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The Evolving Asian System: Implications for the Regional Security Architecture

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Security does not operate in a vacuum, and security architectures are likewise embedded in broader regional/global dynamics. Thus, consideration of the Asia-Pacific security architecture must necessarily take account of the principal elements and factors that collectively constitute the “system” in the region today. The regional system in Asia today is quite fluid and complex. New features are appearing while old characteristics (i.e. alliances) are being redefined. As a result of this fluidity, the evolving Asian system is not easily described or defined. No single characteristic is dominant. Rather, a number of factors operate quite independently, yet reinforce each other; taken together, they constitute the regional system *qua* system.

Before describing the essential elements that I believe constitute the current Asian regional system, let me hasten to note several models that do not characterize the emerging regional order. International relations in Asia, it seems to me, are *not* characterized by:

1. a hegemonic system, dominated by any single power;
2. major power rivalry or a balance of power system, characterized by two competing major powers;
3. a concert of powers, in which power is roughly equally divided among 3-5 nations and stability is provided by their collective actions;
4. a condominium of powers, whereby the two strongest powers in the region collaborate to dominate the region
5. structural asymmetry and the inevitable clash between the main established power (U.S) and the main rising power (China);
6. a hierarchy of powers, with one power atop a pyramid of less powerful and subservient nations;
7. a region-wide collective security network;
8. bandwagoning with the region’s strongest powers (U.S., China, Japan)

In considering the Asian system today, it is very important to consider the full spectrum of possibilities, not just the existing features, so that we can be mindful of directions in which the regional system may move in the future.

Indeed, several of these models characterized the regional system in the past—and may do so again in the future. While each of these alternative models are conceptual *possibilities*, I do not see evidence for any of these at present.

Thus, let us examine the six elements that I believe *collectively* comprise the regional order today. Among these six, no single element is dominant—rather, taken together, they comprise a “mosaic of models” that capture the complexities and essence of international relations in Asia today.

The U.S.-Led Security System

First, the U.S.-led security system remains the predominant regional security architecture across Asia. This includes a number of elements: the five bilateral alliances in East Asia; non-allied security partnerships in Southeast Asia, South Asia and Oceania; the buildup of forces in the Southwest Pacific; the new U.S.-India and U.S.-Pakistan military relationships; and the U.S. military presence and defense arrangements in Southwest and Central Asia. Taken together, these comprise the dominant security architecture across all of Asia. No country can match the United States in these regards.

The alliance system is commonly referred to as the “hub and spokes” model, with the United States serving as the hub of a wheel with each of the five bilateral alliances (Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand) serving as the spokes. The system has benefited the United States and its Asian allies for more five decades and has been the predominant regional security architecture since the end of the Vietnam War. It has been central to the maintenance of strategic stability and economic development throughout the East Asian region. Even China has benefited from the regional security and

stability engendered by the system, which has provided a conducive environment for China's recent explosive economic development.

During the second Clinton administration, but particularly during the George W. Bush administration, the United States has sought to strengthen each of these bilateral alliances. Strengthening has involved some redefinition as well. The alliances with Australia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea have undergone the greatest redefinition and strengthening.

In the case of the U.S.-Australian alliance this has involved stepped-up joint military training and intelligence sharing, as well as the prepositioning of supplies and logistics support. Australia has also contributed to the "coalition of the willing" by deploying troops to Iraq.

In the case of Japan this has involved collaboration on theater missile defense (TMD), a resolution of the nettlesome Okinawa bases issue (with redeployment of the Third Marine Expeditionary Force), and the issuance of a Joint 2+2 Statement on mutual security interests (which outlined twelve common strategic objectives, including a controversial clause identifying Taiwan as a matter of "mutual security concern"¹). The U.S. Global Defense Posture Review also envisions changes in deployments and command structures that increase joint military interoperability and further facilitate Japan's involvement in global peacekeeping operations.

The U.S.-ROK alliance has also undergone redefinition insofar as the Pentagon has decided to redeploy some forces out of central Seoul and away from the DMZ, but the alliance has also undergone substantial strain owing to

¹ See *Joint Statement of U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee*, February 19, 2005, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/42490.htm>.

rising anti-Americanism in South Korea as well as divisions between Seoul and Washington over handling of the North Korean nuclear crisis.

The U.S.-Philippines and U.S.-Thailand alliances have also been upgraded. Both have been designated as “major non-NATO allies,” thus qualifying them for large security assistance packages. In both cases, cooperation on counter-terrorism operations has assumed a central place in joint training and other assistance.

In addition to strengthening these alliances, the United States has moved to solidify non-allied security partnerships (sometimes dubbed “Cooperative Security Locations” by Pentagon planners) with India, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Singapore. In each case, these security partnerships involve joint exercises, training, intelligence sharing, arms sales, military educational exchanges, and a wide range of military assistance programs. Indonesia has recently requalified for U.S. military assistance programs, and military-military exchanges have also commenced between the U.S and Vietnam. In Central Asia, the U.S. maintains air bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, in connection with the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Each of these security partnerships are significant in their own right, but taken together strongly supplement the five bilateral alliances and constitute a dense web of security and military relationships between the United States and the majority of Asian nations stretching from Northeast to Southwest Asia. Only North Korea, Laos, China, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Nepal lie outside the purview of U.S. defense arrangements. Notable too is the fact that these alliances

and security partnerships geographically ring China. This is no accident, and represents U.S. “strategic hedging” against the potential for a disruptive China.²

In addition to such strategic partnering with various nations, the United States has also undertaken its own unilateral military buildup in the western Pacific. Guam in particular is being built up into a forward base of major significance. The forces deployed there are directly relevant to China, potential contingencies in the Taiwan Strait or Korean Peninsula, and can also be used deployments into the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and broader Middle East. Andersen Air Force base on Guam is home to the 13th Air Force command, and includes growing numbers of B-1, B-2, and B-52 strategic bombers; C-17 Globemaster long-range transports; Global Hawk and E-2 Hawkeye reconnaissance aircraft; F/A-18 Hornet fighters; in-flight refueling tankers and other aircraft. Guam is also now home to a growing number of Los Angeles class nuclear attack submarines, and a growing number of surface combatants. Consideration is also being given to homeporting an aircraft carrier battle group there. The Third Marine Expeditionary Force is also being relocated from Okinawa to Guam.

Thus, any consideration of the regional system and security architecture in the Asia-pacific region must begin with, and take full account of, U.S. security ties with these nations. Despite the pervasiveness of this U.S.-led security system, it cannot be claimed that the system is truly and fully regional. A number of countries—most notably China—remain unaffiliated, and have no compelling

² See Evan Medeiros, “Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia-Pacific Stability,” *The Washington Quarterly* (Winter 2005 -06).

reasons to join. Nonetheless, it is this U.S.-led system that provides for regional stability and security—public goods from which *all* Asian nations derive benefit.

A Proactive China

One of the most significant developments of the past decade has been China's proactive engagement of its periphery.³ China's new proactive regional posture is reflected in virtually all policy spheres—economic, cultural, diplomatic, and strategic—and this parallels China's increased activism on the global stage. In each of these realms, the efforts and progress of China in reaching out to its neighbors has been truly impressive (with the notable exceptions of Japan and Taiwan).

As China has reached out, all nations around China have reciprocated and have redefined their relations with Beijing, as well as with one another. As China's influence continues to grow, some of these countries are looking to Beijing for regional leadership or, at a minimum, are taking China's views and sensitivities more into account. Others are less certain of Beijing's short-term motives and long-term consistency, and are hence hedging their bets by tightening their relationships with the United States (see above) and simultaneously seeking to bind China into a dense web of institutional arrangements that will constrain its potential for disrupting regional security. Nonetheless, China's proactive engagement of its periphery is of major importance in defining the emerging regional order. Overcoming its earlier hesitancy to engage in regional multilateral forums, China has taken an active

³ For further elaboration, see David Shambaugh (ed.), *Power Shift: China & Asia's New Dynamics* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 2005); David Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Winter 2004/05); Pan Zhongying, "Yazhou Diqu Zhixu de Zhuanbian yu Zhongguo" [China and the Transformation of the Asian Regional Order], *Waijiao Pinglun*, No. 4 (2005), pp. 41-49.

role in many. Beijing has also worked hard to address and alleviate one of the region's most contentious issue: the North Korean nuclear crisis.

Bilaterally and multilaterally, Beijing's diplomacy has been remarkably adept and nuanced, earning praise around the region. As a result, most nations (the notable exceptions being Japan and Taiwan) in the region now see China as a good neighbor, constructive partner, and non-threatening regional power. This regional perspective is striking, given that just a few years ago many of China's neighbors voiced growing concerns about the possibility of China becoming a domineering regional hegemon and powerful military threat. Today these views are more muted. Even former adversaries—such as Vietnam, India, Indonesia, South Korea, and Russia—now enjoy steadily improving relations with Beijing. To be sure, Beijing's strained relations with Japan are a major blight on this otherwise positive trend, and various countries (particularly Singapore, Vietnam, and India) are hedging by strengthening their ties with the U.S.—but, overall, China's cooperative diplomacy has become a defining—and positive—feature of the emerging regional order.

“Hedged Engagement” Between the U.S. and China

The relationship between the United States and China remains the most important bilateral relationship, with truly regional (if not global) consequences. On balance, this complex relationship is characterized by substantial cooperation on bilateral, regional, and global issues—while, despite this tangible and positive cooperation, there remain evident suspicions and distrust of the other's motives and actions. As a result, the state of Sino-American relations today may be characterized by David M. Lampton's phrase “hedged

engagement.”⁴ Both sides are engaging to a significant extent, yet are hedging against the possibility of a deterioration of ties.⁵ Looking to the future, the Sino-American relationship is likely to continue to exhibit these dialectical features.

While the two nations cooperate on a number of regional and global issues, the relationship is not a condominium of two-power domination. While they occasionally display traditional balance of power and strategic hedging features, it should be recognized that Sino-American *cooperation* is real and significant. Further, it must be recognized that the *absence* of Sino-American antagonism is an important feature of the regional order. While some Asian countries may hedge against either U.S. or Chinese regional domination, and adroitly acquire whatever resources and benefits they can from both China and the United States, *every one* of these countries seeks a stable, cooperative Sino-American relationship. Should Beijing and Washington one day confront each other, all regional states would be put in the awkward position of having to choose sides—and this they seek to avoid at all costs.

To be sure, there are tensions in the relationship at present. The ballooning trade deficit is probably primary, as both sides appear to have worked well together to manage the Taiwan issue and the Chen Shuibian government in Taipei (effectively curtailing its independence inclinations). Intellectual property rights (IPR) are a concern. North Korea is as well. Human rights remain an irritant. China’s military modernization is viewed warily by Washington, while the U.S. security partnerships and military buildup in the Pacific

⁴ David M. Lampton, “Paradigm Lost,” *The National Interest* (Fall 2005).

⁵ Medeiros, *op cit*.

(described above) are of concern to Beijing. These are all real concerns, but none are grounds for a significant cleavage in the relationship.

The principal tasks before Washington and Beijing are thus to manage these issues, maximize cooperation, engage in regular and candid dialogue, and minimize strategic competition. This requires regular, institutionalized exchanges between the two governments and militaries at all levels. Reducing misperceptions and enhancing trust should be a priority. To be sure, dialogue is no guarantor of agreement—but it is an important confidence building measure that can lead to tangible cooperation. The past few years have witnessed significantly increased bilateral dialogue in all sectors and at all levels. This represents a real institutionalization of the relationship, and while there are frictions (which are discussed), the very fact that the two governments interact so intensively across the full spectrum of relations—including now military—is a good and positive indicator that a “floor” exists beneath the often fluctuant relationship.

A Deteriorating China -Japan Relationship

While Sino-American relations are characterized by a mixture of engagement and hedging, with significant cooperation and extensive exchanges, unfortunately the same cannot be said for Sino-Japanese relations. This relationship between two of Asia’s four leading powers (India and the United States being the others) has progressively atrophied in recent years. It is on the verge of being dysfunctional, despite the robust economic relationship between the two nations. Some describe it as “hot economics, cold politics,” but in fact the relationship is more complex than that. Suspicions, nationalism, and

hostility run deep in each society. Mutual perceptions are increasingly negative. The “history issue” hangs as a dark cloud over the entire relationship, and repeated visits to the Yasakuni Shrine by Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi is an unnecessary irritant. To make matters worse, the potential for military engagements over disputed maritime claims in the East China Sea/Sea of Japan and around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is growing.

This is a combustible environment. The maritime/energy dispute could ignite a broader confrontation that could quickly escalate, and would put the United States into a very delicate and uncomfortable position. Given its alliance with Japan, Washington would have little choice but to side with Tokyo in any such dispute (although this may not be in America’s best strategic interests). The atrophy in relations needs to be arrested immediately, and a series of confidence building measures established. The United States can, and should, play a constructive role in this process. The deteriorating Sino-Japanese relationship is not simply a bilateral matter—it has truly regional implications. If China-Japan relations are not stable, East Asia is not stable.

An Emerging Normative Security Community

The fifth defining feature of the evolving regional order is the gradual emergence of a regional security community and growing multilateral architecture that is based on a series of increasingly shared norms (about interstate relations and security). The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is the cornerstone of this emerging regional community, but the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are also important component parts. These organizations

are forms of cooperative, rather than collective, security. China's growing embrace of the ARF and a potential "regional security community" is a positive sign and may move the region gradually in the direction of further institutionalization. Consideration being given among security specialists in Northeast Asia for evolving the Six Party Talks into some kind of Northeast Asian cooperative security mechanism should also be further explored.

In non-traditional security, regional cooperation is already occurring in a wide variety of areas: economic security; nonproliferation; resource management; public health; counter-terrorism; countering narcotics; countering smuggling; countering piracy; countering organized crime; countering human trafficking; container security; disaster relief, etc. Asian nations are also increasingly engaging in combined military exercises. Energy security is an issue ripe for multilateral cooperation.

Although the growth of multilateralism in Asia has had a late start compared with Europe or the Americas—and it has a long way to go to reach comparable levels of institutional integration—there has nonetheless been significant progress in recent years. One reason for the increase in the number of dialogues, groupings, and multilateral mechanisms in Asia has been the growing acceptance of common norms within the region. Such ideational agreement must precede the formation of institutional architectures; but once norms are institutionalized, they have a kind of binding effect on member states. To be sure, the diversity of Asian societies, cultures, and economic and political systems will be a challenge for Asian states to overcome, but there are increasing signs of normative convergence around the region.

Regional Interdependence

The final feature of the evolving Asian system is oriented not around security affairs or major power relations, but around the increasingly dense web of economic, scientific, technological, cultural, societal, educational and other ties being forged among Asian nations in the era of accelerating globalization. The core actor in this model is not necessarily the nation-state, but a plethora of non-state actors and processes—many of which are difficult to measure with any precision—that operate at the societal level. These multiple threads bind societies together in complex and interdependent ways. Indeed, they point up another significant way in which the Asian region is changing: its traditional geographic subcomponents—Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Southwest Asia, and Central Asia—are no longer useful intellectual constructs for dividing or distinguishing the macro processes occurring throughout the region. In the 21st century, these five sub-regions are all increasingly interconnected and interdependent at numerous levels.

Regional interdependence is a rapidly accelerating trend, it serves as a powerful deterrent to conflict, and it is conducive to peace and stability (including across the Taiwan Strait). Yet as profound as this dynamic is, interdependence by itself is insufficient to establish a dominant regional system in Asia. It does not operate at the nation-state level, nor does it necessarily require the creation of security arrangements—features that any truly regional system must exhibit.

Implications for the Regional Security Architecture

This paper has sought to sketch out some of the macro trends in the emerging Asian order. Some are directly related to security, while some are more peripheral. But, the security architecture does not exist in a vacuum—it depends on the “oxygen” of these other regional dynamics in order to survive. Asia is a dynamic region, in which these multiple macro processes simultaneously combine together to characterize and shape the regional order.

As the component parts of the regional order might be thought of as a “mosaic,” so too can the regional security architecture. That is, there are different layers that address different aspects of regional security.

Clearly, the U.S.-led security system addresses the “hard security” dimensions and provides the all-important collective good of assuring the peace and overall stability of the region. Since the end of the Cambodian conflict the U.S.-led system has deterred conflicts from erupting in Southeast Asia, while the U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea have helped to prevent the outbreak of hostilities on the Korean peninsula. The forward deployment of U.S. forces in the region, taken together with the alliances and non-allied security partnerships, has helped to deter China from aggressive or destabilizing behavior (or so the U.S. Government tells itself). Thus, it can be concluded that the U.S.-led security system, now extended to South and Central Asia, has been a net plus in guaranteeing regional security and stability.

The ARF and SCO cooperative security mechanisms have also done much to address pressing non-traditional security concerns in the region—which are, in fact, paramount for Southeast Asian nations. Together, the ARF and SCO have

also contributed to the gradual emergence of a regional consensus about the norms of interstate relations. As a result, a normative “soft security” community is gradually taking shape—which supplements, rather than supplants, the “hard security” institutions noted above.

I would also count the significant engagement by China of its periphery as a positive contributing factor to regional security and stability. Beijing’s signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and Code of Conduct on the South China Sea are particularly noteworthy actions. The Chinese government’s general embrace of regional multilateralism is very significant, as no regional institution can be considered effective unless China is not only a member, but an active one. Beijing’s active regional diplomacy places it increasingly at the center of all regional issues—bilateral and multilateral. Finally, China’s growing centrality to the economic and technological networks of production and supply chains that crisscross the region, also serve as a stabilizing factor.

Interdependence, which is mushrooming rapidly across Asia, is inherently conducive to stability and security. There may be no better deterrent to conflict than this accelerating interdependence.

Finally, what about U.S.-China and China-Japan relations? Both are important to the regional security architecture insofar as they involve three of the four major powers in the region (India being the other). The region cannot be secure or stable if relations among these powers are unstable. This was the case for the century stretching from the 1870s to the 1970s. However, the *détente* of that decade ushered in a new era and did much to ensure stability in the region.

Yet, three decades later one cannot help but observe that there is some fragility in relations on two sides of this regional triangle.

Clearly, the current estrangement in Sino-Japanese relations is cause for considerable concern—and it behooves all parties to arrest the atrophy in relations as soon as possible. Yet this will not be so easy, unless a series of unilateral gestures concerning the “history issue” are undertaken by Tokyo. It is unlikely that the current Japanese government will see it in its interests to do so, unless and until some subtle *gaiatsu* is exerted by its ally and benefactor in Washington. What is required is a sustained and genuine “German-style” domestic educational campaign—via the media and school system, to educate Japanese citizens of all ages about Japan’s actions during World War II, and the system and strategy that gave rise to the war. The United States has a role to play here, and it is in America’s national interests to do so. Japan may seek to be a “normal nation,” and the U.S. may seek Japan to play a greater role in regional and global affairs—but neither is possible unless and until the Japanese government and society undertake a serious and sustained educational effort. Until this transpires, Japan’s relations with China, the two Koreas, and all of Southeast Asia will remain strained and non-normal.

As noted above, there is an obvious ambivalence currently apparent in U.S.-China relations. This is not new, although the current phase tends to emphasize the *angst* and unstable features. Yet, if one takes the long and macro views, the overall depth and institutionalization of the relationship—at both the governmental and nongovernmental levels—is cause for optimism. The two nations are simply so intertwined that a conflict is almost unthinkable, as it

would so damage their respective national interests. Similarly, a U.S. policy of “containment”—suggested by some—is equally fallacious, as (a) no other government would cooperate in such a policy and (b) the two societies are so intertwined that it would immediately undercut any such government effort. Thus, on balance, while there may be a strong element of uncertainty and ambivalence *at the perceptual level*, in terms of hard interests and bilateral ties, the two nations remain deeply engaged. From the perspective of the regional order, the depth of this engagement is a very positive and conducive element to stability and security.

From this observer’s perspective, all of the elements discussed above constitute the evolving regional order in Asia—and, in one way or the other, they all contribute to the regional security architecture. Except for the Sino-Japanese relationship, they auger for continued stability and security in the near term.