East Asia is no stranger to regional mechanisms that offer a forum for countries to discuss common problems and challenges. Notably, East Asia is also the venue where the competition for influence and power between China and the US is primarily being played out, and where the potential for conflict is most pronounced. For that, and other reasons, a new mechanism is needed to enhance co-operative security in East Asia, Liu Ming argues.

Needed: A New Mechanism for Co-operative Security in East Asia
By Liu Ming

OVER THE PAST 15 years in East Asia, there have been two asymmetric types of security cooperation: co-operative security and bilateral-trilateral balance-of-power security, which developed unevenly based on a number of factors: the focus of the US’s East Asia strategy on traditional or non-traditional security; the attitude of neighboring countries to China’s military development and its measures taken to protect its maritime sovereignty rights; and the escalation of the North Korean nuclear crisis.

During the administration of US President George W. Bush from 2003 to 2008, the US had a relative preference for co-operative security rather than a balancing strategy, because the Sept. 11 attacks totally reshaped its national security priorities. Its threat perception shifted from state players to non-state terrorists. To be sure, the Bush administration didn’t reduce its military edge and activities in the region, but its focal point was not on the rise of China or major-power competition. When Barack Obama became president, US policy underwent a paradigm shift back to the traditional, geopolitical approach: maintaining comprehensive American primacy and balancing ascending major powers.

The East Asia strategy of President Donald Trump’s administration has not been framed since Trump announced an end to Obama’s rebalancing strategy, and it’s possible there will be no clear-cut strategy during his time in office. However, no American president can easily renounce the country’s basic and long-held strategic goal: its hub-and-spoke system of alliances and its military balancing approach. But Trump seems to have neither the interest nor the passion to engage in a full-scale balancing strategy to constrain China’s military development and economic expansion. In this regard, the geopolitical and economic competition between China and the US will not be as sharp and intense as it was in the years from 2010 to 2016 under Obama.

As a result, the political confrontation between the main claimants in the South China Sea — and the degree to which the US gets involved in those disputes — is likely to diminish significantly.

A corresponding situation is also evolving. Although the strategic anxiety of some East Asian countries about China’s power has not changed substantially since last year, they have to recalibrate their co-ordinated steps in terms of American strategy to hedge the rise of China and economic repercussions overseas. This subtle policy adjustment is driven by several factors, but chief among them is that China’s loss to the Philippines in the South China Sea arbitration case has not produced any change in China’s position on its historic rights over that sea, while some countries have felt deep disappointment at the inability of the US to influence China to back off from its position on the reefs and waters it claims.

CHINA’S NEW SECURITY CONCEPT FOR REGIONAL STABILITY
China’s long-term position is to oppose the US-led Cold War system of alliances, which seeks to guarantee the security of the US and its allies and maintain alliance predominance. As an alternative to this zero-sum approach, China has advocated a “New Security Concept,” seeking common security through mutually beneficial co-operation and expanding the concept of security from narrow military threats to encompass economics, science and technology, the environment and culture.

Given that it is a rising power and a major target of hedging policy by the established superpower, China is trying to use the notion of common security to avoid what Graham Allison calls the “Thucydides Trap,” caused when a rising power so unsettles an established power that war results. The “New Major Power Relationship for Sino-American Relations” mentioned by President Xi Jinping is a notion as well as a practice. Largely through China’s persistence, the two countries have made moderate progress in tackling the hardest issue — namely, military distrust.

In September 2015, the US and Chinese militaries first signed a memorandum of understanding on establishing a mutual reporting mechanism on major military operations and a code of safe conduct on naval and air-force encounters. Then they signed annexes to these agreements regarding, respectively, “notification of mili-
The negotiations between China and ASEAN on Council sanctions, Resolution 2371, to strengthen claims in the South China Sea as null and void in countries in the region—for example, building existing construction will not target any country can strategic suspicions and decreasing miscalculations in future crises, since the two sides have intensified competition in the South China Sea and on the Korean Peninsula.

On the North Korean nuclear crisis, China and the US have also tacitly collaborated, ranging from jointly endorsing the toughest UN Security Council sanctions, Resolution 2371, to strengthening communications on handling North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests and rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Beijing and Washington, however, do not see eye to eye on how to rein in the recalcitrant Kim Jong Un and on the broader issue of the ultimate survival of the North Korean regime. Still, the issue of North Korea is now centering Sino-American co-operation.

**MODELS FOR SUCCESS**

In addition to these positive moves, China is also taking other valuable and constructive steps in the South China Sea: it has stopped building new civilian facilities on five reefs; it has said that the existing construction will not target any country nor impede navigation and overflight freedom in accordance with international law and it also has offered better public goods and services for countries in the region—for example, building two lighthouses on reefs in the South China Sea. Although Beijing rebuffed the ruling against its claims in the South China Sea as null and void in 2016, China has learned from this legal warfare at sea that it should take care of the concerns of small countries on the territorial disputes and rebuild trust between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Since then, particularly following the election of Rodrigo Duterte as president of the Philippines, the flash points in the South China Sea are cooling down. The negotiations between China and ASEAN on the Code of Conduct are making progress; the two sides officially approved its draft framework on August 6 in Manila, and the formal negotiation process will begin soon after the ASEAN Summit in November. And more surprisingly, China and the Philippines are discussing the idea of jointly exploring and exploiting resources in the South China Sea.

In addition to these China-driven co-operative security actions, the most attractive and successful model for co-operative security is the Lancang-Mekong River patrols involving China, Thailand, Laos and Myanmar. The 59th joint patrol and law enforcement operation along the Lancang-Mekong River has been successfully completed. Since the inception of joint patrol operations in December 2011, the patrol has cracked 22 drug-related cases along the Lancang-Mekong.

This success is derived from the fact that the issue has both a lower political profile and fewer sovereignty-related issues. Also contributing to the success is mutual respect for sovereign dignity; accommodation of the interests of other parties; a focus on common security like combating terrorism, smuggling, illegal immigration and drug trafficking; and the establishment of functional mechanisms such as three police stations along the banks of the river.

**DANGERS PERSIST**

Not all the trends, however, are positive for co-operative security. Unilateral security, alliance-deterrence security or military-confrontation security still exist in the region. North Korea’s nuclear and missile developments, and the military and diplomatic reaction of the US, South Korea and Japan, reflect the tense situation on the Korean Peninsula. As a byproduct, the deployment in South Korea of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system has led to strong resentment in China, a reflection of the awkward place that smaller countries find themselves in amid Sino-American strategic competition.

North Korea also is going against both the trend of the times and China as it continues to pursue nuclear and missile development. It conducted its sixth nuclear test on September 3, and the failure of the US and others to stop North Korea’s repeated tests shows that Pyongyang’s military behavior is outside the influence of the major powers and the restraints of regional regimes. This failure on North Korea proves that we lack an effective and binding organization, or common major-power determination, to forcefully compel Pyongyang to stop its nuclear program. Now faced with the challenge of a nuclearized North Korea, co-operative security cooperation is necessary between China, the US, Russia, Japan and South Korea, with a common goal of forming an effective oversight regime to prevent North Korea from further boosting its nuclear and missile capabilities.

Another long-term sticky issue is the rise of China set against the strategic co-operation among the US, Japan, Australia and India. The four countries worry about China’s growing naval power and economic influence in the East China Sea, the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, in addition to the assumed challenge by China to the American-led liberal regional order. Nuclear provocations, major power strategic competition and other potential conflicts in East Asia are making the security dilemma more complicated. Feeling threatened and wanting to consolidate power mainly comes from some states’ strategic uneasiness, territorial disputes and the existence of exclusive military alliances, among other issues. To mitigate this sense of anxiety, we can’t always rely on the US hub-and-spoke system of alliances and American primacy. The fact that the US is mainly regarded as a one-camp leader and a partisan superpower with overwhelming military power, is also a source of anxiety for some countries.

THE NEED FOR MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRATION

As an alternative to the regional power structure and security architecture of the post-war period, it is necessary to explore a co-operative security approach and a binding multilateral mechanism. To maintain a dynamic and common basis for co-operative security, East Asian countries need first to devote themselves to economic development and multidimensional co-operation, which will draw the attention of people to their common interests — capacity building and the exchange of benefits. Thus, a concept of sustainable security comes into the equation: we cannot successfully control all the consequences of insecurity, but we must work to resolve the causes. Insufficient and unbalanced economic development, underdeveloped transportation systems, and scarce resources are among the causes of division and distrust among nations.

The China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) precisely meets these demands. Its total membership is now up to 70 countries, which exceeds that of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The geographical focus of the AIIB, of course, isn’t just on East Asian infrastructure. It will help countries throughout the region to sit with other industrialized members for consultations and bargaining, where they can seek grants for badly-needed projects, including green
energy, poverty reduction, railways and highway construction, and trade facilities, all of which fall into the category of sustainable development. If the AIBS can raise more funds in the future, it will play a growing role in bridging economic gaps as well as affecting diverse perceptions on security.

Of course, this kind of intra-regional and extra-regional co-operation will facilitate trust-building and deep interdependence among countries, helping to ease differences. Economic co-operation, however, may not inevitably lead to traditional security co-operation, confidence-building arrangements, conflict management and the resolution of territorial disputes. A new type of institutional co-operation on security is needed to play an active role in addressing all pressing problems and conflicts.

So far, there are several forums on security issues, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Council on Security Co-operation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) forum, ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). So far, these regimes mostly operate as forums for the purpose of economic or security cooperation. The APT and APEC have achieved various goals in terms of investment facilities, regional trade and connectivity. None of these groupings, however, have a mandate to address the region’s hot security issues.

**SIX-PARTY LESSONS**

Currently, most East Asian countries still tend to accept the loose security forums and ASEAN leadership, because they are concerned that their sovereign power as well as strategic maneuvering would be restrained by biased, binding rules, and that the US, China and Japan will contend for a leading role in the institutions. However, the increasingly complex regional environment has impelled countries to set up more authoritative institutions to address security issues and manage maritime competition and other crises.

The Six-Party Talks from 2003 to 2008 were an imaginative post-Cold War diplomatic exploration that reflected an idea from China, the US and South Korea, whose security concepts and strategies differed on how to resolve the North Korean challenge. Though the talks ultimately failed because of Pyongyang’s determination to possess nuclear weapons, many derivative mechanisms from the talks were very well designed, among them two working groups: the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism and the Korean Peninsula Peace Mechanism. If these were fully developed, the security situation would be totally changed, and a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula might be realized.

The aborting of the Six-Party Talks doesn’t mean that the effort to construct an East Asia security mechanism in the future has been without value. The starting point for discussing such a security architecture relies on China and the US reaching a consensus. Washington is always suspicious of China’s proposals to develop such a mechanism, assuming that Beijing wants to exclude US involvement and expel its military presence from the western Pacific. When Beijing enthusiastically promoted APT in 2004, Washington drove a wedge between China and ASEAN by arranging for India, Australia and New Zealand to join the EAS.

Almost a decade ago, Washington studied the proposal to streamline the current overlapping security architecture by combining the ARF and the EAS into a formal security organization and setting up a rotating leadership system, while downgrading APEC into an economic ministers meeting. For unknown reasons, this proposal was not raised with other countries. However, the concept is still worth pursuing.

Actually, the development of these various institutions with members from within and outside the region has a historical basis. The ARF was founded in July 1994 and was the first region-wide Asia-Pacific multilateral forum for official consultations on peace and security issues. It has made significant contributions to confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the region. Beginning in 1997, East Asian countries started a parallel path for regional co-operation involving economic and security issues. The APT and the EAS are the focal points. The hope is that advancing regional integration will finally lead to an East Asian community, which will include security co-operation.

**UPGRADING THE EAST ASIA SUMMIT**

China and ASEAN have long held the view that ASEAN is at the center of the community-building process, the APT is the next band and the EAS is the outer band. Even as the US and Russia joined the EAS in 2011, the APT process was regarded as the main vehicle to achieve the long-term goal of building an East Asian community, with ASEAN as the driving force.

If we want to create a new and more effective dynamic, not only for economic co-operation but also for regional stability, we have to adjust the status quo, including structures, leadership and principles. Of course, this should take place gradually. As a 10-member organization, ASEAN is neither a powerful nor cohesive bloc as a leader nor a neutral, credible player, therefore other powers should be allowed to play a more equal leadership role. The APT does not include the US and Russia, in terms of geography and realm, so its spillover effects are limited. By that token, the EAS is a suitable institution to take the lead on community-building above all other institutions.

To upgrade the EAS, it needs a charter, a secretariat, a new goal, a series of working guidelines and a serious commitment from all the major powers. Of course, we should be realistic about the process and goals we can reach, but the vision and commitment should be clear. The APT’s current economic co-operation function could be moved in or remain outside, but the EAS should be entitled to guide the course of APEC on the Asia-Pacific Free Trade Area (APFTA). And the ARF needs to be placed within the framework of the EAS as a ministerial council.

If all this is well arranged, the future EAS should be able to address both traditional and non-traditional security issues, starting modestly on the implementation of Sino-US military agreements on confidence-building measures, which will display a model of strategic trust for all EAS members. After that, the security issues of all the concerned parties should be opened for discussion, including eliminating the implicitly hostile policy towards third parties practiced by military alliances. The new EAS would hopefully oversee:

- Respect for the status quo of disputed areas and waters — no more reclamation, no offensive military deployments and no provocative Freedom of Navigation operations in the South China Sea;
- Agreement on a binding Code of Conduct in the South China Sea;
- Active arms-control efforts in East Asia;
- The reduction of military exercises and reconnaissance activities along other nations’ coasts;
- Management of the development of North Korea’s nuclearization;
- Adoption of confidence-building measures on the Korean Peninsula.

To be sure, the above issues are all very sensitive. The key stakeholders and beneficiaries won’t easily forgo their comparative advantages, and some countries are still looking to America’s hub-and-spoke alliance system to maintain regional order. But the trend is clear; American power is fading and it is unwilling to shoulder additional burdens for regional security. Given the insufficient regional capacity to deal with complex transnational challenges and growing demands for better infrastructure, what is called for is the integration and upgrading of overlapping regional forums.

As regional governance and co-ordination on security and economic co-operation become more interdependent and imperative, and the existing mechanisms under ASEAN leadership lose weight, the countries of East Asia must reach a new consensus to merge most of these mechanisms into one. And that one mechanism needs a mandate that gives it relatively strong binding force. However, this mechanism should not exclude other confidence-building bilateral security dialogues or non-governmental dialogues of an academic nature.

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