Changing Times, Changing Ties for the US, China, Japan and Korea

Mark Beeson
The extensive US alliance system in East Asia looks ever more targeted at Beijing. Could that risk miscalculations and even conflict?

Thomas Fingar
China’s rise and Japan’s efforts to become a more ‘normal’ nation are an opportunity for greater multilateral co-operation.

Alain Guidetti
There are complex dynamics and lessons for the US in the quietly growing strategic partnership between China and South Korea.
Can Asia’s Alliances Still Keep the Peace?
By Mark Beeson

ONE OF THE MOST distinctive features of the broadly conceived Asia-Pacific region is the system of alliance relationships established in the aftermath of the Second World War. The strategic architecture created by a hegemonic and newly victorious United States came to exert a profound influence over the states we have now come to refer to more commonly as East Asia. Indeed, so great was the influence of this “hub-and-spoke” network of alliances that it made little sense to actually talk about East Asia as anything other than the most basic of geographic descriptors. Due to profound, non-negotiable ideological divisions, geopolitics meant that the region — however it was described — simply didn’t exist as a coherent political entity.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the attention of policy-makers around the world, for a moment at least, seemed to focus on geo-economics rather than geopolitics. This might have been a time to expect alliances to fade from view. And for a while, they did. It is important to remember that when James Carville, a senior campaign strategist for former US President Bill Clinton’s first campaign for the presidency, famously observed that “it’s the economy, stupid,” he wasn’t just talking about the shift in America’s domestic political priorities. The 1990s were, after all, also the decade when China began its triumphant re-emergence on the world stage. Significantly, the initial “rise of China” was — and was perceived by the rest of the world as — almost exclusively an economic phenomenon, because its leaders took seriously Deng Xiaoping’s advice to keep a low international profile as they focused on domestic economic development. Now, however, China’s foreign policy in particular and regional security context more generally look very different.

As the US “pivots” back toward the region and China adopts an increasingly assertive — some would say aggressive — foreign policy stance, nervous regional states are fretting about being caught in the crossfire between a rising China and a possibly declining US. At this stage, the crossfire is rhetorical rather than real, but a growing number of observers point to the possibility of a military clash between the world’s most powerful countries, which might be triggered accidentally. At the same time, some of the US’s alliance partners in East Asia have begun to question America’s commitment, capacity and political will when it comes to fulfilling its alliance obligations. The key question that the rapidly evolving strategic landscape in the Asia-Pacific throws up is whether the alliance system is likely to prove a force for stability or help push the region into an unwanted and unexpected conflict.

For a region that has been principally known for its “miraculous” economic growth, this might seem an inherently unlikely prospect. And yet, this is what many observers thought about Western Europe before the outbreak of the First World War. Norman Angell’s The Great Illusion captured much of the contemporary zeitgeist when he argued that greater economic interdependence between the European powers had rendered war obsolete and irrational. Shortly afterwards, of course, Europe was engulfed by the “war to end all wars.” The complex alliance structures that existed between the principal European protagonists may not have been the sole explanation of Europe’s unwanted cataclysm, but it was plainly an important contributing factor. Could something similar happen in East Asia?

Before trying to answer this question, it is useful to say something about the logic of alliances generally and their particular trajectory in the Asia-Pacific region.

GOOD IN THEORY? There is a large and sophisticated literature dedicated to the study of alliances. Like most academic endeavors, it comes replete with its own language and assumptions that are often taken for granted and uncontested. The conventional wisdom, particularly in the US, is that America has been, in the words of former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, an “indispensable nation,” without which the world generally and the Asia-Pacific in particular, would have been much more unpredictable and unstable. It is not possible to re-run the course of regional history, so we have no way to compare such claims. We can say, however, that the US was both the principal protagonist of the major recent wars in East Asia and that its alliance relationships played a key part in the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam.

Both of these wars occurred within the wider context of the Cold War, which was anything but cold, of course — especially in East Asia. Nevertheless, the Cold War overlay meant that strategic relationships were not “normal” and that the expectations of theory did not apply as easily. For half a century, the unprecedented existential struggle between communism and capitalism gave a unique and decisive importance to alliance relationships even for those in the Soviet sphere of influence. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the unraveling and diminished importance of such ties for both communists and capitalists were not entirely surprising.

What is surprising has been the continuing importance of the US’s formal alliance relationships in the absence of the sort of overarching, existential threat that the Cold War posed. True, some states took the opportunity to strike
a more independent attitude in the Cold War’s aftermath. The departure of the US from its long-standing bases in the Philippines, for example, marked an important reconfiguration of Southeast Asia’s strategic geography. Elsewhere, however, the US’s alliances endured, even prospered. In Japan and Australia — the northern and southern anchors of America’s regional strategic presence — military ties with the US intensified despite the absence of any obvious threat to either country.

It is important to emphasize just how counterintuitive this is. According to some of the most influential interpretations of inter-state behavior, the “normal” pattern ought to have seen individual states become more concerned about the overwhelming power and influence of any single state, no matter what it happened to be. By the end of the 1990s, it became increasingly commonplace to talk about an era of American unipolarity and the emergence of the most dominant, unrivalled power since ancient Rome. Under such circumstances, we might have expected — indeed, ought to have expected, according to many international relations theorists — to see smaller, less powerful states seek to “balance” against rather than “bandwagon” with the US. In reality, of course, we saw the opposite, as Australia in particular became an enthusiastic participant in former President George W. Bush’s “war on terror.” Such behavior is arguably the rule rather than the exception and takes some explaining.

**BAD IN PRACTICE?**
States are not all alike. While this may be self-evident, it merits repetition because it is frequently not reflected in the way inter-state behavior is conceptualized. Not only do states come in various sizes and with wildly differing capabilities, state elites often think very differently about themselves and the purposes to which state power should be put. Even though Australia fulfilled its alliance obligations with its usual alacrity in the second Gulf War, it is noteworthy that some of its counterparts in the “Anglosphere” did not. Canada and New Zealand, for example, were noteworthy symbolic absentees, even if their actual participation would have made little difference to any military outcome. Indeed, given the US’s overwhelming military capacities, it is important to recognize that its allies are generally not required because of their ability to make a decisive difference military. On the contrary, the principal contribution that Australia, in particular, has made has been to give a strong sense of international legitimacy to actions that were essentially unilateral; the Bush administration’s catastrophically misguided invasion of Iraq is the quintessential case in point.

To President Barack Obama’s credit, he appears to have learned some salutary lessons about the limits — and costs — of American military power. True, the US could reduce North Korea to rubble tomorrow if it chose to do so, with a high degree of confidence that its actions would be unopposed, at least militarily. Revealingly and thankfully, however, America is constrained — in large part — by international norms, domestic pressures, the logic of international interdependence and its own sense of itself as a civilized nation. In this regard, perhaps, military might seems to be a wasting asset and simply not what it used to be; or it is as a rationally deployed, actively utilized means to a military end, at least. The reality is that the logic of conflict has also changed, and — in the absence of accident or miscalculation — overwhelming military power is not something that can be utilized even against significantly weaker, endlessly troublesome states with any certainty of success. The remarkable decline of inter-state war is Exhibit A in defense of this hypothesis.

And yet, the reason that alliances are the subject of renewed interest to scholars and policymakers alike, and why some are drawing comparisons with the Europe of one hundred years ago, is because it seems that large-scale war could be possible again — despite the fact that no one appears to want such an outcome. The key question that emerges within this context is whether the region’s alliance relationships are a force for stability or whether they could play the same sort of unwanted, unforeseen and catastrophic role that they did in the run-up to the First World War.

**DO ASIA’S ALLIANCES WORK?**
Formal alliances are designed to enhance the security of their members. They are established in response to some real, potential or imagined threat. The very formation of such an alliance, it is hoped, will draw in a more powerful security guarantor. There are a variety of reasons, however, for questioning whether this logic applies in East Asia’s unique historical and geographical conditions.

First, we might expect that weaker states would side with other, non-hegemonic powers like themselves. One of the main reasons alliances developed in the first place was to guard against the possibility of any one state becoming too powerful and thus threatening its weaker neighbors. Even if we allow for the fact that the US is an “off-shore balancer,” and exerts its supposed stabilizing influence over the East Asian region from afar, this is still a striking anomaly. The reality is that not only are some regional
states apparently reassured by America’s non-resident status, some are plainly more comfortable with a hegemonic power with which they feel a cultural affinity.

But while we may be able to identify specific contingent factors that account for the US’s historically privileged and paramount status, the more fundamental question is whether an American presence has proved decisive in keeping the peace. Here the evidence is ambiguous and contradictory. On the one hand, the US and key allies such as Australia have been at the sharp end of all the major (and some of the minor) conflicts of the last half century. On the other hand, while there has been a notable decline in the level of inter-state war, this has been a universal phenomenon and has not been something that is specifically attributable to the impact of America’s role or alliance relationships. Organized violence at the inter-state level seems to have gone out of fashion everywhere, with or without American assistance.

Threatening behavior that stops short of actual conflict is quite another matter, however. In this regard, the US’s very prominent strategic engagement and presence in the region have done little to curb the rise of China, a genuine peer competitor, and an increasingly confident one at that. Despite the presence of American troops in Japan, South Korea and elsewhere in Asia and the Pacific, China is increasingly assertive and its strategic influence, whether by military means or through economic pressures, is a threat of growing regional presence.

**ASSET OR LIABILITY?**

The parallels with Europe before the First World War are inexact but not irrelevant. The key point to make is that Europe’s complex system of alliances not only failed to deter war, it actually helped make it difficult to avoid. Certainly, there were many differences in the byzantine, endlessly shifting nature of European alliances; personalities mattered far more, too. The fact that Europeans in the early 20th century had no comprehension of the horrors that lay ahead or of the “efficiency” of modern weapons systems also distinguishes their time from ours. But the fact remains that the historical record suggests that alliance relationships may contribute to the very thing they are designed to avoid.

In the increasingly possible event of a clash between the growing number of Chinese and Japanese military assets in the East China Sea, for example, it is worth considering what the consequences might be. At the very least, we might expect that both countries would find it difficult to withdraw or de-escalate without losing face domestically. Indeed, if there is one factor that is becoming more analogous to the European situation, it is the increasingly prominent role played by nationalist sentiment at both the elite and popular levels. What is equally likely is that without a quick resolution of rapidly rising tensions, Japan would expect support from the US, its key security guarantor for more than half a century.

At a time when many doubt the Obama administration’s appetite for new “foreign entanglements,” America’s alliance obligations would be put to their most searching examination for many decades. If the US failed to support what is considered to be its most important ally in Asia, Japan, there would be little to curb the rise of China, a genuine peer competitor and an increasingly confident one at that. However, despite a general reluctance to name potential foes, China’s leaders feel—understandably enough—that whatever the origins of East Asia’s alliance system may have been, it is now directed toward them. While America’s alliance system may have done little to curb China’s growing strategic influence, it is arguably making the region less rather than more stable as China chafes at its constraints. If the goal is to both stabilize East Asia and move toward resolving some of the tensions that continue to undermine intra-regional relations, what might be substituted for an alliance system that seems anarchistic, divisive and ineffective?

**In the long-term, alliances offer no comfort — if they fail to deter and they have to be enacted, nothing is more certain than an economic, political and strategic catastrophe that would bring the region, if not the world, to its knees. Winston Churchill’s famous aphorism about jaw-jaw being better than war-war remains as pertinent as ever.**
The answer is far from self-evident. It is thus not hard to see why so many of the region’s policymakers prefer what they take to be the supposed certainties of material power and security guarantees over emollient platitudes about the possible mutual benefits of China’s peaceful rise. And yet, in the long-term, alliances offer no comfort — if they fail to deter and they have to be enacted, nothing is more certain than an economic, political and strategic catastrophe that would bring the region, if not the world, to its knees. Winston Churchill’s famous aphorism about jaw-jaw being better than war-war remains as pertinent as ever.

For all the criticism, even ridicule, to which the European Union has recently been subjected, it is important to remember that whatever else it may or may not have done, it has been a pivotal piece of a broader institutional architecture that has overseen the pacification of what was formerly one of the most violent regions on earth. Europeans found ways to kill one another on a scale that still sets an unenviable benchmark for organized violence. Institutionalized intra-regional relations and the self-evident economic benefits of peace and co-operation transformed a region where historical antagonisms were deep and seemingly implacable.

This may not be the most auspicious moment to be arguing for European-style institutional development in a region that is famously suspicious of transnational authority and where national sovereignty is still jealously guarded. Unlikely as it may seem, however, is it any more unrealistic than supposing that an alliance structure that was created during the Cold war is capable of maintaining the peace, much less resolving the underlying disputes and tensions that threaten its continuity? Yet to judge by the surprisingly high number of regional initiatives of one sort or another, there is clearly the potential — even the demand, perhaps — for regionally based organizations with which to address common problems.

If ever there was an organization that was potentially in the right place at the right time, it is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum.

The trick, as ever, is to realize this potential and give such organizations the capacity and authority to make a difference. This will require a cultural change on the part of the smaller ASEAN powers, and willingness on the part of the region’s great powers to take such multilateral forums seriously, with all the diminution of autonomy that collective decision-making implies. China, the US and its allies need to recognize that the best hope for continuing stability in the world’s most important economic region lies in some sort of institutionalized *modus vivendi*. This may seem unlikely, but it is infinitely preferable to some of the possible alternatives.

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