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# Regional Security Arrangements in a Multipolar World?

# The European Union in Global Perspective

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SECURITY IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

# 1 Introduction[1]

What role can regional institutions such as the European Union play in managing peace and security in today's world? During the Second World War, Winston Churchill saw regional security arrangements as the basis of a multipolar world order which could ensure the balance of power and prevent another global conflagration. Today, however, we live in a unipolar world, and regional institutions are constrained by this reality. But the breakdown of international cooperation over Iraq, and the growing anti-Americanism around the world, creates doubts about the prospects for a stable and legitimate international order under American hegemony. Hence a return to multipolarity has become not just a strategic aspiration of some major states, but also a normative one.

# 2 Towards a Multipolar Order

In the contemporary international system, two types of actors are seeking a return to a multipolar international order.[2] One is China, whose dramatic ascendancy poses the most serious challenge to the post-Cold War balance of power. Another country seeking multipolarity is France, which asserted its independence from the US by refusing to endorse the Bush administration's plans to invade Iraq. There are differences between these two multipolarity-seeking powers though. Both see American hegemony as a grave threat to world order, challenging the possibility of both peace and justice. But China is a rising power, while France by itself is not. China's desire for multipolarity is hence motivated to a greater degree by its perception of American dominance as a threat to its own regional power ambitions. And while China's is largely a national quest for multipolarity France's is framed within a "Euro-nationalism", which calls for "the EU to become an independent ac-

tor in the world stage to counterbalance the United States."[3] Despite its growing interest in regionalism, Beijing has not embraced regional cooperative security to any comparable extent, although its quest for multipolarity may subsume a long-term quest for a regional sphere of influence.

# 3 The Role of Regional Arrangements

But can regional arrangements contribute to multipolarity? Here, I propose to make a distinction between multipolarity as a strategic pursuit and multipolarity as a normative quest. The differences between the two international orders are three-fold. First, strategic multipolarity is closely linked to the distribution of material power. The status of being regarded as a "pole" is determined mainly by one's military and economic resources. Normative mulitpolarity depends largely on one's ideational resources, such as a forceful adherence to, and advocacy of, international law and institutions, and a strong sense of collective identity (national or regional). Second, and related to the above, states operating within strategic multipolarity maintain a strong preference for balance of power approaches to international order. States in normative multipolarity, by contrast, accept and pursue the principles and mechanisms of cooperative security, and seek to maintain international order through the vigorous exercise of what Joseph Nye has called "soft power". Third, a polar power within strategic multipolarity usually seeks out weaker partners (especially its neighbours) in order to develop a "sphere of influence." This is absent in normative multipolarity, in which relationships between the dominant power co-opts weaker states are developed through shared rules and institutions with a view to enhance the capacity for collective action of all of them (and not just the polar power) to pursue common goals at the global level, including goals other than deterrence or defence which are usually the chief motivations behind spheres of influence.

## Asia

Going by their historical experience, regional organizations are poor instruments of strategic multipolarity. Some regional organizations have been better at reflecting hegemony, rather than challenging it. Today, regional power blocs of the kind Churchill or Walter Lippmann envisaged

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1   This is a revised version of a paper prepared for the 4th FES-SWP North-South Dialogue: "Global Un-governance" or New Strategies for Peace and Security?", Berlin, September 21 and 22, 2004

2   The implications of multipolarity for global peace and security have been the subject of much debate in international relations theory. Neo-realists such as Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer view multipolarity (having in mind the European multipolar order of the 19th century) as being less stable than a bipolar one. In contrast, liberals such as Karl Deutsch and David Singer see multipolarity as being a more peaceful international order than bipolarity.

3   "Outgrowing the Union: A Survey of the European Union", The Economist, 25 September 2004, p.6.

may seem impractical and even immoral (in the sense that they would challenge the authority of the United Nations as much as the United States). The experience of Europe and Asia in building regional institutions, despite being marked by differences, shows common barriers to building multipolarity through regional institutions.

In Asia, regional multilateral security arrangements were practically non-existent during the Cold War, although the multipurpose subregional group ASEAN, operated under the conditions of bipolarity while trying to carve out a measure of regional autonomy in the management of local conflicts.[4] The 1990s saw the emergence of the ASEAN Regional Forum, Asia's first continent-wide regional security grouping. But from a realist point of view, the purpose of the ARF was not to strategically challenge American dominance, but to keep the US engaged at a time when there was some chance of a precipitate US military withdrawal from the region. Today, however, China, once upon a time a somewhat reluctant player in multilateralism, (especially in the early 1990s), has taken an unprecedented level of interest in multilateral economic and security approaches at the regional level. Realists see China's new-found interest in regional security arrangements as a way of countering US power and influence in the region. China's "new security concept" promotes the notion of multipolarity while espousing regional security cooperation in Asia. Although China has not linked the two in an ends and means relationship, its "charm offensive" in East Asia provides one example of how regionalism could be turned into an instrument in pursuit of a strategic multipolarity. But neither China nor the EU are in a position to create a multipolar world order through counter-hegemonic regional security arrangements. And despite its initial impact, China's charm offensive is already being confronted with Japan's economic and diplomatic counter-postures and the ultimate reluctance of Southeast Asia to bandwagon with Beijing at the expense of the US. While Asian regional organizations would be meaningless without Chinese involvement, too

much Chinese "leadership" would also spell their doom.[5]

**Europe**

The European experience of regionalism has been different from that of Asia. Cold War Europe participated in two main kinds of 'security' arrangements. The principal regional security arrangements, NATO and the Warsaw Pact, were a form of "hegemonic regionalism" in the sense that they were created and maintained by the two superpowers. Today, such hegemonic regional security arrangements are neither popular nor relevant. The Warsaw Pact collapsed with the end of the Cold War. While NATO has confounded predictions of its demise by neorealist scholars like John Mearsheimer, it has had to embrace roles, such as peacekeeping, that had more in common with cooperative security organizations than collective defence systems in its classical sense. And even then, NATO faces a severe test of its resilience as a result of the unilateral US decision to invade Iraq. But even if US interest in NATO declines further, reinforced by its global force restructuring, it will not result in an "Europeanized" NATO that would create a multipolar world order.

The second European regional security arrangement, the CSCE/OSCE, was conceived primarily as a mechanism to dampen Cold War polarization and rivalry, rather than as a challenge to superpower dominance. To be sure, its underlying principle of "common security" and its confidence-building and arms control agenda helped to lessen the strategic importance of hegemonic regional security arrangements that sustained bipolarity in Europe. The OSCE today remains an important vehicle for managing security issues in Europe. But its days of glory may be behind us, not the least because both NATO and EU have converted to the principles of common security and adopted many of the instruments that the OSCE developed. In any case, to describe it as an agent of multipolarity would be misreading its normative purpose and overstating its current or potential strategic clout.

Hence the most credible European force for multipolarity today is neither the OSCE, nor the Western European Union, but a sub-regional group created ostensibly for economic coopera-

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4  For a historical background on the development of Asian regionalism, see: "Regional Institutions and Asian Security Order: Norms, Power, and Prospects for Peaceful Change", In Muthaah Alagappa, ed., Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp.210-240.

5  Amitav Acharya, "Will Asia's Past be Its Future", International Security, vol. 28, no.3 (Winter 2003-04).

tion. The EU evolved under conditions of bipolarity and was supported by the Cold War US security umbrella. But there has been periodic recognition from the intellectual and policy-making community of the EU's potential to be a regional superpower combining economic might and strategic purpose. As *The Economist* recently put it, "European federalists – their heirs to Monnet and Schumann… believe that a new impetus for European unity can be provided by trying to build up the EU into a new superpower – a global force that can equal the United States."[6] In reality, such a quest within the EU may seem closer to the realist-strategic vision by Churchill and Lippmann than the liberal-pacifist vision of Monnet and Schuman. But it has become a legitimate quest in the wake of the divisions produced by Iraq war, and the diminishing legitimacy of American security dominance in Europe and its declining military presence there.

Hence, a poll conducted by the German Marshall Fund found strong support in Europe for the idea that "the European Union should become a superpower like the United States."[7] Yet, such aspirations come at a time when membership expansion has created greater diversity within the EU and made consensus on its strategic role even less likely than before. The discord between France and Germany on the one hand, Britain and Spain on the other over Iraq undermines the credibility of a common European foreign and defense posture regionally or globally. Moreover, a global superpower role for the EU in the conventional sense requires a willingness and capability for global power projection, but the European societies seem less and less inclined to resort to force to settle international problems, and defense spending in Europe is declining.[8] The Kantian aspirations of the EU intra-regionally are not easily reconciled with the Hobbesian assumptions of strategic multipolarity globally.

Looking beyond Europe and East Asia, regional security arrangements geared to collective defence and operating under the security umbrella of a great power were never very popular. The experience of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organiza-

tion (CENTO) attests to this. Even collective security and defence frameworks created under the auspices of large multipurpose regional bodies such as the Arab League and the Organization of American States (OAS) have never been credible and effective. In the Third World, the term "regional security arrangements" has invariably meant mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes undertaken by multipurpose regional groups, rather than for alliances geared to defence against common threats. As such, their ability to alter the global power structure has been, and remains minimal.

## 4   Regional Orders and Normative Multipolarity

Regional security arrangements are thus poor instruments of strategic multipolarity. But can they help realise a normative multipolarity? Here, I am of course assuming that ideas and norms about international order can exist independent of, or even contrary to, the power and preferences of the hegemon. Compared to its strategic dimension, normative multipolarity is more realistic as a goal for regional security arrangements. Under certain conditions (such as when faced with a common threat or a common neglect) regional security arrangements in the Third World have on occasion been able to achieve a degree of autonomy from superpower dominance. This requires a robust role in regional pacification through measures of cooperative security and community-building – of which the EU has been the most accomplished regional entity – which ensures that their intra-mural problems do not become sources of a wider international conflict inviting the intervention of outside powers. Both Western and Third World regional organizations today may seek such autonomy by undertaking a variety of peace and security roles. And it is in this context that some of the most important changes in the purpose and role of regional security arrangements in the post-Cold War era have taken place. The following are noteworthy.

First, there has been an expansion of the purpose and role of "original" regional organizations, such as the OAS and African Union (born as the OAU). The end of the Cold War has seen their role extending beyond peaceful settlement of disputes to peacekeeping and peace-building, and the promotion of human rights and democracy. Regional organizations today face the need to develop capabilities for complex tasks that combine elements of peacekeeping, peacebuild-

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6   "Outgrowing the Union: A Survey of the European Union", The Economist, 25 September 2004, p.4.

7   Ibid. p.7.

8   I share some of the scepticism regarding a global strategic role for the EU registered by The Economist in its 25 September 2004 survey, although the original draft of my paper was presented on 22nd September.

ing and humanitarian assistance. This role of regional security arrangements has been recognized and encouraged by the United Nations under the so-called "subsidiarity" principle.

Second, entirely new regional security organizations have emerged. Asia created its first macroregional security grouping with the founding of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994. The ARF is to some extent unique as a regional security arrangement. It's the only regional group to bring together all the great powers of the contemporary international system. Yet, it is at the same time led by ASEAN, a group of its weaker members. While realists see this as a structural flaw, institutionalists see it as a vindication of the role of soft and ideational power in the making of security arrangements that can promote regional and international order.

Third, in a related vein, regional organizations which in the past dealt primarily, if not exclusively, on economic integration, are now developing a peace and security role. The European Union, the mother of all regionalisms, in one important respect, may be learning a lesson from Third World regional organizations: economic integration cannot be separated for too long from political and security cooperation. Because of its original normative underpinnings and predominantly economic evolution, the EU's peace and security role would hopefully be guided by normative concerns rather than the imperatives of power politics. In the Asia Pacific region, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), originally created to advance trade liberalization and manage regional economic interdependence, has seen its economic role undermined by, among other factors, regional suspicions of American dominance. It is now quietly developing a role in security management: but only as a venue for consultations on neighbourhood conflicts (such as East Timor), and as a framework for promoting the idea of human security and cooperatively addressing the danger of transnational terrorism.

Fourth, existing multipurpose regional organizations are reorienting and retooling themselves in order to respond to new transnational challenges. This reorientation of regional organizations is especially evident in the Asia-Pacific, although the trend is by no means confined to this region.[9] The Indonesian proposal for an ASEAN

Security Community (ASC) is partly a response to transnational dangers such as financial meltdowns, terrorism, and infectious diseases which have bedeviled Southeast Asia since 1997. APEC's role in transnational security issues has already been noted. The ARF has undertaken a program for suppressing terrorist finance and promoting maritime security cooperation in East Asia. "New regionalism" in Latin America and East Asia, combining economic and security cooperation, are challenging the "Washington Consensus" which many see as a tool of American hegemony and blame for creating the conditions for the Asian financial crisis in 1997.[10]

While many of these projects involve the US, they are not necessarily led or dictated by it. The agenda expansion and reorientation of regional organizations enhances the prospects for the development of alternative ideas and approaches to world order. And the EU can play an important role in furthering these trends and using them to project a legitimate global security role for itself.

The EU's unfolding security role beyond the European continent includes a recent peacekeeping mission in Congo. To its credit, EU's role in Africa accepts the principle of "African ownership." While the EU is developing its own rapid deployment capability, unlike NATO, it categorically rejects preemption, and accepts the "subsidiarity" principle (while NATO clings to the more self-serving "coalition of the willing" formula), recognizing the final authority of the UN Security Council. It agrees to keep its peace and security missions out-of-area "open", i.e. subject to participation by other regional and extra-regional states. But to give meaning to ideas such as "African ownership" and "open coalitions", the EU needs to channeling more resources and expertise to regional organizations in the developing world.

## 5    Problems of Regional Organizations

This is critical because regional organizations in the developing world, despite their growing interest in regional peace and security in their own

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9   For details see: Amitav Acharya, "The Role of Regional Organizations: Are Views Changing?" Paper presented to the Pacific Symposium, 2004, Wa-

shington, D.C.: National Defense University, 22-23 April 2004.

10  Amitav Acharya, "Regionalism: The Meso Public Domain in Latin America and South-East Asia", in Daniel Drache, ed., The Market or the Public Domain: Global Governance and the Asymmetry of Power (London and New York; Routledge, 2001), pp.296-318

neighbourhood, face critical limitations of resources and institutional capacity. In Africa, lack of regional collective action in managing humanitarian disasters and civil strife and interstate conflict has less to do with the absence of political will than with severe resource constraints. The reverse situation obtains in Asia; the growing involvement of Japan and China brings in considerable new resources to peacekeeping and related operations, but the resilience of sovereignty and non-intervention concerns has made it difficult for Asia to undertake regional peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention operations.

Another obstacle to regional security arrangements in the developing world has to do with the fear and distrust of local hegemons. The role of such powers has been both a source of strength and fragility of regional security arrangements. Without South Africa, for example, the transition of the OAU to AU and NEPAD might not have been possible, but South African dominance does have its critics, who see NEPAD as a neocolonial project. Nigeria's role was crucial to ECOWAS' intervention in Liberia, but it also attracted resentment from other West African states. Fear of Indian dominance has stymied the development of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), even if it is hard to imagine any meaningful security or economic role for SAARC without Indian leadership. Hence, the involvement of a resource-rich extra-regional actor like the EU without the pretensions or ambitions of a global strategic superpower can ameliorate the distrust of local hegemons.

In developing its global security role, the EU can take note of the changing norms of regional security organizations in the developing world. While issues of sovereignty and non-intervention remain a barrier to regional security cooperation, there have also been noticeable shifts.[11] African regional organizations are now more receptive to humanitarian intervention. The New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), strongly backed by South Africa, has sought to move beyond Westphalian sovereignty by adopting a "peer review mechanism" which encompasses

areas of peace and stability, democracy and political governance, and economic and corporate governance. The Inter-American Democratic Charter is an important example of the willingness of non-Western states to move beyond the Westphalian framework. The charter makes a normative commitment to the promotion of democracy, as opposed to the traditional defence of state sovereignty, and permits collective action in defence of democracy not only in the case of coups, but also anti-democratic and unconstitutional "backsliding" by elected rulers. Even in Southeast Asia, despite the persistence of the non-intervention mindset, the Indonesian proposal for an ASEAN Security Community calls for the non-recognition of unconstitutional ouster of governments (albeit without any enforcement or sanctions mechanism), designates democracy as the normative goal of ASEAN members. Such ideas would have been inconceivable a decade ago. These developments create new opportunities for partnership between the EU and other regional organizations in the developing world in developing cooperative human security and humanitarian assistance, as well as promoting growth and development.

But in pursuing a global role, the EU should accept diversity in regional security predicaments and mechanisms. It is important to note that the agenda expansion of regional organizations towards new transnational dangers has not been a case of the simple diffusion of European models and approaches to the Third World. To be sure, the EU and OSCE has provided important ideas and mechanisms for regional groupings in Africa and Asia. Examples of the diffusion of the OSCE framework include the Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Co-operation in Africa (CSSDCA), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (which grew out of negotiations between China and the then Soviet Union which featured many aspects of the OSCE), some aspects of the ARF's confidence-building agenda, and proposed security frameworks for the Mediterranean and the Middle East. But adopting formal and legalistic CBMs in non-European theatres has proven to be difficult, and the OCSE approach has had to be adapted and localized.[12] Similarly, the EU's ideas and approach to peace and security is not likely to be replicated in other parts of the world. But accepting such variations

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11 For a more detailed discussion, see Amitav Acharya, "Regionalism and the Emerging World Order: Sovereignty, Autonomy, Identity", in Shaun Breslin, Christopher W. Hughes, Nicola Phillips and Ben Rosamond, eds., New Regionalisms in the Global Political Economy (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp.20-32.

12 Amitav Acharya, "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism", International Organization, vol. 58, no.2 (Spring 2004).

are both necessary and healthy; the development of regional security cooperation need not follow a single model, derived from the European experience.

To conclude, regional security arrangements such as the EU remain imperfect agents of multipolarity in its strategic dimension, but they can be meaningful agents for multipolarity in its normative sense. The US remains a powerful and influential actor in ensuring regional peace and security in many parts of the world. But with the UN in some disarray and the global distrust of US strategic intentions and policies growing, regional security arrangements have a potential to be one instrument of a normative multipolarity which could offer better prospects for stabil-

ity than a desocialized American hegemony. When and where US power is exercised unilaterally and where US security guarantees are no longer credible, regional arrangements could have an important role in managing peace and security in their own neighborhood. The European Union has a potential to support such a development by partnering regional organizations in the developing world.

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