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.”
Co-operative Security and Asia’s Divided Values

By Robert Ayson

Asia’s political and strategic diversity is an obstacle to a co-operative security order that will require shared values as well as common interests. Washington’s values emphasis underpins deep collaboration with trusted allies and partners, writes Robert Ayson, but threatens to divide the region. ASEAN’s brand of regional diplomacy is inclusive and more accommodating of China, but the co-operation it gives rise to is too shallow to safeguard Asia’s peace.

A CO-OPERATIVE security order for Asia would require governments in the region to make some sacrifices by dialing down their more competitive impulses. This is a demanding requirement in any period, but especially challenging today given intensifying nationalism and territorial disputes in Asia’s maritime domains.

The region’s political diversity is an additional challenge. It’s not easy to know what would motivate Asia’s liberal democracies, one-party states and other regime types to make co-operative security a priority. One possibility is to view this issue through the lens of common interests. This emphasizes the material benefits that most countries stand to gain from deeper co-operation. These benefits include stronger economies and the belief that major violence, and the costs that would bring, is increasingly unlikely.

But enhanced co-operation in Asia can also be encouraged by common values if countries see greater collaboration as just and good in addition to being materially beneficial. If values like fairness, reconciliation and mutual respect, which tug at emotional heartstrings, can be sustained, this may increase the resilience of a co-operative security order against the challenges that will come its way.

These two features, common interests and common values, are not independent of each other but can be mutually reinforcing. Common interests may be enough to make deeper co-operation advantageous to all. But, as I have concluded in a recent study, Asia’s Security, common values may deepen the commitment in Asia to collaboration.1

WISHFUL THINKING OR ESTABLISHED PRACTICE?

Skeptics may call this a misty-eyed view of Asia’s international relations. But at least on paper, some of the leading regional organizations already involve commitments to common values. And some of these shared goals are potentially very important for the management of regional conflict. A prominent example is ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC). Signed in 1976 (when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations was just a decade old), this agreement commits its signatories to conduct their relations according to a series of shared principles including: “Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations;” “The right of every state to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion;” “Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another;” “The settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means;” and “Renunciation of the threat or use of force.”

Some of these principles may not sound revolutionary for readers of the United Nations Charter. But they denote the path-breaking commitment of ASEAN’s original members (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand) to restrain themselves from interfering in one another’s domestic politics (including aiding insurgencies). In part, this commitment reflected their common interest in avoiding a return to Southeast Asia’s very violent recent past. But these principles also evoke a deeper sense of common purpose. They reflect some level of agreement on the political values that a modern Southeast Asia should and can aspire to. For example, the peaceful settlement of disputes was not just a materially useful outcome, but a way of approaching conflicts that reflected the values of an emerging diplomatic community.

Signing onto the TAC has since become an almost ubiquitous practice across the region. More recent signatories include the newer members of today’s expanded ASEAN of 10 nations states. Countries in the wider region also have found it necessary to sign the TAC as a precondition for entering the growing band of institutions that revolve around ASEAN. The United States, Russia, India, Australia and New Zealand, would simply have been unable to participate in the East Asia Summit (EAS) had it not been for their agreement to sign on to the TAC. This is no small matter. After all, Washington’s rebalance to Asia started with President Barack Obama’s commitment to join the EAS as part of a renewed American commitment to East Asian multilateralism.

Of course, what governments sign is less important than how they behave. A poignant example comes from interwar Europe. In 1926, nearly 50 countries signed on to the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which prohibited war in the conduct of international politics. This piece of paper was motivated by a common desire to avoid a repetition of the horrors of the First World War, whose carnage had violated both shared interests and shared values. But the Kellogg-Briand moment was unable to stem the continuing rise of competitive nationalism, militarism and geopolitical jealousy. By 1939, the century’s second global conflict was setting Europe ablaze, and in Asia it had begun even earlier with imperial Japan’s aggression in China.

This historical failure of global proportions is the antithesis of a co-operative security order. But it does not mean that the principles embodied in the TAC have failed in today’s Asia. Whether or not the treaty itself has created new behavior or is simply a reflection of an underlying commitment to avoid war, does not change an important fact: Southeast Asia’s violent modern history has been replaced by the stable and prosperous period that continues today. This is not to suggest that the principles of the TAC have been scrupulously
observed. But minor scuffles on the Thai-Cambodia border, for example, are a far cry from violence that gripped much of mainland Southeast Asia from the 1940s to the mid-1970s.

Not too much celebration is warranted, however. The common values inhabiting the TAC may not be enough for ASEAN-centered regional diplomacy to deal with Asia’s changing distribution of power and the associated growth of geopolitical competition. We do not see a strong ASEAN unified by common values and common interests grappling with territorial competition in the South China Sea. Instead, serious differences in the association are all too clear.

Norms of co-operation also appear to have limited purchase on the differences over the East China Sea between China and Japan and between Korea and Japan. North Korea’s nuclear tests and threatening rhetoric hardly demonstrate a commitment to the principles of the TAC, let alone a co-operative security order. To be sure, major interstate war has been avoided in East Asia for several decades. But there is plenty of coercion going on that is not in keeping with the spirit of amity and co-operation, or with common interests and values.

THE US FACTOR
These problems do not mean that deeper security co-operation, supported by strong shared values, is beyond reach in Asia. Examples beyond ASEAN and its family of wider regional groupings can be found where this richer collaboration has been happening for some time. Yet, this deeper co-operation in parts of the region is not found in other multilateral security forums. Instead, it is mainly seen between the members of US-led alliances and security partnerships in Asia, many of which have been strengthened during the Obama presidency.

When Washington established its San Francisco set of alliances in the early Cold War years in Asia, commitments to common values featured in at least some of that process. But these affinities were expressed mainly with Australia and New Zealand, which were regarded by American leaders as fellow English-speaking liberal democracies with strong cultural and historical similarities. This approach excluded some of America’s new Asian allies, a number of whom were still led by military or authoritarian governments. Some scholars see this gap between the West and the rest as one reason there was no NATO in Asia.2

Today’s picture looks quite different. For some time, Washington has emphasized the common values that are helping to drive closer security co-operation with its two main alliance partners in Northeast Asia, Japan and South Korea. While these similarities in values have not succeeded in bringing Tokyo and Seoul together, they have helped Washington broadcast the sense of a common commitment to liberal politics including human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Likewise, when Australian leaders now meet with their Japanese and South Korean counterparts in bilateral settings, similar expressions of value unity prevail.

This emphasis has been encouraged by contemporary strategic circumstances. For example, Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have posed direct and violent challenges in parts of the Middle East and Central Asia to political freedoms that the US and many of its regional allies are committed to upholding. When Prime Minister John Key announced that New Zealand military trainers would be sent to Iraq to join an Australian deployment, he said his country, was “standing up for its values.” And the closer interactions that Australia, Japan and New Zealand have developed with NATO, largely as a result of co-operation over Afghanistan, are often explained by these governments as a reflection of shared political values among democracies.

That common values can help unify particular groups of states in Asia is unmistakable. But in wider regional terms, they can also be divisive. Any focus on the political values of open societies, especially in domestic affairs but also on some aspects of international conduct makes attention to rising China’s very different views on these matters.

PLURAL VALUES
That common values can help unify particular groups of states in Asia is unmistakable. But in wider regional terms, they can also be divisive. Any focus on the political values of open societies, especially in domestic affairs (including civil liberties) but also on some aspects of international conduct draws attention to rising China’s very different views on these matters. It would be naive to think that Washington and its closest partners are unaware of this situation. There is no question that the statements of the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue have often had China squarely in their sights.
Deeper co-operation among the few can mean greater competition with others. This is a problem if co-operative security needs to be regionally inclusive but also requires common values to make it really work.

One response is to acknowledge Asia’s political diversity and proceed on the basis that co-operation can go hand in hand with a plurality of values. This would run against the grain of Isaiah Berlin’s argument that to acknowledge values pluralism is to see the places where political actors fundamentally disagree. But such an approach would appear to go hand-in-hand with Amitav Acharya’s arguments for security pluralism. Incorporating plural values could be seen as a confidence-building measure illustrating that co-operation does not require political uniformity.

It is not difficult to find examples where democracies have worked closely with autocracies in shared security endeavors. These include the marriage of convenience that the US and Britain enjoyed with Stalin’s Soviet Union against their common enemy in Nazi Germany. In the Cold War, many of America’s allies in Asia were governed by military regimes that were anything but liberal. Today, the US is working on a new pattern of co-operation with Vietnam, which, like China, has a one-party system intolerant of domestic political competition.

If the Obama administration’s Asia rebalance had only engaged fellow democracies, it would have missed out on a number of opportunities for partnerships that can help Washington geopolitically. Moreover, if the US was only willing to work with countries sharing its approach to the freedom of navigation, it would have fewer emerging partners in regards to the South China Sea. Washington’s partners are not required to subscribe to the view that China is challenging democratic norms because these are principles that only some of them hold dear themselves.

But this is not the variety of values pluralism that a fully inclusive co-operative security order in Asia would require. Like the deeper patterns of co-operation enhanced by common values between the US and some of its closest traditional allies in the region, America’s co-operation with quite different political regimes on the basis of common interests can still be at China’s expense.

This means that there is such a thing as divisive (or competitive) co-operation in Asia. If a rebooted approach to co-operative security requires common values as well as common interests, it might simply be implausible for today’s Asia. That is, unless the emphasis is placed on values that are more widely shared around the region. That means values that a rising China can ascribe to, which might require the US to go quiet on some of the values it holds dear.

A co-operative security order requires more than a shared awareness by Asia’s diverse polities that they have significant differences in the values that help drive their preferences. Values plurality may be a fact of regional life, but it is not a platform for co-operation that is either deep or inclusive. Fashioning an agreed set of values that brings the whole region together is a very tall order. The more likely choice is between deeper co-operation among the few and shallower co-operation among the many. And neither of these options is enough to keep Asia’s peace.

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