American Aims: Realism Still Prevails Over Community Idealism
By Michael J. Green

Despite the proliferation of regional institutions in East Asia in recent years that bring together countries to discuss and address a wide range of issues, there is little likelihood that any of them will easily evolve into an effective foundation for a new East Asian security architecture.

Michael J. Green, a former member of the US National Security Council, argues that US alliances in the region will continue to be a central component of any new security arrangements that emerge.

The expansion of multilateral forums and institutions in East Asia over the past 15 years has added an important layer to the security fabric of the region. Venues such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum (APEC) that were once focused solely on economics have also allowed informal leadership-level dialogue on security issues, while sub-regional groupings such as the Six-Party talks on North Korea have emerged to address specific security challenges. Leaders and senior officials who participate in Asia’s dense multilateral diplomatic calendar have been socialized to the broader narrative of community-building and have found opportunities for co-operative efforts ranging from debt-swap arrangements to counterterrorism.

But it would be difficult to argue that this new multilateralism has fundamentally transformed security calculations in Asia. In late 2008, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington conducted a survey of more than 300 strategic thinkers in Asia on the future of regional architecture. In it, over 80 percent expressed support for the concept of an “East Asia Community.” Yet when asked what institutions they would expect their governments to rely on to prevent or respond to armed attacks, terrorism, proliferation, pandemics and natural disasters a decade from now, very few chose regional institutions. Instead, they overwhelmingly chose their own national capabilities, their alliances with the United States (particularly in Japan and South Korea) or global institutions such as the United Nations. These responses reflect the continuing gap between the quantity and quality of Asia’s multilateral institutions and uncertainty about the future balance of power within the region.
A brief survey of the output of regional forums and institutions underscores both the successes and shortcomings.

- **APEC** was established to ensure that regional economic integration would remain trans-Pacific and thus complement the prevailing security architecture of US alliances. Leaders’ meetings have often involved important parallel discussions on security, but efforts to generate an explicit security agenda have usually met resistance. US Secretary of Defense William Perry’s proposal in 1995 that APEC might someday address security challenges was rebuffed, and the Bush administration’s post-9/11 initiative to expand co-operation on non-proliferation and counter-terrorism exhausted most member states. APEC now has refocused on its trade agenda with high expectations for the “triple crown” meetings in Singapore (2009), Japan (2010) and the US (2011). The Obama administration’s inability to articulate a clear trade liberalization strategy also has handicapped APEC’s potential as a champion of economic cooperation. The administration’s positive signals on the Trans-Pacific Partnership could help, but not if the administration fails to pass the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement or the Trade Promotion Authority necessary for full negotiations elsewhere. APEC remains the pre-eminent regional forum for the US, but it has evolved little in terms of security cooperation and faces new questions about its original trade focus as well.

- **The East Asia Summit (EAS)** has begun competing with APEC, though this new forum has yet to produce any of the concrete action items that have characterized APEC’s history. If anything, the process leading to the establishment of the EAS served as a reminder of how significant great power rivalry remains in Asia. When China made a bid to decouple the EAS from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations by offering to host the second summit meeting in Beijing, Japan and Singapore responded by inviting India, Australia and New Zealand to join as a counterbalance (and insisted that ASEAN member states host all meetings). Beijing has since demonstrated a preference for the so-called ASEAN + 3 (Japan, South Korea, China), which can point to some important initiatives to supplement the International Monetary Fund through the establishment of a regional debt-swap arrangement, but very little in terms of security cooperation or confidence-building measures.

- **The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)** is the region’s broadest forum for security dialogue, and it has become quite important. When US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice skipped the annual ARF foreign ministers’ meeting, it led to embarrassing charges that the US had lost interest in Asia. Moreover, the ARF allows for useful side discussions that might not normally be on the secretary of state’s travel itinerary in any given year. However, with a membership that includes North Korea and Burma and a speed limit determined by ASEAN, the ARF has produced little in terms of common norms for security practices in the region.

- **ASEAN** is also proving less cohesive as a regional stabilizer than many had hoped. The Northeast Asian powers are generally content to let the organization remain in control of major forums such as the ARF and the East Asia Summit. The new ASEAN Defense Ministers Meetings could also prove useful in building greater cooperation. But there are signs of brittleness within

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1 http://csis.org/programs/japan-chair/ regional-institutional-architecturethe-world
ASEAN. Many member states have tense security relations with their neighbors and rather than pulling together to offer one voice in the face of Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea, the ASEAN states are splintering. On key issues relating to sub-regional security, Beijing can often count on proxies within ASEAN to represent its interests, while member states cannot count on a unified voice on security challenges emanating from outside Southeast Asia. Rather than serving as a buttress against great power interference, ASEAN is increasingly looking like an arena for that competition.

The Six-Party talks represented the first high-level security forum in Northeast Asia and at certain points seemed to offer a workable framework for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. However, in the wake of North Korea’s two nuclear tests and brazen promise to achieve full nuclear weapons status by 2012 (the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-sung’s birth), the prospects are dim for any meaningful negotiations. Some have argued that the Six-Party talks should focus on a peace regime instead of denuclearization, but nothing could be more inimical to the forum’s original goal of stopping Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions. Indeed, it appears that none of the other five parties see any reason to reward Pyongyang’s serial proliferation by offering gestures that the North would pocket as validation of its nuclear weapons status.

In short, it is not surprising that the CSIS survey found a deep vein of realism just beneath the surface idealism that characterizes most discussions of regional community building. This is not necessarily welcome for the US. While low confidence in regional institutions may underscore the indispensable role that US alliances and forward engagement play in guaranteeing regional stability, it also suggests that the burden in terms of security will continue to fall heavily on the US, even as relative economic power shifts to Asia. To be sure, as Winston Churchill famously once quipped, “To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.” But it is also time to raise the bar of expectations on regional cooperation and to think about shifting the emphasis from consensus and inclusivity towards more effective governance and output.

The first solution raised at this point is often “rationalization” of regional architecture. If there is a gap between quantity and quality, the logic goes, just reduce the quantity. Some have proposed the creation of a sub-group of eight Asian members drawn from the Group of 20 (G-20). That proposal has merit in terms of caucusing within the G-20, but is unlikely to replace or render more effective other regional institutions. Others have suggested turning APEC into a trade minister-level forum and bringing the US and Russia into the EAS at the summit level. In some quarters this may seem logical, but there is no way that a US president is going to tell two of his top three trading partners, Mexico and Canada, that they are being demoted to second-tier status in the Pacific. The reality is that Asia’s security architecture will continue to reflect the region’s diversity in terms of regime type, development level and threat perception.

Part of the solution to rendering Asia’s multilateral security architecture more effective may actually lie in the competitive nature of different visions for a future regional order. Trade theory postulates that when nations compete for advantage through selective bilateral agreements, the aggregate effect can be greater trade liberalization of the entire system. This same concept of competitive liberalization would apply to Asian security architecture. Rather than attempt to rationalize regional institutions, the US and like-minded nations should push more effective governance and output by caucusing and taking action themselves.

This is essentially what happened when the US, Japan, Australia and India formed the Regional Core Group to respond to the 2004 tsunami. These four nations had the naval power and the domestic political support necessary to act decisively in a way that none of the region’s institutions or other major powers was capable of doing. The Regional Core Group established an integrated task force that the UN and other states could then plug into — and perhaps more importantly, they set a high bar for disaster relief efforts across the region.
Initially, the Six-Party talks also represented an ad hoc arrangement to bring greater regional pressure on North Korea to negotiate a verifiable and irreversible end to its nuclear programs. However, as chair of the talks, China insisted that the meeting schedule and agenda would be established by consensus, handing North Korea a virtual veto that Pyongyang used to demand a high price for attendance and to delay progress. The solution to North Korean intransigence at this point should be to hold talks among the other five with or without North Korean participation. This would depend on Pyongyang’s readiness to engage and a determination by the other five of whether the purpose is negotiations or managing North Korean bad behavior.

THE ROLE OF DEMOCRACY

It is also critical that like-minded democratic states find ways to caucus within the existing architecture. The general trend in global and regional governance is towards broader inclusivity and away from values-oriented groupings. Thus, the Group of Seven (G-7), which once represented the most advanced industrial nations and the world’s leading democracies, is being eclipsed by the G-20, which represents only the leading economies. Membership in Asia’s major multilateral forums and institutions also reflects the new distribution of economic and political power in the region, in which democratic values are not universally shared. This is appropriate given the region’s growing economic interdependence. But it is also essential that community-building in Asia should lead to greater convergence toward political liberalism, governance, rule of law and human rights — and not towards a simplistic Westphalian concept of non-interference in internal affairs aimed at legitimizing all regimes.

There is far more convergence on this point than many observers acknowledge. For example, the CSIS survey of strategic elites asked what goals should guide East Asia community-building in the next decade. Across the region the top three answers were “preventing conflict,” “promoting confidence” and “establishing a framework for trade and regional economic integration.” The next four answers were “promoting good governance,” “human rights,” “free and fair elections,” and “strengthening domestic institutions” — all of these were ahead of energy, defense or other areas of functional cooperation. The broader historical trend in Asia over the past 25 years has been towards political liberalism, most notably in South Korea, Taiwan and now Indonesia. More recently, leaders in these middle powers have begun articulating their national identity less in terms of unique “Asian values” and more in terms of achieving their peoples’ aspirations for greater accountability, human rights and rule of law.

Establishing norms of behavior not only among, but also within, states is also indispensable to confidence-building. Historically, the rise of non-democratic powers has caused far more uncertainty than the rise of democratic powers because authoritarian regimes traditionally lack transparency, accountability and predictability. It would not be possible, of course, to establish a broad multilateral institution in Asia like the European Union that requires adherence to democratic norms. On the other hand, it would be a poor reflection of the growth of political liberalism and a strategic mistake to allow Asia’s multilateral architecture to emerge around the premise of non-
interference, à la ASEAN, and the guarantee of diversity of regime types.

Democratic states will have to be mindful of the ideational balance of influence within Asia’s emerging architecture. The contest of norms is not going to lead to a simplistic bipolar ideological cold war, as some have warned. For example, while the CSIS survey demonstrated strong support for advancing democratic norms in Asia, there was a split between developing and developed democracies on the importance of maintaining the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. Nor is there attraction to the so-called “Beijing Consensus” on authoritarian development beyond a few states such as Burma, Cambodia or Laos. The reality is that multilateral cooperation in Asia will continue to have multiple dimensions, one of which will be ideational.

It is appropriate and necessary for like-minded democracies to caucus on how best to advance democratic norms within an open and inclusive regional architecture. The US, Japan and Australia already meet in the Trilateral Security Dialogue, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has proposed a US-Japan-India trilateral forum as well. This will be all the more important since it is unlikely that the US will be present in all of the region’s forums or privy to all of the dialogues and agenda-setting. Already the US is outside of the ASEAN + 3, and it is unlikely that the US president will attend the EAS even though the US has signed the requisite Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN.

As the comedian Woody Allen once said about life, “nine-tenths of success is just showing up.” That principle should serve as the pillar for any US approach to regional architecture in Asia. The credibility of efforts to improve the governance or output of the existing architecture or to pioneer new efforts such as the tsunami Regional Core Group will depend on whether the US is actively engaged across the full range of multilateral diplomacy in Asia. In her January 12 speech at the East-West Center in Hawaii, Clinton signaled her intention to do just that — though the speech did suffer from a glaring omission on trade strategy.

The other principle that will guide US engagement is the centrality of the network of US alliances in Asia. Two decades ago American strategists worried about the potential trade-offs between multilateral cooperation and bilateral alliances in Asia, leading to US Secretary of State James Baker’s famous 1991 Foreign Affairs article extolling the hub-and-spokes approach to what was not yet being called regional architecture. Today there is little doubt that more effective multilateral cooperation in Asia will supplement the public goods provided by US alliances. But without those alliances, there will be no superstructure around which, and upon which, to build multilateral cooperation.

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