

Multipolarism and “Globalplayers” in Asia

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Fifth Panel

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The most recent terrorist attacks on the United States of America and the quick international response to them have altered and will further alter the coordinates of global security politics. It may be too early to provide a conclusive answer to the question of whether the challenge of cross-border terrorism will eventually lead to new multilateral patterns of behaviour in security affairs. However, the initial and somewhat surprising commonality of views among the big powers of Asia, Europe and America on how to react to this specific challenge may hint at new chances of improved, yet probably limited, political interaction on a global scale. For years China, Russia, India, Indonesia and other nations have faced the problem of spreading violence, fuelled by either ethnic or religious extremism. The governmental counter-strategies of these nations have usually been criticized by the West, in particular with reference to the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in their home countries. It cannot be excluded that this criticism will become less direct and outspoken in the future, overshadowed by the harsh American counteraction against the terror network of Osama bin Laden. However, the patterns of domestic and cross-border security policies of nations in Asia may also be affected, having an impact on neighbourhood relations and regional stability in an as yet undetermined way. Moreover, any military escalation and the spread of terror and counter-terror into

Asia may pose a serious threat to the security situation of most peoples in Asia.

There can be no doubt, however, that organized global terrorism, which is motivated by fundamentalism and hatred, poses a crucial challenge, and not only to nation-states and international organizations. It is also linked to far-reaching changes induced by globalization in economy, technology, culture and society. Certain uncomfortable questions have to be answered: (1) whether these changes and the reactive methods which have been applied so far to tackle them politically may even have contributed to the further spread of fundamentalism; (2) whether globalization has resulted in significant losses for large groups of people within transforming societies, which people attribute to the politics of the 'rich' part of the world; and (3) whether or not the spread of political conflicts, triggered by these losses, feeds incentives to either use or tolerate force as a legitimate tool for resisting what is being perceived as a threat to sustainable living conditions for millions of people? Although the United States appears presently to be the main target for cross-border terrorist attacks, it may become an issue for other nations as well. Asia, in particular, could be concerned as the gap between the richest and the poorest groups of Asian society has widened much more than within the societies of Europe or America.

A Strong Case for Regional Security-building in Asia

At first glance, the basis of post-Cold War security politics has shifted to the strength

of nation-states within regionally structured security architectures. However, while few

nations have maintained global influence in selected areas, only the United States can, and has, acted as a global superpower. Nevertheless, the United States has painfully experienced a relative loss in its national impact on security matters. At present security matters are essentially driven by globalization and fragmentation. They can, for the sake of regional stability, only be tackled through multilateral cooperation. This has become more evident in the case of Asia than in any other part of the world.

Although the significant progress made in regional security building in Asia cannot be ignored, certain developments have triggered a growing concern that this progress may be overturned by parallel deteriorating trends, such as the potential escalation of war and violence in and around Afghanistan, the difficult transformation in Indonesia, the situation in the Kashmir region, the possibility of political backlashes on the Korean peninsula, the sensitive issue of several territorial claims in East Asia, the ongoing arms race, the horizontal and vertical proliferation of weapons throughout the whole region and, last but not least, growing problems with piracy, cross-border organized crime and the spread of terrorist threats. Each factor in itself challenges the stability of regional – and probably global – security. As Howard French has correctly noted, the region is presently home to many of the most explosive loose ends (*IHT*, 2000:1, 11), none of which can be tied up unilaterally. Therefore, the essence of security multipolarism in Asia can be described in two ways. On the one hand, it is an existing patchwork of relatively independent yet interdependent areas of conflict, which may possibly be tackled only on the sub-regional or even local level. And on the other hand, if these conflicts are not resolved or sufficiently harboured, they may pose a threat to many other nations in, as well as beyond, Asia. Nonetheless,

even though ‘global players’, whether major powers, economic actors (e.g. transnational corporations), state or non-state international institutions or organizations, may exert significant influence on each of these areas, they can hardly take responsibility for solving these issues on their own. Each issue requires the cooperation of different actors on different levels of action. The prospect of solving these issues, however, is not as discouraging as it appears to be at first glance, mainly because any escalation or spread of conflict would be harmful to all international actors’ vested interests, and because awareness about the imminent risks of escalation has grown.

Threats to security, however, originate not only from spreading conflicts, but also from deteriorating trends that make the cooperative resolution of a conflict more difficult. The most imminent – and partly interrelated – trends can be summarized as follows:

- the growing gap between wealth and poverty, between prosperity and misery, within the developing societies of Asia;
- the spread of violence, motivated by, or based on, ethnic, religious or cultural divergence;
- xenophobia and the oppression of human and minority rights;
- the weakening competence and ability of many states to balance the basic political, social and economic equilibrium causing a growing dependence on, and influence on domestic affairs by, foreign states or non-state actors;
- the impact of ‘globalization losses’ or negative ‘globalization effects’ on states, such as organized crime, drug trafficking, environmental degradation, erosion of cultural values and social identities, alienation, the privatization of the monopoly of force, etc.

Notwithstanding these risks and trends, the possibility of Asia successfully coping with the transformation of the global security system does not look too bad. For example, over time, Asia has experienced growing regional coherence (Naisbitt, 1996:11), which is primarily due to the emergence of a prospering market that is twice as large as that of Western Europe and the United States combined. The growing market coherence on the one hand and growing interdependencies on the other have fostered incentives among the regional actors to seek closer cooperation, as well as a more stable security environment. It is clear, however, that the policies of the major players, namely the United States, other regional powers and not least international organizations and financial institutions, have to contribute in a constructive way if these incentives are to be translated into a stable regional security system. For the time being, however, the prospects for such a 'constructive engagement' remain uncertain.

Instead, the recent power and policy shifts of major actors in Asia have even contributed towards sharpening the contradictory trends of homogenization and fragmentation. The most striking shifts concern the reorientation of American engagement in East Asia, the decreasing influence of Russia after the implosion of the Soviet Union, and the undetermined future role of China as a potential regional hegemony. The ability of these nations, including Japan, to manage their national interests in a cooperative way, will have a tremendous impact on the consolidation of existing regional security institutions, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), as well as on the prospect of extending regional integration. On the other hand, the accession of China to the World Trade Organization (WTO) may contribute towards strengthening the idea of a cooperative identity amongst the major players in Asia, including Japan, thereby opening up a path to extended multilateralism also in the area of security policy.

A Strong Case for a Multi-layered Regional Security Approach

Although several initiatives to create a regional security system *sui generis* have failed in Asia, a strong case can still be made for a multi-layered security system. The complex regional identity, overlapping economic, ethnic and social structures, and also the possibility of searching for face-saving trade-offs between the various interests of all regional actors constitute a sound basis for a broadened architecture of cooperation. The ARF (1994), Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) (1993) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (1967) have become significant regional actors, but they lack intrusive security mechanisms. So far, security matters have usually been dealt with on the bilateral or sub-regional scale, such as in the case of Korea. Even if such an

approach sufficed in the past, it can hardly deal with the requirements of the future, especially if new threats and challenges for security, such as global terrorism or proliferation, are considered.

While the ARF approach can, to some extent, be compared with that of the former Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), directly cloning European experiences may not be the ideal solution for Asia. The founding conditions of the CSCE differed extensively from those that presently exist in Asia. Yet while the bipolarism of the Cold War was occasionally considered an advantage for forming the CSCE in the case of Europe, the heterogeneous multipolarism of present-day Asia – in combination with

growing economic coherence, political pressure for closer cooperation and a long tradition of bilateral pragmatism – may provide a good opportunity for creating a regional security system. As Klintworth noted a decade ago already, ‘economic interdependencies are channelling common interests and structures. Economic interdependence has opened up new channels for regional cooperation, confidence building and transparency in security relations between Asia-Pacific states. Most countries are speaking the same language as far as trade, investment and economic cooperation are concerned. This has been matched by a habit of dialogue on a broad range of regional, diplomatic, humanitarian, political, environmental, cultural, security, nuclear, military, intelligence, trade, development and economic issues’ (1992: 221-231).

The comparative advantage of a multi-layered approach in Asia lies in the possibility of trade-offs and the immediate win/win results of cooperation. While it hardly makes sense to search for a unique

security system in Asia, the already existing web of organizations and mechanisms may equally serve the purpose if its elements efficiently reinforce each other. Essentially, ten mechanisms form the basis of a multilateral security system:

1. global multilateral state-to-state cooperation (UN)
2. issue-related multilateral state-to-state cooperation (WTO, Missile Technology Control Regime)
3. cross-regional state-to-state cooperation (APEC+)
4. regional state-to-state cooperation (ARF)
5. multilateral ad-hoc state-to-state cooperation (e.g. Cambodia)
6. sub-regional multilateral state-to-state cooperation (ASEAN+)
7. issue-related sub-regional state-to-state cooperation (e.g. the Korean Peninsula)
8. bilateral state-to-state cooperation
9. regional NGO-interaction (e.g. CSCAP)
10. issue-related ‘track-two’ cooperation.

Multipolarism vs. Multilateralism?

Much has been said and written about why it would not make sense to directly apply Europe’s experiences to East Asia: the existence of bilateral disputes on territorial matters; Russia and mainland China’s absorption in domestic politics; the possibility of nuclear blackmail; heterogeneous political, economic, social and cultural structures; asymmetric and asynchronous power balances; greater distances (land and sea) that are to be bridged between the centres of strategic decision making; the lack of neutral intermediaries; and the sharp asymmetries of economic performance. However, some of the conditions that led to initial rapprochement in Europe can also be

detected in East Asia: high levels of military confrontation and mistrust between the regional players; competing vested governmental interests; a gradual shift in the distribution of regional power projection; growing interest in stable patterns of cooperation being a prerequisite for increasing economic prosperity and for diminishing the likelihood of war; and a habit of loose dialogue, especially within the framework of the ARF, on a broad range of issues that might serve as a basis of generic security networking.

The ARF appears to be more comparable to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) than, for

example, ASEAN, which has a much stronger focus on economic cooperation, and which has always ruled out commitments in the realm of military security. However, close cooperation between ASEAN and APEC members with the ARF may provide a supportive economic dimension of cooperation to the ARF. Such a scenario did not take place in the years of the CSCE. The missing link between multilateral economic and political interests, as well as the lack of regional security structures, has frequently made politicians and experts feel that an OSCE-like organization, an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Asia (cf. Gills, 2001), could lead to a more stable environment in East Asia. Yet the analogy itself may lead to wrong conclusions, because the OSCE per se could not be implemented in East Asia. It is more likely

that the principles and norms underlying the OSCE may be applicable to East Asia, while the mechanisms and instruments must be generated according to the striking challenges in the area. These require a made-to-measure approach. Some should be dealt with by an enlarged audience, others may require bilateral negotiations, or mediation based on good services. The ARF, however, is not likely to transform into a Jack-of-all-trades. This role was, for example, only adopted by the CSCE in Europe at a late point in time, after 15 years of incremental steps and several backlashes. On the other hand, such a role may serve the best security role by harbouring, comprising and curbing the most essential security interests of all major players, as well as those of all other nations and peoples in Asia.

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