American Hopes: An Agenda for Cooperation That Serves US Interests
By Susan Shirk

OVER THE PAST 15 YEARS, multilateral forums designed to knit East Asia together and create a peaceful environment for economic development have reshaped the region’s international relations. The impetus for this multilateral cooperation has come from Asians themselves, with the United States hesitantly and ambivalently following along. Yet it is in Washington’s interest to take a more active role in building a strong multilateral architecture for the region.

It’s not hard to understand the US reluctance to endorse multilateralism in East Asia. Ever since the Soviet Union made the first proposals, Washington has suspected that the true aim of such efforts was to weaken its bilateral alliances and leadership.

The US Pacific Command, though, has embraced regional multilateralism even if Washington has been skeptical and passive regardless of which party is in the White House. The George H.W. Bush administration rejected proposals for East Asian security cooperation as a solution to a nonexistent problem and lauded the US-centered hub-and-spokes architecture. To differentiate itself from the Bush administration, the State Department under Bill Clinton incorporated multilateralism into its Asia policy speeches, but with the exception of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, didn’t invest much energy in it. Critical of Clinton for paying too much attention to China, the George W. Bush administration emphasized its alliances with Japan and South Korea and put even less energy into multilateral institution-building than its predecessor. Barack Obama’s administration came into office signaling greater enthusiasm for the multilateral enterprise, but it is too soon to say what it will produce.
Meanwhile, East Asian governments have promoted multilateralism as the best way to reduce mistrust and prevent arms races during a period of rapid change and great uncertainty in the relative power of states. Regional multilateralism also offers a measure of independence from their security patron, the US, and a hedge against possible declining US commitment to the region. In the mid-1990s, China discovered that multilateral regional cooperation offered an opportunity to enhance its influence while reassuring its neighbors about its benign intentions. Today, East Asians view multilateralism as a non-confrontational way to tame China’s rising power; but Americans still misperceive it as a Chinese tactic to reduce American influence and eventually push it out of the region.

Why should the United States take a more active role in building regional multilateral arrangements in East Asia?

Bilateral alliances alone cannot guarantee the peace in East Asia. The relations among the major powers — the US, China, Japan and Russia — are in a state of flux, and there is no natural hierarchy in the region. At various points in history, China, Japan and the US each have been dominant. They are all heavily armed states with very different political systems and unresolved historical and territorial issues. All of them are also looking over their shoulders at one another as they upgrade their military capabilities, making uncertainties about their intentions even more acute. Politicians who play to nationalist public opinion, especially in China and Japan, heighten perceptions of mutual threat. The greatest danger is that popular hostility between Beijing and Tokyo could lead to an unintended war. US alliances with Japan and South Korea are good for making China think twice about lashing out militarily against Japan or Taiwan, but they do little to reduce the mistrust and misunderstandings that raise the risk of military conflict.

Multilateral engagement enhances the US commitment to East Asia. Americans like to talk about the “Asia-Pacific,” but the reality is that while senior Asian diplomats shuttle between one another’s capitals regularly, the tyranny of distance makes it impossible to get senior US officials to the region more than once or twice a year. And as the distant power, the US faces no direct threat from regional conflict, making its military role optional despite its economic and political interests.

Not surprisingly, Asian leaders question whether the US will continue the forward deployment of military forces in South Korea and Japan forever. This uncertainty is a great source of instability.

Since the end of the Cold War, the US has reduced its forces in East Asia from roughly 100,000 (1976-1990) to 64,500 today. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the high priority to defend the homeland from terrorist attack, and economic problems all create doubts about America’s ability to sustain its security commitments in Asia indefinitely. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s 2003 announcement that US forces in South Korea would be moved south of the demilitarized zone and cut drastically triggered fears of abandonment in both Japan and South Korea. But in both countries the issue of US military bases is also growing increasingly contentious. Korean and Japanese citizens may support the alliances with the US in principle, but they resent the impact of the bases on local communities and the indignities of dependence on American might.

According to a December 2009 Pew Research Center for People and the Press survey,¹ almost half of the American public — the highest percentage in four decades — believes that the US should “mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own.” No wonder East Asians lack confidence in the staying power of the US and are seeking alternative ways to preserve their security.

One of the most compelling reasons for Washington to augment its bilateral alliances with multilateral security arrangements is to put its commitments on a broader and more sustainable basis. East Asians would welcome a more active multilateral engagement on the part of the US as a signal of its commitment and would not misconstrue it as abandonment. Operating in a mul-

A multilateral mode would help America learn how to “play well with others,” to achieve its objectives in a world in which the gap between American power and that of other countries is narrowing. The Six-Party talks on the North Korean nuclear program have already provided some instructive experience in this regard, even if the concrete result has been disappointing.

**What kind of multilateral arrangements in East Asia should the United States pursue?**

Put relations between the United States, Japan, China and Russia at the core. The notion of a concert of powers sounds politically incorrect in this day and age, but something like it is desirable both to reduce the risk of confrontations and to provide more effective region-wide leadership. Competition among the powers undoubtedly will persist, but regular informal consultations would help prevent it from degenerating into overt conflict.

The most feasible way to build a concert-like process is to embed it in a Northeast Asia security dialogue consisting of the four powers whose interests converge there, along with the two Koreas. That was the vision that inspired the creation in 1993 of the track-two Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue, led by the University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation. This same six-party framework was adopted to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue. When the Six-Party talks were making progress, there was hope that they might evolve into a permanent multilateral security arrangement. The current stalemate in the talks makes that prospect more remote. The Chinese currently reject the idea of a five-country Northeast Asia multilateral arrangement that excludes North Korea. The US and the other governments should seek to persuade China to start meeting together as an informal six-country forum with an empty seat waiting for North Korea. Why allow North Korea to spoil the future of major power relations in the region?

It would be a mistake for Washington to embrace any of the alternative proposals for security arrangements among a subset of countries that excludes China or Russia and thereby ef-
effectively creates two blocs in the region. The goal of 21st century multilateralism should be to bridge differences peacefully, not revive Cold War antagonisms.

Use multilateral discussions for real policy coordination. Regular consultations by the senior officials responsible for managing East Asia policy in the six governments of Northeast Asia should be at the heart of the process. Such consultations are the best way to improve transparency and coordinate policies. High-profile meetings by foreign ministers or leaders can ease domestic threat perceptions by publicizing cooperation, but they are no substitute for substantive discussions by hands-on policy managers. Two or three meetings a year are necessary to establish the habits and norms of cooperation. Leave the staffers and representatives from other agencies at home or on the periphery so that the real policy decision-makers are seated together at the table, and make sure they have plenty of time together during cocktails, meals and, if there is time, on the golf course.

Establish collective norms. The group should try to agree on some fundamental principles guiding international relations in Northeast Asia as well as procedural guidelines for the multilateral dialogue. Talking about principles is not the usual American style of diplomacy, but Washington supported the effort of the Russia-led working group on the Six-Party talks to begin building a Northeast Asia multilateral mechanism by agreeing to a set of principles. Norms can provide a basis for coordinated action. A norm against regional nuclear proliferation, for example, would lend weight to the effort to discourage Japan or South Korea from going down that path. And a norm on freedom of navigation could be the starting point for managing differences about maritime access in exclusive economic zones so that they don’t lead to accidents at sea.

Procedural agreement would also give the multilateral process more continuity and weight. The group should seek basic procedures such as consensus decision-making, no taboo issues, no boycotting of meetings and a commitment to meet on an emergency basis if anyone requests it. Rotating the chair would help build a shared sense of ownership in the process.

Tackle hard security issues. The agenda for the six-country process should not artificially exclude discussion of hard security issues. The typical approach of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) of starting with “easy” issues before moving to the “hard” security issues of war and peace is not the roadmap to follow for building major power cooperation in Northeast Asia. After all, the Six-Party talks have already taken up the hard issue of North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs. To be effective in averting military conflict, the forum must address the issues that government decision-makers really care about, including military modernization, weapons of mass destruction, missile defenses and historical and territorial disputes. Increasing transparency — not just about military capabilities and doctrines but also about the policy-making process — is important for mutual reassurance because such transparency is lacking in China, Russia and North Korea. It may sound utopian today, but at some point even structural arms control may be on the agenda.

Economic and energy issues should also be discussed although not as the defining centerpiece of the process. An important objective of a multilateral mechanism is to translate economic interdependence into security gains. Discussions about energy infrastructure could also have positive spillovers for managing territorial disputes that revolve around access to potential oil and gas fields.

Participate actively in existing region-wide organizations, but don’t expect to join all of them. In addition to building a concert-like framework for major power consultations, the US should participate in ASEAN Regional Forum and APEC meetings and try to make them as substantive as possible. The Obama administration’s steps toward observing and eventually joining the East Asian Summit are a nice gesture toward regional cooperation although that forum is unlikely to become much more than a photo-op. ASEAN + 3 (China, Japan and South Korea) has emerged as the most vibrant regional undertaking because it promotes policy coordination in a wide range of
functional areas and provides a means for China and Japan to share leadership on regional initiatives. It is working well as an Asian effort without the participation of the US; for the US to insist on joining would appear pushy and insecure.

**Deepen regional military cooperation.** One of the most valuable steps the US could take to enhance East Asian regional security and anchor its own role would be to deepen multilateral military cooperation. US-led regional military exercises already provide an effective mechanism to enhance interoperability in non-traditional military activities and promote regional cooperation. China has been observing and beginning to participate in these exercises. With US support, these joint military activities could extend to shared policing of the sea-lanes of communication or to regional protocols for incidents at sea; they also could become more closely integrated with the regional multilateral architecture.

**Strengthen the binding power of multilateral organizations.** The achievements of existing regional organizations have been modest. US officials aren’t the only ones who disparage them as mere “talking shops.” A more active leadership role by the US and other major powers could put more starch into these bodies. When the US pushed the ASEAN Regional Forum to take up the clashes in the South China Sea, the result was a code of conduct that has largely succeeded in preventing further confrontations.

In time, China, recognizing that its rising power provokes threat perceptions, may actually favor delegating to regional groupings some binding force over the behavior of their members. Like the US after World War II, China might decide that the best way to credibly reassure other countries about its benign intentions (and compete with the US-centered alliance system) is to create international institutions that tie its own hands. This would be no more surprising than China’s rapid conversion to regional multilateralism in the mid-1990s after viewing it with suspicion for many years.

**OPERATING EFFECTIVELY** in the East Asian multilateral arena will take continuous attention, tact and patience on the part of the US. Although East Asians want the US to be more active in multilateral undertakings, they would resist any move from Washington to dominate them. Informal consultation with other key players behind the scenes will be required for any American initiative to be successful.

If the US proceeds in this fashion, however, the incentives of the players are well aligned for finding multilateral solutions to regional security: East Asian countries seek effective mechanisms to constrain China and sustain a US presence in the region; the US wants to maintain its regional leadership; and China wants to prove to its neighbors that multilateralism can offer them greater security than US bilateral alliances alone.

Susan Shirk is director of the University of California system-wide Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation and Ho Miu Lam Professor of China and Pacific Relations at the School of International Relations and Pacific Studies at the University of California, San Diego. She served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State under President Bill Clinton from 1997 to 2000.