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Regional Security: Is "Architecture" All We Need?

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In October 2007 the Stanley Foundation, in collaboration with the RSIS, convened a conference to explore "Changing Security Cooperation and Competition: New Power Dynamics in Southeast Asia." This conference, which addressed a range of traditional and non-traditional security issues shaping regional dynamics, is a major component of an ongoing, multiyear Stanley Foundation project on "New Power Dynamics in Southeast Asia: Issues for US Policy" that examines the impact of changing power relations in the Asia-Pacific region on Southeast Asian politics, security, and economics, and the implication of these trends for US policy. As part of the conference Richard Smith, former Australian Ambassador to Indonesia and China and former Secretary of the Department of Defence, was asked to deliver a luncheon talk on "Regional Security: Is "Architecture" All We Need?" The text of Smith's speech is reproduced, below.

Over nearly 40 years in government, I readily made my career in Asia and the Pacific because I took the view that this was a region in which the interests of my country, Australia, would forever remain most critically engaged. These 40 years have, as it turns out, been a period of special interest in this part of the world. Each of the four decades since 1970 has been different.

The '70s was the decade which saw India and Pakistan at war; the end of the Vietnam War, sometimes called the "second Indo-China war"; and then in 1978-79 the Sino-Vietnamese war, that is, the "third Indo-China war." These were significant and immensely preoccupying events, to be sure, but they were far from being the most important events of the decade. Far more significant for their long-term impact were President Nixon's visit to China in1972, with all that it meant for the global political landscape then and far into the future; and the decision of the Chinese leadership under Deng Xiao Ping, in late 1978, to change the direction of China's economy. Looking back now, in a world seemingly bereft of big ideas, we can only be astonished at the audacity of those two decisions. The world since then has been different because of them.

The '80s was a bridging decade. We weren't quite used to living without war, we hadn't quite got the idea that it was increasingly going to be "all about the economy," and only at the end did it dawn on us that the Cold War, that great organizing principle of the previous 40 years, had been in its death throes. As the dawning came and we entered the '90s, we fumbled around for new organizing principles. We contemplated "peace dividends," and a world in which our intelligence efforts would be redirected to economic targets. And, missing the reassurance of the old bipolar world, we went in search of new alignments in the name of "regionalism," which momentarily gained an almost doctrinaire status and led to some defining debates about which countries belonged to which regions.

Then of course came the new millennium, and with it reminders that security remained a real and legitimate international concern. First impressions were of a new

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agenda based around terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, failing states, and other matters of "nontraditional security." Then, reflecting further, we came to realize that, important as these matters are, they don't threaten states or reshape power balances. And so attention has now turned again to the notion of shifts in power relativities among states which are seen to offer the prospect of conflict at the strategic level.

The Defining Themes

In all of this, two defining themes have been engaged. The first is globalization; the second is the rise of Asia. Both have had a profound effect on world affairs.

This is not an occasion in which to dwell on globalization beyond making two points relevant to Asia. The first is that globalization has transformed not just the way business is done but also the business agenda of international affairs—the substance, that is, as well as the machinery. Above all, it has had what I call an "economaking" effect: it has raised economics to a new level of importance in world affairs. As Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley have said in their excellent work on *The Making of Australian Foreign Policy*, power relationships are now tied to economic performance. Some states are seen to be competitive while others are not. The influence of states in world affairs depends less on their size or history, and more on their economic performance. To put it another way, economics has gained a new and bigger role in defining *strategic weight*.

The second point to make about globalization is that it has gone hand in glove with the rise of Asia. The Asian economies, especially the new ones, have both benefited from globalization and helped drive it. Thus more than 40 percent of China's economic growth derives from external sources, while China in turn is reckoned to have driven 25 percent of world economic growth in an era in which we have had an unprecedented six consecutive years of positive global growth.

This leads me to the second of what I've called the "defining themes" of our times, namely, the rise of Asia. The distinguished historian and strategist Niall Ferguson tells us that the rise of Asia has been the most important historical trend of the last century, a proposition that owes something to the decline of Europe and much to the unleashing of Asia's economic potential. We can argue about when to date the rise of Asia—from 1942 or from 1945 or from the '60s, after Japan's remarkable recovery and takeoff and the completion, mostly, of Asia's decolonization. But the overall point nevertheless remains the same: Asia is no longer the playground of non-Asian powers, it has power in its own right.

There have of course been two aspects to the rise of Asia. The first has been economic; and, as I have suggested, in the post-global world that is critical in itself in defining power.

The second has been strategic. Historians tell us that when new powers rise, the old powers are discomforted and anxious and rivalry and tensions follow. The question then is, how will the old powers respond: by seeking to limit or contain the new powers, or to push them back or draw lines in the sand? Or by moving over, and accommodating them? And how will the new powers comport themselves—in accordance with the norms of the world they have come into, or by seeking to assert and impose themselves?

Regional Security

This conference is about strategic and security issues in Southeast Asia, but those issues have to be seen in the wider context of the changes that have taken place across Asia as a whole. While it used to be reasonable and—for policymakers at least—convenient to regard Northeast and Southeast Asia as separate strategic entities or subregions, it is now more difficult to make this distinction. South Asia—that is, the Indian subcontinent—is to a larger degree still a separate strategic entity because it is yet less well integrated with the rest of Asia and has its own set of issues, but that situation too may change in time.

But why are we so preoccupied, here at least, with this subject called "regional security"? A traveler arriving anew in Asia would quickly see and feel the economic growth, and digest the learned journals on Asia economic growth and the glossy lifestyle magazines that adorn the hotel suites, watch the hourly stock-exchange reports on television, and hear the taxi drivers exchanging market tips. From this, the traveler might conclude not only that it is, indeed, "all about the economy" but also that peace has won. Our traveler might also note that there has not been a war between states in Asia for a whole generation and ask, "is it not true that this whole edifice of growth and prosperity would be put at risk by military conflict?" And yes, competition rules, but is this competition not built on a framework of cooperation that it is in everyone's interest to maintain? If challenged about whether the "architecture" of regional security is adequate, our traveler, increasingly skeptical about all this talk of security, might look around and say,"well, something must be working."

Having answered these rhetorical questions, our traveler might decide to forgo the opportunity to attend a security conference, and instead join the circuit which offers those ubiquitous economic and business conferences and seminars. And having done so, she would likely find herself in her future travels more at home in New York than in Washington, in the City than in Westminster, in Sydney than in Canberra, in Shanghai than in Beijing.

We would all like to believe that the triumph of the economy has been accompanied by a triumph of rational decision making in relations between states, and that it has become redundant to even think about military conflict. We can all hope that is true, but if we believed it we wouldn't be here. The best strategists have a good base in the study of history, which I suspect is what makes them pessimists. They are ever ready to remind us that economic progress and high levels of integration, by themselves, do not guarantee peace. And for policymakers, the dictum remains as ever it was—in all things, prudence, and in matters of war and peace and national security, great prudence.

The fact is that security issues live on in this region. They live on at four levels. The first is the *strategic level*: how will the old cope with the new, will the world order adapt quickly enough to accommodate the aspirations of the new, will the new respect the norms of the existing system? If a balance of power is still essential, or enough players think it is, how will it be arrived at—and will we recognize it? And isn't the old set of unwritten understandings about where the lines are drawn now redundant? Specifically, in relation to Taiwan, the one "live" issue in the region with the potential to cause a strategic fissure, can it be managed without conflict?

The second and related level is about *nuclear and other weapons* proliferation. Already since the Cold War two more Asian states, India and Pakistan, have broken out—and North Korea, less a client state now than ever, remains an unpredictable risk, albeit the management of that problem looks more promising now than it did six months ago. Will Japan and South Korea and Taiwan continue to accept the validity of the US nuclear umbrella in a world in which their interests might not now be quite the same as those of the United States, and in which the United States is likely to be seen to have suffered a strategic setback in the Middle East? And what anyway of the proliferation of missiles, with all the potential they offer for intimidating neighbors and fighting wars at greater distance?

The third level of concern is about the plethora of still unresolved territorial *disputes* in Asia. Scores of them exist to this today, ranging from Kashmir in the West through the disputes in the South China Sea to those in Northeast Asia over the Diaoyu or Senkaku Islands and the Japanese territories.

And the fourth level of concern is about that endless range of *nontraditional security issues*. "Nontraditional" is of course an inadequate euphemism where it applies to terrorism, whose cancerous cells remain active in Indonesia and the Philippines and elsewhere, and anyway an inaccurate description of matters like people smuggling, organized crime, piracy, and so on because they are hardly "nontraditional." It remains nevertheless a useful enough label for a category of activities which are prevalent in this region, that is, activities which endanger people and challenge the sovereign authority of states but don't actually challenge their existence as states.

This is a fairly standard taxonomy of the issues that define our landscape, but for the sake of this discussion let me suggest two more issues for your consideration. One is the number of countries in the region whose *political destinies* are less than certain. I would include Burma in this list, and also North Korea, changes to which could conceivably implicate South Korea as well. Some might add China, too. The question is, in regard to their political structure and how they are ruled, will these states look the same 20 years from now as they do today and, if not, how will we get from here to there? Will it be by evolution, painless to the rest of us, or by revolution which puts at risk our shared economic success and thus erodes the cooperative peace on which it has been premised?

The second issue we might consider is that of *defense spending* in Asia. In many regions of the world spending on arms has fallen in the last decade, but that is not true for Asia as a whole. The pattern is uneven—the more successful economies are spending more, the less successful are spending less, so the gap between the military haves and have nots is growing.

The good news is that spending seems to be declining in most countries as a percentage both of GDP and of government spending (including in China, where outlays on health and education are growing faster than spending on the People's Liberation Army). In absolute terms, however, spending on military personnel and equipment is increasing across the region, which if nothing else tells us that the governments of the region have not accepted the argument that peace has won, war has lost, or that it is all about the economy.

Regional "Architecture"

This then is the context for the continuing focus on security in this part of the world. It is a setting in which regional security architecture is a subject of continuing attention. The question asked is whether the region's consultative machinery, its mechanisms for security consultation and problem solving, are robust enough. And there is a persistent perception that they are not, that the security burden is too heavy for the structures the architects have given us.

Let me contest this view. In doing so, I should first declare an interest as one who had some part in the creation of one of the existing institutions or architectural pieces, namely, the ASEAN Regional Forum (or ARF).

The ASEAN Regional Forum

Having declared that interest, let me diverge for a few moments to talk a little about what we had in mind when we developed the ARF. What we did not have in mind, incidentally, was that we might create a whole new area of reflection and analysis for scholars and researchers, though that seems to have happened anyway.

The work I was involved in came to a head at a meeting in Singapore in mid-1993 of those senior officials of the ASEAN members and their dialogue partners whose task it was to prepare the way for the annual Post Ministerial Conference (or PMC). There had been some discussion over the previous couple of years, in the wake of the Cold War, about developing new security arrangements in the region. The Canadians and some Singaporeans had floated some ideas, and the Australian foreign minister had put up a trial balloon about a possible Asian version of the OSCE. While we all saw the unworkability in the Asian context of some of the ideas that were around, there was nevertheless a consensus among the more active of us that at the least we needed a forum in which regional security matters could be talked about by regional members. The PMC allowed some discussion of these things, but in an ad hoc way and of course neither China, Russia, nor Vietnam were members.

Singapore was the ASEAN chair that year, and suggested an informal discussion of these matters at the end of the usual more formal officials' meeting. This happened before lunch on the last day, and after a discussion between a number of us during the lunch break we decided, given the general support for a more inclusive forum, to canvass a proposal to recommend to ministers a new add-on to the annual PMC, namely, a meeting on security matters to which China, Russia, and Vietnam, and the other Indo-China states, would be invited.

The American delegation at the meeting was cautious, in part I suppose because Washington always preferred bilateral security arrangements—and I think still does—and was wary about concepts of the cooperative security type. But we talked to Winston Lord, who did some quick consulting and, at the last minute, signaled that he would support what we wanted to propose. Getting support from the rest of the meeting then became easy, although we had apparently out-run the Japanese delegation's approved brief and it became necessary for them to take the idea back home for approval before it was included in the report to ministers for their meeting in July. Ministers then signed off on the idea, including the name, and agreed that the first meeting should be held in Bangkok the following year.

The other countries were duly invited. Russia, as I recall, was quite keen—in the early days after the collapse of the Soviet Union they were ready to be in anything. The Chinese were very wary, suspecting that this was part of some wider plot to socialize China, or even to actually gang up on it. On the first point at least, they were not far off the mark. At all events, this was happening in the lingering shadow of Tiananmen Square, and China's "dance card" was not exactly full, so the Chinese said "yes"—and of course as time went by they came to see that, far from having to be on the defensive in the ARF, China could in fact work the forum to its advantage.

I should add here that, for Australia, the role we played in supporting the emergence of the ARF was related not only to our interest in having a forum for the discussion of security matters. It was also consistent with our objectives of growing a sense of community in the region—a community, that is, which we could be part of—and of finding ways in which the United States could be kept engaged in Asia after the Cold War. For our part too, we knew that it would be impossible to get an entirely new organization off the ground, and that the only way to get to first base at least would be to work with ASEAN—its members shared our objectives in general, and it carried an automatic six votes, as it were. And so the new forum was grafted on to ASEAN.

Our approach was to get the ARF up and running, and then to see where it went to. In the context of the times, the establishment of the Forum was a strategic level achievement, but it has not functioned at that level. The consensus seems to be that while it is a useful talk shop, and a talk shop is certainly better than no shop at all, it has not proven much more than that—apart as I said from generating a lot of conferences and seminars for academics and middle-level officials. Most of the latter, incidentally, have been from foreign ministries. Defense organizations, while tending to prefer bilateral relationships, have developed a tradition of meetings between regional defense force chiefs and service chiefs, but their less-than-wholehearted support for the regional security agenda run by foreign ministries and academics has been an interesting subtext in the regional narrative of the last 15 years.

Other "Architecture"

The ARF is of course but one part of the region's *multilateral* architecture. Above it lie APEC, the East Asian Summit, ASEAN Plus Three, and of course ASEAN itself with its Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and a new charter about to be concluded. Beyond that, the region is adorned by architectural designs almost too numerous to mention—some regional, like the Five Power Defence Arrangements and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; some single-issue focused, most notably the six-party talks; some semi-governmental, and some nongovernmental. The most significant government-level development in recent years has been the establishment by ASEAN of a regular meeting of defense ministers which in time might, we are told, come to include dialogue-country representatives.

The Shangri-la Dialogue also deserves comment. It has been convened here in Singapore by the IISS for each of the last six years and attended by defense ministers or their equivalents. Its conference role is interesting and has gained momentum, but at this stage its greater value lies in the opportunity it provides for bilateral meetings among the ministers, military chiefs, and senior officials who attend, which is presumably one reason why the US Defense Secretary has attended for the last four or five years.

All this multilateral architecture is supported by a range of *bilateral* relationships. The most prominent of these are the formal strategic alliances between the United States and respectively Australia, Japan, and South Korea, and also Thailand and the Philippines (albeit we have heard less of these two lately). Singapore also has some strong bilateral relationships at a slightly less-than-treaty level, including with the United States and Australia. Various other bilateral arrangements exist between other countries, an increasing number of them supported by formal agreements; for the most part their significance is political or practical rather than genuinely strategic, but this is not to suggest they are unimportant.

There has in fact been more activity lately at this secondary level of architecture than at the multilateral level. Relationships have also developed between India and a number of others, especially but not only the United States, which became possible after the Cold War ended and India emerged into the economic mainstream. As well, the Australian and Chinese governments recently announced a new, annual strategic dialogue between their foreign ministers.

At another level, the emergence since 2001 of the US/Japan/Australia strategic dialogue has brought regional significance to the previously separate alliance strands that run through Washington. More recently, Prime Minister Abe signaled Japan's interest in developing its strategic relationship with India and suggested a four-way relationship between Japan, India, the United States, and Australia. There is some skepticism about how far this will proceed now that Abe has gone, and doubts persist anyway about whether shared democratic systems are really a basis for enduring strategic relationships. These developments nevertheless reflect hedging adjustments in response to the changes occurring in the region, not just the rise of China and potentially of India, but also Japan's interest in playing a more normal role in world affairs.

In the end however these new relationships should not be overestimated. They certainly cannot—and should not—be construed as the emergence of an "Asian NATO." No such construct is necessary in this region because there is no agreed or common enemy or threat. Nor is the containment strategy of which NATO was a critical part in Europe appropriate in a time or a region in which open and interlinked economies are driving new levels of prosperity. Moreover, alliance relationships, in which governments commit themselves to come to each other's defense in the event of attack, are not relevant in a multifaceted environment: absent a common threat, states will not want to make themselves hostage to the vicissitudes of the ways other states conduct their international relationships.

Let's be clear about this: caution in this area is not simply a matter of "not offending China," though it would of course be silly in any line of business to cause gratuitous offense to one's biggest client. What remains important is to keep China locked in. We cannot risk driving China into harness with Russia, whose reappearance in the region might yet prove an event of strategic significance in itself. Nor is it in anyone's interest to create a situation in which the Shanghai Cooperation Organization came to see itself as "Asia's Warsaw Pact" in response to "Asia's NATO."

Notwithstanding that the landscape is thus littered with architecture, there are calls for more. No forum, it is said, is addressing the big picture, that is, what sort of power balance do we want, do we need a new "concert of Asia"? And no serious effort is being put into dispute resolution in relation, for example, to the South China Sea, let alone seeking to manage the possibility of an arms race or a missile-building competition.

I would beg to differ. Yes, if we were starting afresh, we might want to build something different. But we've got what we've got, most governments are overstretched in servicing what already exists, and we can be sure that none of the existing structures will be dismantled—they are in their different ways serving useful regional community roles, and anyway far too many rice bowls are at stake for that to happen.

Yes, the existing forums are imperfect for the tasks described by the critics, but they can be made to work. The APEC leaders' forum for instance, like APEC itself, has been flawed by the inclusion of countries marginal to its original purpose and far from East Asia, and of course Taiwan's membership constrains what it can do in the security area. But when the need arose to develop an agreed formula to handle the developing East Timor crisis in 1999, the leaders, meeting in Auckland, were up to the task. And they were up to it again when they met in Shanghai shortly after 9/11.

The East Asia Summit could surely also be used to address big issues. In neither the APEC Leaders' Meeting nor the EAS, if that were the vehicle, is there always a need for all 20-plus leaders to meet. To use the parlance of the circus, a summit can always be seen as a "big top," under which on any one day performances involving different groupings of players can be run in two or three or more rings.

Conclusion

Let me conclude then with this thought. What is needed is not new architecture but, rather, the imagination and the will to use what we have. This in turn probably requires some cultural change. Ministers might have to stand up and play more active roles in the existing forums, rather than letting officials set the agendas. And leadership and even statesmanship might be required from heads of government and states in their numerous summits.

Beyond this though there is a need for ideas of the right scale and kind. The APEC leaders delivered, when there was a crisis, something tangible they could wrap their skilled political hands around. I expect the EAS could do the same if it had to, albeit without the United States it might be limited in what it could achieve. The question is, however, whether this diverse region can produce and drive home big ideas outside crisis situations.

For this, there are two prerequisites. The first is the idea itself, and the courage to advocate it. I won't venture a view here on what that idea might be, though I assume it would have to be built around the need to ensure a security environment which supports sustainable economic growth in the region.

This is not intended as a comment on the political situation in any one or more of the countries of the region, but the fact is that there is an end-of-cycle feeling to regional affairs now. New life is needed. It may well be that with the political changes which are inevitable over the next year and a half, there will come an appetite for some new thinking.

As to the second prerequisite, timing, I return here to the point I made about Singapore being in the ASEAN chair at the right time to allow the ARF idea to come to fruition. More recently, Singapore has stood up again as the chair of ASEAN to produce a defining position on Burma. Over the next two years, Singapore will be in the driving seat again, first as ASEAN and EAS chair and then in 2009 as the chair of APEC. So, if we can define the big idea, the two prerequisites might just be in place to see it through—that is, leaders ready for it, and the right driver in the seat.

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