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.”
Military Alliances in a Co-operative Security Order

By Mohamed Jawhar Hassan

The primary defense alliances in the Asia-Pacific region are constructs of the Cold War anchored by the United States, and they have lost much of their original rationale, writes Mohamed Jawhar Hassan. China’s rise and its increasingly assertive stance on maritime disputes is fueling moves to enhance those alliances, which in turn is triggering worries in Beijing that the US is trying to contain it. To build a co-operative security order, the role and nature of military alliances in the region will need to be adjusted.

THE PURPOSE of this paper is to explore the adjustments that might be made to fit the present system of military alliances into a functioning co-operative security order (CSO) in the Asia-Pacific region.

To see how military alliances might fit into such a CSO, there must be some consensus on what this co-operative security order would look like. A fair idea can be gleaned from various sources, including the work of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP Memorandum No. 3), the writings of various researchers and academics and the speeches of leaders. But a consensus on the most appropriate CSO for the Asia-Pacific region is still a work in progress.

UNDERSTANDING A CO-OPERATIVE SECURITY ORDER

Reduced to its essentials, a CSO is understood to constitute the following features and elements:

- It is a multiplex system that accommodates all forms and institutions of security co-operation in the region, including bilateral and multilateral platforms;
- It includes co-operation on military (traditional) and non-military (non-traditional) security;
- It involves state and non-state participants.

In this context, “security” is understood to encompass not only defense against external military threats, but also defense against organized violence from within and within a state, such as that from terrorist and militant groups, piracy, transnational crime and environmental threats. This essay, however, focuses on challenges within the traditional “hard” security realm.

Though inclusive of all the security structures and dynamics that are at play in the region, the CSO would emphasize co-operative, as opposed to conflict-oriented, habits and instruments of security interaction and security building.

In other words, the idea of “security with” as opposed to “security against” approaches will be promoted over time.

This deliberate drive towards co-operative ways of fostering security is impelled by several current geopolitical shifts that make conflict-based approaches inappropriate, counter-productive and forbiddingly costly. The geostrategic changes include a shift toward a more diffuse global power structure that makes hegemony and domination increasingly costly and impractical; intensive financial and economic interdependence; steady empowerment of hitherto marginalized and disadvantaged states and other stakeholders; transnational threats and challenges that require co-operative action; and instant global communications making the planet one common habitat.

In this common environment, security is becoming increasingly mutual and shared, and advancing one’s own interests and security at the expense of another’s is difficult and unsustainable. Examples abound, and mighty oceans, still less narrow seas, are scant insulation against the repercussions of crises fomented elsewhere though the destruction, agony and costs are felt unevenly.

The CSO seeks to transform into reality the lofty post-Cold War rhetoric that envisioned a just and peaceful global order where nations large and small enjoy equal rights, where force or the threat of force is not used against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state and where international disputes are settled peacefully without endangering justice, to paraphrase the United Nations Charter.

Similarly, the CSO will be animated by the universally accepted norms, values and principles that are embodied in the UN Charter, international law and recognized international norms, the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, the ASEAN Charter and like instruments. State behavior will respect and conform more closely to these norms, values and principles than they do now.

The CSO is not some naïve construct that ignores power and realpolitik. Rather, what needs to change is the exercise of power and the practice of realpolitik, in keeping with the profound transformations taking place in the strategic situation. Progress will require strong political will and an enlightened appreciation of the national interest in a regional order that serves and benefits all countries in the region. Most assuredly, it will demand deft stewardship from statesmen of wisdom and vision.

THE ROLE OF MILITARY ALLIANCES

Defense alliances are as old as conflict and history. They are best understood and defensible when they are used to address a power disequilibrium among states in potential conflict situations, and when they are intended to provide assurance and protection to the weak against threats and intimidation from the strong. Alliances are also beneficial to the strong for power projection purposes, and to the lesser partners for capacity building. All these can benefit the regional good if they help keep hostilities in check and deter recourse to the use of force or the threat to use force to resolve conflicts.

Military alliances can become menaces in their own right when they are alliances of the collectively strong to perpetuate a hegemonic or hierarchic security order, or when they are designed to constrain other states from developing the capacity to better protect their legitimate interests and security.

Military alliances can also have other negative effects. Lesser partners may be compelled to toe
the line and join in hostilities begun by a principal ally; the belligerent or provocative actions of even a lesser treaty partner can draw other allies into conflict and tension; and in extreme instances, a party with overwhelming military superiority reinforced by the assets of powerful allies can feel tempted to brush aside international law and launch foreign military adventures that cause huge destruction and suffering.

**CHINA’S BUILDUP**

The primary defense alliances in the Asia-Pacific region are those anchored by the US, and they are constructs of the Cold War that have lost much of their original justification. The US is already by far the world’s most potent military power. With its alliances, often involving other leading military powers, its military superiority is unassailable for the foreseeable future. US security strategy in the region, including its pivot/rebalance and the network of US military alliances around China, is fueling Beijing’s sense of encirclement and containment and spurring a large part of China’s military modernization and buildup. It is also driving Beijing’s search for overland trade routes and ports in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, as well as security partners in Central Asia. China’s naval buildup and assertive activities in the South China Sea are also, in part, a response to the US military presence in the area and China’s sense of vulnerability regarding maritime trade routes.

Even with its rapid increase in military capacity as a result of modernization in pursuit of “offshore waters defense” and “open seas protection,” China is not expected to acquire the capability even to defend itself up to the first island chain until the 2020s. Moreover, there are no indications that China is seeking to challenge the US for global military supremacy.

Much is made of the North Korean security and nuclear threat. The security threat cannot be dismissed, and South Korea is particularly vulnerable, being on the front line. No country in North Korea’s strategic situation, however, would resort to the use of a nuclear bomb unless its survival were at stake. Perhaps Pyongyang perceives nuclear weapons as essentially a deterrent. It is perhaps time, in a co-operative security order, to recognize that North Korea may have its own legitimate and grave security concerns as well.

In recent years, China’s rise, the US pivot/rebalance and the assertive behavior of China in the East China Sea and the South China Sea have together led to a further strengthening of defense linkages in the region. With a radical revision of its post-war defense posture, Japan is playing a more active military role and has strengthened its military assistance and co-operation with several countries in the region, generally against the interests of China. India is more active in the region as well, and Australia has raised its profile. Going forward, how then can military alliances be positioned in a CSO where national well-being and security become increasingly common, shared and indivisible?

**REASSESSING ALLIANCES**

Some states will see utility in military alliances when they perceive a military threat, or threat of use of force against their vital interests, from a stronger state. Until a CSO matures in the Asia-Pacific region and such perceived threats no longer exist, military alliances must continue to be accepted as a feature of the regional security landscape.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that military alliances have been demonstrably useful for some states in the past and arguably in the present as well. Examples include Taiwan (with the
US), North Korea (with China before) and South Korea (with the US, especially before). When weak states such as the Philippines see their vital interests threatened by the perceived assertive behavior of big powers like China, they look to a revitalized military alliance as an option.

In other cases, however, even in the immediate and near-term, a close look could be taken at the net security and strategic impact of military alliances and arrangements. Are they a positive for regional peace and stability, a negative, or have they merely entrenched a security structure whose present contribution is at best mixed? Cases for cost-benefit analysis could include the US-ROK Alliance and the joint exercises conducted under its auspices, and the US-Japan Alliance, especially when Japan is developing an enhanced defense capability and is playing a more active role in the region. The study could include an examination of the feasibility of other security options and arrangements to meet security needs.

One useful and highly constructive option to explore would be the transformation of existing bilateral military alliances that are perceived as hostile by countries such as China into wider and more inclusive arrangements for security cooperation. These security arrangements could provide special security assurances for erstwhile defense allies without being overtly threatening and provocative to others. They will cover both military and nonmilitary dimensions of security such as search-and-rescue operations and disaster and humanitarian relief, to which countries such as China and North Korea could become parties. Such inclusive security arrangements that gradually accommodate the legitimate security interests and concerns of all would be the way to go for security collaboration in the CSO. The ASEAN model of comprehensive security cooperation short of becoming a military bloc could provide some guidance.

**CHANGING THE GAME**

The Asia-Pacific can progress more quickly along the CSO curve if the security issues that most induce hostility and trigger conflict are greatly moderated if not resolved. The security environment would be completely different and much more benign if the maritime disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea could be resolved and if the divided Koreas and China-Taiwan issues no longer pitted militaries against each other and invited outside involvement. The Korean problem, for instance, may well benefit from credible third-party mediation rather than persisting with the fruitless 12-year-old Six Party Talks. The South China Sea disputes could similarly gain from an effective Code of Conduct and recourse to international arbitration.

As noted above, a credible CSO must be one in which state behavior and conduct adhere more closely to international law and universal norms, principles and values. In this regard, states could:

- Refrain from the use of force or threat of use of force. This includes refraining from the illegal invasion of other countries or from providing political, military or other material support for the illegal invasion and occupation of the territories of other countries.
- Refrain from conducting repeated and extended military exercises that are really demonstrations of force, and are intimidating and provocative in nature.
- Refrain from providing arms or other forms of material and financial support to organizations and groups that seek the violent overthrow of governments.
- Refrain from imposing sanctions that do not work and only bring widespread deprivation and suffering to the population.

The lack of sufficiently strong scrutiny and censure by the international community of rogue behavior by powerful states has contributed to undermining the international security order and the emergence of violent conflicts. The CSO must develop this critical capacity in the absence of enforceable legal sanctions. This would include the capacity for healthy, credible and independent evaluation of perceived security threats and alleged security incidents; national security doctrines and defense policies; and significant military and security measures taken by states and other parties that impact on the security of others.

This credible and independent capacity must be fostered in various centers of research and international institutions that do not become captive to vested interests, ideologies and national designs and agendas. Equally important, these sources of independent analysis and evaluation must be given the space and opportunity to publicize their findings and bring them to an international audience without the need to be “politically correct.” Some of these sources are already available but they are not currently allowed sufficient exposure or platforms to express their views.

**CONCLUSION**

Strengthening the foundations of a CSO in the Asia-Pacific region will entail much hard work and encounter skepticism as well as resistance, but a credible and functioning CSO is far from a pipe-dream. Significant elements are already in place and functioning effectively in domains such as the European Union and ASEAN and in the principles, norms and values that drive them. Promising features for further adaptation and development are also present in the many platforms for security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

Mohamed Jawhar Hassan is the Chief Executive Officer, Director-General and Chairman of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.