude the U.S. and reduce its influence in the region, the U.S. will not need to radically alter its long-standing approach of support for regional integration.

Over the last 20 years, the U.S. has been at the forefront of the creation of some of the principal foundations of regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region, notably the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. The U.S. has played a leadership role in both.

More recently, Asians have established organizations and dialogues that do not include the U.S. The U.S. has not objected to its close Asian allies – South Korea and Japan – discussing economic and security issues with ASEAN countries and China in the “ASEAN Plus Three” meetings, which do not include the U.S. Similarly, the U.S. did not object when it was not invited to the East Asia Summit (EAS) in December 2005, which sought to lay the groundwork for a new East Asian Community (EAC).

For Washington, multilateral organizations in Asia complement U.S. bilateral alliances in the region. Regional organizations can:

- Promote long-term peace and stability
- Establish a political framework that facilitates American involvement in regional security and economic issues
- Facilitate bilateral dialogues
- Contribute to a positive regional identity
- Reinforce U.S. global efforts to reduce trade and investment barriers by engendering positive

regional attitudes toward free trade and investment flows

- Provide a mechanism for less prominent states in the region to express their views
- Create a spirit of cooperation and confidence-building

Consistent with these policy objectives, President Bill Clinton invited the heads of state of all APEC countries to Seattle in 1993, when I served as Deputy National Security Advisor, and this gathering has evolved into an annual “Leaders Meeting” which facilitates diplomatic progress on pressing regional issues.

Despite the long history of U.S. support for regional cooperation in Asia, it is important to identify major American concerns for a future that will see creation of new regional institutions at the initiative of other countries. No doubt the U.S. is committed in principle to being a prime-mover for the continued evolution of Asia-Pacific regional institutions. But whether it continues to do so in practice depends on as yet unknown answers to certain critical questions:

- Will the new East Asian Community (EAC), as announced at the December 2005 East Asia Summit, interact in a positive way with other institutions in the Asia-Pacific that the U.S. actively supports?
- Will the EAC take actions aimed at weakening U.S. bilateral alliances or the overall U.S. role in the region?
- Will the EAC become a means for China, in particular, to dominate the regional security agenda?
- Will the EAC reinforce the programs and policies of other regional organizations, especially the ARF and APEC?

There are concerns that China will use its growing involvement in the East Asian Community and other regional organizations to di-

minish the U.S. role in Asia. During the 1990s, China strongly favored bilateral diplomacy and was reluctant to involve itself in regional organizations that it believed were controlled by the United States. Beijing suspected that the U.S. wanted to enmesh China in multilateral activities to constrain China’s freedom of action in the political and military spheres.

China’s attitude toward regional cooperation in Asia has evolved considerably in recent years. It realized that it could gain political influence through regional arrangements, particularly those that excluded the United States. As a result, China began investing greater efforts in three forums: 1) “ASEAN Plus Three” meetings where China participated in talks on both security and economic issues; 2) the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) where China and Russia have sought to limit U.S. influence in Central Asia; and 3) the East Asia Summit in 2005, which included the “ASEAN Plus Three” as well as India, Australia and New Zealand.

Despite U.S. anxiety that China may use regional organizations to reduce U.S. influence, the bottom-line U.S. assessment is that this situation is not likely to occur in the foreseeable future. The regional organizations in which China actively participates are essentially “talk shops” and China feels comfortable with this approach. ASEAN and the ARF work through consultations, dialogue and consensus. They take only incremental policy steps and they resist more muscular efforts to impose normative codes of conduct or punitive sanctions.

Work in the ARF is voluntary and because its pronouncements have no binding character, the confidence-building measures it has developed are rudimentary and do not constrain its members in a binding way. The SCO is more of a potential problem for the United States because

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of its implied “anti-U.S.” character, as embodied in the statement it issued in 2005 calling for the withdrawal of U.S. bases from the states of Central Asia.

Despite these U.S. concerns, regional organizations in Asia also provide a mechanism for China to demonstrate that it is a good neighbor and not a threat to other countries. Enmeshing China in the broad framework of international organizations and thereby encouraging it to pay attention to the interests of other countries is likely to outweigh the risk of China dominating such groupings and giving them an anti-U.S. agenda.

East Asia certainly has a legitimate right to strengthen its own institutions. At the same time, the U.S. should continue to be a leading participant in the larger “Asia-Pacific architecture” of organizations like ARF and APEC that seek to address broad security and economic issues.

Working with its friends and allies in the region, the U.S. should strive to integrate the new EAC with the more established Asia-Pacific organizations. This effort can help ensure that

all multilateral organizations within the region work in greater harmony. It can also establish the most efficient process for adjusting the competing interests of states and for strengthening their common interests.

In the end, of course, the success of all these regional organizations will not be based just on fostering dialogue and consultation. It will depend on the energetic policies of Asia-Pacific governments to utilize these organizations to solve problems and build consensus. By demonstrating the relevance of regional organizations, both new and old, the U.S. and other participants can best contribute to advancing their common goal of achieving greater peace, stability and prosperity in East Asia.

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