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***Session II: “War by accident”? –  
How to (de-)escalate conflicts with neighbors?***

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# The Reshaping of Asia's Security Order and a New Regional Security Structure

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**Abstract:** The security order in Asia is undergoing profound reshaping process, and the game to influence this process is unfolding. During this period, each country has a strong sense of insecurity with the fear that their security interests may be jeopardized. It becomes a security dilemma which results in escalating Asian security disputes. Because of the complexity and uncertainty of the Asian security environment, there are several scenarios of the Asian security order outlook, such as (1) deep integration, (2) shared dominance of big powers, (3) polarization and (4) falling into chaos. Among the four scenarios, the deep integration has stronger legitimacy and sustainability and is a better one in line with every country's interests. All countries should make joint efforts to it.

**Keywords:** Asia, security order, security dilemma, and Sino – US relations

The regional security disputes in Asia are increasingly prominent. It seems to be a product of the United States' rebalancing strategy or the so-called China's "tough" policy. In reality, it is an inevitable phenomenon during the process of reshaping of Asia's security order. What will be the features of future Asian order? What roles will China and the United States play in the formation of this order? This paper intends to throw a preliminary thinking on these issues.

## I. The Evolution of Asia's Security System

In the past hundred years, the security order in Asia has undergone a series of structural changes. During the long time before the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 – 1895, Asia had been maintained with China as the center of the tributary system. Through building certain forms of tributary relations with other Asian countries, China had established a regional order with features of feudal and hierarchical characteristics, in which other Asian countries get security guarantees from China by recognizing Chinese dominance in Asia. From the first Opium War, with the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 – 1895 as a significant sign, China's tributary system was facing profound challenges when European powers involved in Asian affairs and Japanese rose and expanded in Asia. It propelled the fall of the millennium-old Asian tributary system, and the competition for dominance in Asian affairs between Western

colonizers became the theme of the time. Before the end of World War II, the tributary system with China as the center collapsed by and large, and the Asian power structure under Japan's colonial rule turned into the core feature of the Asian security order in this period of time. After World War II when Japan was defeated, the United States, Britain, China and the Soviet Union signed the Yalta Treaty which determined Japan's territories and the different roles powers played in Asian affairs. For a short time, there emerged a feature of "shared dominance among powers" in Asia. However, it came to an end very soon due to the outbreak of the Cold War. Since the Cold War, security order in Asia thus showing the characteristics of two groups sharply opposite. After the Cold War, the United States became the only superpower. By further strengthening its security alliances in Asia, the United States' unipolar dominance in Asia had been strengthened.

However, there appears an ongoing looseness of the United States-dominated Asian unipolar system which has been established since the end of the Cold War. The U.S.'s influence over regional hotspot issues and the evolvement of situations is showing an important decline. In issues related to Korean Peninsula, Sino-Japanese relations, Taiwan, the South China Sea dispute and many other hot topics, the role of the United States has begun to degenerate from a "leader" to a "balancer". There are two reasons for this: one is the decline of the United States, the other is the collective rise of Asian countries. Two wars the United States launched after 9/11 cost hugely, and the investment in critical fields was seriously inadequate, such as traditional security, security in Asia, and especially security in the Western Pacific region. As a result, the US lacks the ability to adapt the rapidly changing security situation in Asia, and can only make relatively passive response to security issues in Asia. Moreover, in short of a clear goal, the United States' security alliance system in Asia also shows signs of loosening from time to time. As a response, the Obama administration launched the "Rebalancing Strategy" to increase investment in Asia's security and strengthen the existing alliance system, with the aim of maintaining a leading position in Asia. Sadly, this investment is constrained and distracted by both domestic fiscal austerity and troubles in the Middle East, Eurasia and elsewhere in the world. In this regard, it is still highly controversial on whether the Rebalance Strategy can obtain the desired results. At the same time, the majority of Asian countries, including China, have entered a stage of rapid development in the first decade of the new century, and their security capability is also growing fast. Currently, Asia is the world's fastest growing region in military spending. The most important reason is that economic growth makes it possible to increase military spending. Among all Asian countries, because of its giant size, China has become not only the most important engine for economic development, but also the most prominent one in military

modernization. In short, the lack of investment from the United States and the growth of Asian countries are shaking the post-Cold War unipolar system.

As a result, a new round of games determining the trend of Asia's security order has been put on the stage. It is safe to say that Asia's security order will inevitably be in the phase of re-shaping in a relatively long period of time. Given that the old security order is unstable and the new order is far from forming, it will be a phase of transition. During transition, every party, not only the United States and China, but also Japan and ASEAN, will try actively to influence the way forward, while it will be more and more difficult to contain existing security problems under the current security order. The result will be upgrades of many potential and pending issues to disputes. All parties try to influence the re-shaping of future security order by wrestling on these disputes, such as Diaoyu Island dispute between China and Japan, the South China Sea disputes between China and the Philippines and Vietnam, and the highly unpredictable situation in Korean Peninsula.

## II. The Sense of Insecurity and the Escalation of Security Disputes

In the reshaping process of regional security order, all parties hold the strong sense of insecurity. From the United States' perspective, insecurity sense is mainly due to Asia's speedy integration while the United States' influence on it is limited. In the first decade of the new century, there came up the advance of the "10+1" (closer trade and political ties between ASEAN and Japan, South Korea and China respectively), "10+3" (cooperation between major countries in East Asia), the trilateral trade and economic cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea, "10+6" (the broader Asian cooperation), not to say Japanese Hatoyama regime, as a U.S. ally, initiated "East Asian Community" concept. It became the United States' biggest security concern to be eventually pushed out of Asia. From Japan's perspective, insecurity mentality is also strong. Seeing most Asian countries are undergoing fast economic development, Japan became more and more worried about being trapped in the economic doldrums. It can be a vivid showcase of the plight of the Japan's national governance by the frequent changes of Japanese Prime Minister in the past decade. Facing the rise of China, Japan is sensing that its leading position in Asia is being marginalized. Especially when China surpassed Japan in GDP for the first time in 2010, the latter felt subtle psychological changes. Japan worried that it will have to accept a subordinate role in the future Asia. From ASEAN's perspective, China's rise means not only enormous economic opportunities, but also worries and concerns for some ASEAN countries. For a long time, ASEAN has been playing, at least in form, the role of "main driver" and "leader" in regional cooperation. Although China still

highly respects ASEAN's position and role of in regional cooperation, ASEAN countries are still haunted by their worries. In recent years, the United States has been increasing investment in Asian region and serving as a balancer. It can, to some extent, ease ASEAN's security worries, but at the cost of ASEAN's autonomy in terms of security being further weakened. No matter great powers direct to conflicts or shared governance, ASEAN, as a small country alliance, will be the ultimate victims. From China's perspective, the biggest worry is the United States and other Asian countries join forces to hedge the rise of China and limit the room for China's future development. China's development and security condition depends largely on interactions with neighboring countries, thus Asia is with special significance to China's future. Given that, lacking its own control over Asia's security order will always be an important source of China's insecurity mentality.

The different but prevalent insecurity sense among Asian countries leads to/causes a lack of mutual trust and generates contradictions and frictions in the reshaping process of the Asian security order, left the existing security issues continue to intensify, such as the Korean Peninsula situation, Sino-Japanese relations, and the South China Sea disputes. On the Korean Peninsula, the fact that North Korea accelerates seeking to possess nuclear weapons out of its own security concerns became the reason for the U.S. to put pressure on North Korea and strengthening the US-ROK military alliance, makes North Korea feel more insecure and take more radical action in turn. The end of this logic chain will be even more unstable regional situation. On the Diaoyu Islands dispute, Japan took the so-called "nationalization" action out of fear of China's rise. China viewed such action seriously undermined strategic tactic understanding of "shelving disputes" between China and Japan, and thus strengthened patrol on the waters around the Diaoyu Islands as an announcement of China's governance rights. Continued escalating of this dispute has caused further deterioration of bilateral relations. On the South China Sea issue, the Philippines and Vietnam increasingly worry that they are at a disadvantage in the competition with an increasingly powerful China, and thus act preemptively and continuously strengthen the control over islands they have already occupied. This forced China to take counter-actions. But China's counter-actions make ASEAN claimant countries more afraid. They strengthen mutual support and quickly move closer to the United States to gain more support. However, this kind of actions intensifies China's concerns and sharply reduces the flexibility for China to deal with these issues.

At the back of many hot spots issues, there is the game focused on Asian security order between China and the United States. Given China's position in Asia history, the current momentum of China's rise, China has the potential to play a more central role in regional affairs. On the contrary, the United States claims to be an Asia-Pacific

country and vows never to come off second best. The strategic competition in Asia-Pacific between the two countries will be the most important and most influential international political phenomenon in the 21st century. At present, all contests on a variety of security issues in Asia are originated from the Sino-US relations. Currently, the U.S. is consolidating Asian alliance system and strengthening military deployment in Asia, as a means to reinforce its security advantages. At the same time, China is making full use of its economic advantages to improve the full range of relations with neighboring countries. China is also vigorously strengthening its own security capacity and foreign security cooperation, in order to make up the “security short board” and to enhance its power and influence in Asia. In this competitive process, the United States and China are inevitably suspicious of the other’s every move and strategic intentions. The U.S. worries that China’s ultimate goal is to challenge the U.S. dominance in Asia and eventually pushed it out, while there is a considerable number of people in China hold the view that all of the U.S.’s actions in Asia are to build a containment network against China.

We can see that both the U.S. and China, or other Asian countries, are subject to “security dilemma” to some extent. Worried about the uncertainty of regional security order’s future and deeply suspicious of other countries’ strategic intentions, every country tends to take defensive purposes for offensive initiative, or misjudge the actions based on domestic political motives as a part of the well-conceived strategic layout in foreign policy. As a result, the risk of the regional security relationship being trapped in a vicious cycle is greatly increased.

### III. Outlook for Asian Security Order

Future security order in Asia will be a mixture of different factors, such as geography, history, culture, power comparison, and strategic choices. In geography, Asia is an open area with both complex continent environment and vast ocean environment. When people talk about Asia, some may refer to the East Asian countries consist of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia in particular, while others may think about a broad concept covering Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. Russia also sometimes considers it as a part of Asia, and Australia is often seen as an active factor in Asian security structure. It is a consensus that the strategic gravity of the world is increasingly moving towards Asia, and more and more countries are increasing their strategic investment here. This makes Asia is increasingly a political concept, rather a geographical one. In history, Asia shows diversity in the past hundred years. There have been several forms of security order, and each form currently holds a certain degree of continuity. For example, China is still living in the center of Asian and casts

influence to its surrounding area; big countries like China, the U.S., Japan, and Russia are still competing to shape the security order in their own favor; the U.S. alliance system still exists and continues to develop. In political and cultural terms, there is a wide range of cultures in Asia, including pre-modern culture, modern culture, Oriental culture, Western culture and Islamic culture. They co-exist and profoundly affect each other at the same time. Many Asian countries are experiencing political transition. In the term of national power, the gap is huge. There are major countries of global level, as well as small countries in both the size and influence. The strength rank among powers like China, the United States, Russia, Japan and India is under rearrangement. Middle powers' influence is also rising, such as South Korea, Indonesia, and Vietnam. On strategic choices, though Asian countries tend to take more aggressive actions under security dilemma, they also take preventive measures and self-restraint in order to avoid worse situations. Moreover, although all countries are actively shaping the regional security order, one can hardly find any country's Asian strategy has been completely finalized, given the uncertainty of the situation. Though clear in the basic direction, there remains a lot of room for adjustment in both the U.S.'s rebalancing strategy and China's policy to the Asia. Other countries will have to adjust their foreign policy according to these two countries' strategic changes.

Diversity and uncertainty of the decisive factors to Asian security order leads to different prospects. Judging from the current situation, outlook of "deep integration", "shared dominance of big powers", "polarization", and "falling into chaos" are all possible. "Deep integration" refers to the situation where Asian countries, including the United States, further promote integration on the basis of economic cooperation to form security integration and create an effective collective security system together. In this system, security cooperation has become customary and each country's security and development interests get a certain degree of assurance. There will also be appropriate mechanisms to manage and deal with sovereignty and security disputes. In the past decade, Asian countries were successful in economic integration, which is valuable experience for security cooperation. Asian security mechanism, though still relatively scarce so far, is possible, given the experience of the European countries and fears of conflict around Asia. Besides, the existing regional organizations or communication platforms, such as the six-party talks in Northeast Asia, the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Conference on Interactions and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), set the foundation for the future mechanism of regional security integration. "Shared dominance of big powers" means that Asian countries, due to their different strength and influence, naturally play roles at different levels in reshaping regional security structure. China and the U.S., as the two most important stakeholders in the

run, will ultimately form a certain degree of compromise and consensus through complex interactions, and reach a new pattern of partnership. Other big countries will be attached to the “Group Two” system and play a role to ensure its own security interests, while small and medium-sized countries’ security interests cannot be guaranteed. “Polarization” indicates the possibility that there will finally be a confrontation between two opposite security groups, i.e. the U.S. alliance system and the group of China, Russia and other countries. Given the current strategic distrust and differences in security interest between China and the U.S., the possibility of “Polarization” cannot be excluded, especially along with China’s military strength growing. “Falling into chaos” describes the circumstances when any single country or country group cannot dominate Asian security order or solve complex security problems. In the absence of effective management, existing issues will gradually deteriorate, including the Korean Peninsula crisis, the Sino-Japanese sovereignty dispute, the South China Sea issue and Afghanistan problems, and ultimately lead to security instability throughout the region.

In the outlook of “deep integration”, there will be a stable and sustainable regional order in which every country will be the beneficiaries. In “shared dominance of big powers” prospects, the security interests of big powers can get temporary guarantee, while the security interests of small and medium-sized countries will be violated, thus there will always be legality defects in this order. Small and medium-sized countries will fight against it, and the order can hardly last. Under “polarization” scenario, given the armed forces like nuclear weapons for mutual assured destruction, it is likely for regional security order to reach a steady state for a period of time as in the Cold War. However, as the cost for great powers to maintain the national security interests rises, small and medium-sized countries will have to choose side in the two opposing group. It is a state that most Asian countries are trying to avoid. In the prospects of “falling into chaos”, no country’s security interests can be guaranteed, and regional security order will also be completely destroyed. This is the worst scenario. Therefore, based on comprehensive evaluation, choose the “collective security” model, and create a more equitable, cooperative, open and inclusive Asian security order, will be the most desirable strategic choice for Asian countries.

#### IV. Policy Recommendations

To promote the establishment of new Asian security architecture under “deep integration”, all parties must make changes accordingly.

First, the United States, as today’s largest security force in Asia, must make prompt adjustments to its rebalancing strategy. Currently, rebalancing is still widely regarded

in China as a strategy of containing China. It directly causes the escalation of Sino-US strategic mutual distrust. The United States must bridge the gap between “reassurance” strategy to China and rebalancing strategy to Asia. The United States should actively develop military relations with China, and ensure that the U.S. military alliance’s operations in Asia will be open to China. A certain degree of transparency of U.S.’s military presence, including anti-missile system, to China is also necessary. The United States should maintain real neutrality in all regional disputes. The measures above will reduce China’s doubts and enhance mutual trust between the two countries. In the past two years, China’s attitude on military exchanges with the United States became more active, and Sino-US military relations have achieved a relatively great progress. It is a positive sign. Focused on the future, the two countries should further increase the level and scope of bilateral military exchanges, in order to reduce the possibility of strategic misjudgments, accidents and conflicts.

Second, China, as an important rising force, will also play a more active role in reshaping the regional security order. China, in the center of Asia, is closely linked with most Asian countries. Asian security environment casts a critical influence to China’s development. It is rational for China to be more actively involved in the reshaping process of the regional security order. At present, China has proposed a new security concept, focusing on Asia’s future development, and actively promotes common security, comprehensive security, cooperative security and sustainable security. In the future, China is willing to have more discussion and interaction with other Asian countries in security concept. Meanwhile, China will also actively conduct security dialogues and build closer security cooperation relations with other countries. Within its capacity, China is going to provide as much public goods for regional security as possible.

Third, other Asian countries should develop a balanced security partnership with China and the United States, instead of taking sides. The factor of the two countries to Asian security order is important, but not decisive. The other Asian countries are playing the profound role in the process. The characteristics of the new regional security order will in turn have a direct and profound impact on the fate of other Asian countries. Therefore, these countries bear an important responsibility in promoting the integration of regional security and preventing confrontation and disorder. In the future, Asian countries should make joint efforts with China and the United States to create a favorable atmosphere in regional security cooperation, and tries to develop closer, more balanced security partnership, as well as construct a more inclusive regional security cooperation network.

Fourth, all parties should promote the construction of Asia security more actively. It is necessary to think about how to upgrade the six-party talks on the DPRK nuclear issue to a mechanism for Northeast Asia security dialogue, in order to have a more extensive and effective management over inter-Korean relations, the DPRK-US relations, DPRK-Japan relations, Sino-Japanese relations, Russian-Japanese relations and other regional security issues. All countries should make full use of the East Asia Summit and other related mechanisms to promote security communication and cooperation. It is also necessary to consider the strengthening the SCO's role in maintaining regional security in Central Asia and South Asia. Based on this, regional countries can gradually build a more comprehensive "Trans – Pacific security architecture", and systematically address the long-term security issues between China, the United States and other Asian countries.

Fifth, further improve the crisis management mechanism for regional hotspot issues. For the South China Sea issue, it seems that a "South China Sea Five-Countries Dialogue" is worth considering, namely China, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei, in order to exclude the interference of external factors and to have direct discussion on dispute control and joint development. For the Diaoyu Islands dispute, we can consider establishing a more formal China – US – Japan trilateral dialogue mechanism and enhancing the dialogue level, with the aim of making it a platform to cultivate strategic mutual trust and eliminate strategic misjudgment.