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.”
**Alliances and the Future Asia-Pacific Order**

**By T.J. Pempel**

The increasingly intricate latticework of relations among states in the Asia-Pacific region gives rise both to security uncertainties and greater opportunities for cooperation among states. In this complex emerging order, traditional security alliances will still play a role, writes T.J. Pempel, but the future structure will be the result of far more complex institutional arrangements.

No single factor has contributed more to pan-Pacific influences on East Asia than America's mesh of hub-and-spoke alliances with its various East Asian partners (bolstered by its non-alliance security arrangements such as with Singapore and Taiwan). Nonetheless, it is important to underscore the complementary importance of the 1961 Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance, which commits China to aid North Korea should it suffer an unprovoked attack by its adversaries. Moreover, the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO), while not calling itself an alliance, links China, Russia and four Central Asian Republics, conducts joint military exercises and articulates collective security as a prominent goal. These existing security alliances, and certainly those with the US as the primary partner, will continue to play a robust role in shaping the security order in East Asia and across the Asia-Pacific despite any pressures to the contrary.

At least two logics reinforce one another in sustaining existing alliances. First, a security logic impels any cautious power to prepare for possible threats that may emerge in the future even though conditions appear tranquil in the present. Planning to cope with unforeseen challenges inevitably requires calculations about both the capabilities and the intentions of potential adversaries. Capabilities are far easier to assess with a measure of confidence than are intentions. Despite the fact that no state-to-state shooting wars have occurred in East Asia since 1979, security concerns remain rife. Most of the weapons in East Asia are aimed at other Asian targets while the potentially malign intentions of many countries are difficult to dismiss. Though they differ in the catalysts for their concerns, increasing numbers of policy-makers have become convinced that security ambiguities and challenges are increasing. Such heightened worries simply reinforce the logic for alliance maintenance and/or enhancement. No sudden termination of the current security architecture is likely and existing alliances will remain an integral (though by no means the only) tool in many countries' security toolboxes.

**Alliance Adjustments**

Equally important, however, in propelling alliance continuity is simple path dependence. Numerous impediments stand in the way of eliminating longstanding and entrenched institutions, which have a tendency to remain “sticky” even after their original justifications have evaporated. The primary rationale behind today's alliance structure, of course, was the Cold War and its bipolar divisions, both of which are long gone from East Asia. The US no longer supports dictatorships simply because they are anti-communist; China long ago abandoned Maoist efforts to export revolution. Yet the old alliances live on, in most instances as vigorously nurtured as ever. Unquestionably, security anxieties play their part in such continuity, but the generous support payments made to governments for hosting American bases also play a role in continuing at least some American alliances. So does the value of US posts in Asia as pivotal career stepping stones for officers moving up the chain of command.

Going forward, even though the alliances themselves will continue, they must regularly adjust to meet new challenges. As noted above, coping with two distinct types of challenges will be vital to alliance viability. First, alliances must remain credible both in the promises made to allies and in their deterrent value toward potential adversaries. The classic fears of allies — entrapment versus abandonment — continually animate all parties in an alliance. Alliance managers pursuing their diverse national goals are in constant contact with one another about adjustments as they face the ongoing problems of balancing competing goals, fears and resource commitments. These adjustments have resulted in such actions as rebasing US troops in South Korea, the 2015 reopening of Philippine

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facilities to the US military, China’s decision to back United Nations’ resolutions condemning North Korea, or Japan’s steady expansion of the roles given to its Self-Defense Forces.

Other examples of alliance adjustments include US efforts to thread together some of its bipolar allies, such as the triangular links among the US, Japan and Australia and trilateral security co-operation among the US, Japan and South Korea. Equally one can note China’s enthusiastic promotion of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization and the rollercoaster ups and downs in its dealings with North Korea.

Such bilateral and multilateral adjustments in the alliances’ military specifics will continue to influence the regional order. The central concern is whether adjustments enhance confidence and predictability both for allies and adversaries, thereby reducing the chances for conflict. This is the central challenge posed by such recent actions as the US rebalance to Asia, China’s new assertiveness in the East and South China Seas or Australia’s opening of bases in Darwin or Japan’s steady expansion of the roles given to its Self-Defense Forces.

Balancing Military Risk

For the US and its alliance partners, military security remains a key priority, driven not least by the disproportionate political influence of the Pentagon and the US Pacific Command. Threats to national boundaries and sovereignty will always be singular priorities. Similarly, China’s ties with North Korea and many neighboring states are increasingly shaped by the desire for border security and military anxieties.

There is, however, a built-in danger if the primary focus of alliances remains simply the military goals of reassuring partners and deterring potential foes. Such moves, inevitably presented as defensive measures, risk triggering a classic security dilemma and a spiral of escalating military spending and the ever-increasing possibility of unwanted confrontation. Yet, that is precisely what appears to be happening. Chinese policy-makers justify a military buildup as a way to prevent being “contained” by the US and its allies. But that buildup in turn leads to a situation well described by Minxin Pei: “Most of China’s neighbors, even North Korea, fear an unconstrained Chinese hegemon — and, if the US security presence were eliminated, that is precisely what they would face. Asia for Asians’ would be Asia for the Chinese.”

This leads to a second arena of alliance adjustment that typically commands less attention, namely the relative weight that military alliances should be accorded in the grand strategies of individual countries. The most striking feature of the Cold War Order was the rigidity with which ideological bifurcation shaped not just military and defense interactions, but economic, cultural and social relations. The perceived threats that alliances were designed to offset were presumed to cover all functional areas of interaction.

“No trading with the enemy” prevailed on both sides of the bipolar order. That has changed profoundly. Well into the early 2000s, the US remained the major economic destination for virtually all of its alliance partners’ exports; today China plays that role. Moreover, numerous co-operative bridges span the previously impassable Cold War abyss as well as contemporary security alliances on matters such as pollution abatement, pandemic prevention, disaster relief, and other non-traditional security issues. Particularly salient, as is often noted, US-China economic relations have become deeply interdependent. When relations were heavily shaped by Cold War concerns, the military alliance structure was preponderant in determining most countries’ overall strategies. This is no longer the case.

Most countries across the region today have concluded that “security” remains too vital a treasure to be entrusted exclusively to the military. Domestic security goals and foreign policy aspirations must be kept in balance. In foreign policy, East Asian leaders increasingly recognize the importance of “comprehensive security,” a perspective intended to acknowledge the reality of such things as economic, energy and environmental security, along with security in the face of pandemics, natural disasters and intrastate crime.

Complex Latticework

The region today is marked by a complex geometry of institutions and relations that both strengthens and complicates intra-regional relations. Architecturally and institutionally this complex nexus is reflected in the layered multiplicity of state-to-state relations. If alliances signify blood brotherhood, the regional order is also molded by the close bonds forged within the complex web of regional institutions dealing with all manner of pan-regional issues. These involve varying levels of official commitment and participation across an array of functional areas. Such governmental interactions are further complicated by bottom-up corporate ties involving regional production networks, trade agreements and a welter of corporate ties. This public and private latticework often defies the loyalties implicit in alliances. Add in the reality that countries within the region often engage in extra-regional co-operation such as that between China and the US on piracy, global warming and the multilateral nuclear deal restricting Iran’s nuclear program and the easy identification of friend and foe is blurred. It is no wonder that national grand strategies have become far more complicated, with military co-operation through alliances just one leg of multi-legged comprehensive security stools also supported by interdependent economies, shared values, cross-issue trade-offs and multi-faceted priorities. Most countries are forced to opt for fluid grand strategies that mix engagement, hedging and soft balancing.

For this reason, the Asia-Pacific Security Order will emerge not only from the perspective of military power balances and potential resort to the kinetic mobilization of force, but also from the complicating interactions among states resulting from a stew of security worries, economic interactions and a bevy of less prominent national and regional concerns.

Today’s more complicated and cross-cutting regional ties will unquestionably require reallocations of power and influence, with multiple challenges to the status quo. As adjustments are being made, the ultimate goal for policy-makers, difficult as it may be to prioritize, must include more than simply “enhanced security for me and my alliance partners.”

They must also weave in “peaceful co-existence” and a reduction in “fearful mistrust.” Achieving such a regional nirvana among competing goals will necessitate collective efforts by creative decision makers to enhance co-operative positive-sum interactions and to reduce confrontation and zero-sum calculations. In this regard it is well to applaud actions by the US to engage multiple countries, including China, in multilateral security exercises such as Cobra Gold and RIMPAC. In addition, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and One Belt, One Road economic initiatives should be seen not as security challenges but as positive Chinese moves that can help to fund needed infrastructure developments across the region, thereby reducing economic insecurities.

This last point underscores the need to realize the importance of political choices made today and going forward. Alliances in themselves will not determine the future order of the Asia-Pacific. That future will be the result of a far more complex process within which alliances will surely play a vital part. Adequate attention must be given to the ways in which alliances are just pieces in the larger regional architecture. Given appropriate balance and far-sightedness, a positive regional order will become increasingly visible over the horizon.

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