The Emerging Security Landscape in the Asia-Pacific: Where ASEAN Fits

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ABSTRACT

The security landscape in the Asia-Pacific has seen visible change in the past few years. There has been a momentum in the post-Cold War Asia-Pacific that a new security order, to pursue common security through multilateral cooperation with ASEAN playing a central role, shall prevail in the region. The US pivot to Asia has significantly complicated this process. At the core of the US pivot is to share its regional security responsibilities with its key allies and partners in the region. Potentially to have a similar complicating effect is a subtle, but not that fully clear yet, shift in China’s posture towards a more traditional realpolitik approach to security issues in the region. These shifts in the regional security landscape have limited the space for ASEAN to be an effective player in regional security and weakened the basis for ASEAN centred multilateral processes and platforms to be central for regional security. The paper makes an argument that much of the shifts in the regional security landscape is part of great power politics in the global power structure, which sets the parameters on the security structure in the region. There is a challenge for ASEAN to be relevant and effective in international security in the Asia-Pacific.
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Xiaoming Huang

1. The Post-Cold War New Security Movement: Community Building and Multilateral Platforms

The security landscape in the Asia-Pacific has seen visible change in the past few years. On the surface, the end of the Cold War in the Asia-Pacific was not as drastic and abrupt as was in Europe. The old sources of security concern were still there: the inter-Korean tensions, cross-strait relations, post-conflict Indochina; and key stakeholders and players capable of exerting significant security influence in the region were still the same, the United States, China, and their allies and partners. Over time, however, we have seen significant shifts in the region’s security relations. Indochina was brought into ASEAN; Beijing and Taipei gradually moved into rapprochement; the two Koreas held summits among themselves in 2000 and 2007; and Japan and China were looking to joining hands for greater East Asian cooperation. More significantly, ASEAN and China, the primary security concern to ASEAN during the Cold War, outreached to each other. China’s rapidly transformed relations with ASEAN became a catalyst in the development of ASEAN-centred multilateral platforms for tension reduction, confidence building, security enhancement, economic cooperation, and indeed community building: the ASEAN Regional Forum (1994), ASEAN Plus Three (1997), and East Asian Summit (2005), CSCAP (1992), ADMM Plus (2010), etc.

At a deeper level, the post-Cold War developments seemed to suggest a profound shift in our thinking of the nature of international security in the Asia-Pacific and the causes for conflicts and tensions and therefore paths to sustainable security; and consequently shift in the practice of countries in the region in approaching and conducting security matters. This shift, or the underlying logic of the post-Cold War international relations in the region, has been clearly articulated, with a mixture of celebration and promotion, by some of our leading writers in this field. The idea of “new security,” “security community,” “cooperative

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1 The late 2010s appeared to be a time when internal politics in Japan has still yet to settle between two different visions of Japan’s move to become a normal state: one through Japan working with China for a greater East Asian economic integration and cooperation and the other through Japan work with the United States for an Asia-Pacific political and economic community. Japan under then Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama proposed a Japan-China-Korea FTA in 2009, a major policy initiative on the part of Japan to work with China and Korea for an East Asian economic community.

security,” or “common security,” is built possibly on a particular reading of the new post-Cold War international relation in the Asia-Pacific. First, the end of the Cold War suggested the diminishing of the Communist threat to ASEAN from the North. Without security threats, and, consequently, with no clearly identifiable enemies, the conventional security arrangements and strategy lost their justification and left security interests and relations open for redefinition. Second, as an overall approach to regional security, it is important a sense of community can develop in which we can identify with each other for common security interests and develop effective institutional mechanisms to ensure the development of common interests and the “instrumental and normative” effects on countries’ behaviour and policy.

The new security theory and practice in some way is connected to the idea that the new security is moving beyond “traditional” security, and that non-conventional security issues can be a basis for shared, common security interests. Non-traditional security issues, human security, transnational security, have been and will continue to be an important part of the security landscape in the Asia-Pacific. The cooperative and common security theory and practice is also connected with the idea that “it’s the economy, stupid.” As the hard core, Cold War security issues became increasingly elusive, trade and investment issues started to dominate regional politics and international relations. Tangible achievements in regional community building and in the development of multilateral institutions are seen largely in the areas of trade and investment.

There is a possibility that beyond the broadening and expansion of the scope of “security,” the new security theory and practice is indeed a different security concept that informs an alternative approach and strategy to security. It is about a more effective method, strategy, and institutional arrangements for regional security. Analysts of Asian security noticed the two different security orders and potentially the tension between them. G. John Ikenberry and Jitsuo Tsuchiyama noted, for example, two alternative security orders, “an order based on balance is one where the power of the leading state is counterbalanced by other states,” and “a community-based security order is one where binding security institutions and shared political interests and values exist to shape and limit how power can be exercised.” While they insisted the prevailing security order in the Asia-Pacific region at the time is a mixture of bilateral alliances, multilateral dialogues and ad hoc diplomacy… is somewhere between a balance-of-power and community based system.” 4 While challenging the precise nature of the regional security order in the Asia-Pacific, Acharya Amitav and See


Seng Tan share with Ikenberry and Tsuchiyama on the two alternative security orders, one based on balance of power and one based on community.\(^5\)

One key feature that defined the security structure in the region during the Cold War is the “hub and spokes” alliance system on both sides of the crescent\(^6\) that separates the Asia-Pacific into mainland East Asia and maritime East Asia. There is a great amount of literature on the US centred “hub and spokes” alliance system during the Cold War in the Asia-Pacific.\(^7\) It is a multilateral structure built on formal bilateral alliances of the US with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, South Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia. While less attention to a similar system on mainland East Asia, there was a kind of the “hub and spoke” alliance system in action on the other side of the Cold War divide as well. The hub in this system though was a bit more complicated than that in the case of the US centred one. The USSR was the hegemonic power dominating the system, with China having a strong desire to form a “hub” on its own. China had formal alliance with North Korea, North Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos; and USSR had the same with all of them as well. Regardless of the circumstances, the method used was similar: with a clear security threat and enemies, China and USSR developed a bilaterally organized collective force in Asia as the primary platform for security in the region.

The new security theory and practice however rely on multilateral institutions and an envisaged security community to nurture common security interests and to influence, if not regulate, the countries’ security policy and practice. This difference in approaching and strategizing security is shown no more clearly than in the claimed successful coaching of China into multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific, which is much evidenced, substantiated in China’s transformed relations with ASEAN. Significantly, China’s relations with ASEAN is a core element in the building of the regional security community and the working of the multilateral institutions for regional security. It is a corner stone of the new security landscape in the Asia-Pacific.

Seen in this framework, of these two contending approaches to regional security, we have a better understanding of the problem of international security in the Asia-Pacific. Perhaps, the post-Cold War security “landscape” was yet to take shape in full in the early years of the Post-Cold War when a great enthusiasm for a new security thinking and approach found great room to develop. At least, it was not clear whether the new security movement in the Asia-


\(^6\) A crucial area crescent shape that divides Northeast and Southeast Asia, and indeed defines the Cold War geopolitical landscape, a line along which we fought war in Korea, across the Taiwan Strait, and in Vietnam and broad Indochina, for much of the Cold War years.

Pacific then was aimed to broaden our thinking of the logic of regional security, or to seek alternative approaches, platforms and strategies for regional security in the post-Cold War Asia Pacific.

2. The US Pivot to Asia and China’s “Security Through Force” in Maritime East Asia

Two sets of major developments in recent years can probably help us to ponder the precise nature of the problem of regional security in East Asia, its logic and required instruments. The first is US’s fall back to its traditional methods and platforms for international security in the Asia-Pacific and the second is China’s hardening on its approach to traditional security issues in maritime East Asia. It is a huge point of debate whether these two are related,8 or whether they constituted a qualitative change in the regional security environment. But their implications for the issues we are concerned with here are clear and significant.

The purpose and effects of the US pivot to Asia has been a point of debate from the very beginning.9 Whether claimed or accused, the US pivot to Asia is said to rebalance its global priorities and structure of resources deployment to make up the “strategic deficit” in Asia it has accumulated over the years since the end of the Cold War. It is also said to be a strategy aimed at containing China. It is accordingly a strategic posture on “two legs”: a deployment of 60% of its global forces to Asia and a TPP without China (nor ASEAN). These may all well be true – we can easily gather and interpret evidence in support. Beyond the surface of conflicting claims, clarifications and accusations, however, one thing seems to be clear that the US pivot to Asia is a “re-arrangement” of its strategy posture and required resources structure10 in Asia as part of the “rebalancing” of its global priorities, commitments and resources 20 years after the end of the Cold War. This is not unprecedented in US international policy. A brief revisit to the Nixon Doctrine in 1969, 20 years after the end of World War II, will see the larger picture.11 The Nixon Doctrine and the US Pivot to Asia

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10 Forces deployment; facilities and accesses; and allies and partners and their roles.

11 At the height of the Vietnam War in 1969, US President Nixon declared in Guam a major policy shift that US should maintain sufficient forces readiness for one major war in Europe and a half war anywhere else around the world, presumably in Asia where the half war means the US shall consolidate its commitments to Asia, and instead, take the overall responsibilities but leave actual operations on the ground to local allies. “The Nixon Doctrine properly includes more than the declaratory policy orientation. As explained then, the Nixon Doctrine comprises “the revised worldwide security strategy of “1½ wars” and the new defence decision-making processes such as ‘fiscal guidance budgeting’.” Earl G. Ravenal, “The Nixon Doctrine and Our
seem quite opposite in proposing whether and how much US should be fully committed to Asia. But in “rebalancing” US’s global priorities, commitments and operational arrangements and what they mean for Asia, they are almost the same: while US re-rationalizes its global leadership, commitments and resource requirements, it shifts more responsibilities to its allies and partners in the regions.

In a way, it seems natural that the United States revitalizes its alliances as a core element for its security order in the Asia-Pacific. The hub and spoke alliance system is more effective; institutionally more flexible, compared to multilateral platforms, or even the more formal collective security arrangements such as NATO. Moreover, the US alliance system has worked before, therefore requires less investment to make it work again. The updated and perhaps more sophisticated alliance arrangements emerged under the US pivot to Asia sees a more “partnership” of US with its core allies in the region: Japan, Australia, and a set of mutual assistance relationships with countries such as South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and others. The first tier allies have great stakes in the shaping of regional security and are capable of sharing responsibilities and providing substantive material, political and policy contributions to regional security order. They are partners in policy planning and coordination, forces collaboration and synchronization, and commitment to the regional security order. The second tier alliances are more for providing resources and facilities in the resources structure.

China came out of the Cold War in East Asia with the complete collapse, not just the loss of their relevancy as in the case of the US-led one, of its Cold War alliance “system.” Vietnam had war with China in 1979; North Korea decided to go its own way since 1992 when South Korea normalized its relations with China. Politics in Myanmar and Cambodia made China’s alliance with them unable to be real and effective, or useful. China broke with the Soviet Union in the 1960s, long before the current post Cold War security landscape shaped up in East Asia. Even the quasi alliance between China, Japan and United States in the 1970s and 1980s were no longer relevant once the Soviet Union was gone. As commented by East Asia watchers, looking around Asia 20 years after the Cold War, China seems to have no single ally in the region. There are different reasons in each case for why China lost its allies, but it is beyond doubt that China has not taken its Cold War assets seriously and has

Asian Commitments,” Foreign Affairs 49(2), 1971, p. 201. Nixon Doctrine signalled US retreat from its two-war readiness forward deployment and combat strategy and resources structure in the early decades of the Cold War, a scaling-down of commitments to Asia and the beginning of Vietamization of the Vietnam War.

12 The hub-and-spoke alliance system is a network of bilateral alliances and is an alliance system. The large literature on “why there is no NATO in Asia” has an effect of leading people to think there was no alliance system in Asia. It is culture/identity that complicated institutional building or development of a NATO like alliance system there. See Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein, “Why is there no NATO in Asia? Collective identity, regionalism, and the origins of multilateralism,” International Organization 56(3): 575–607, 2002; Amitav Acharya, Why is there no NATO in Asia? the normative origins of Asian multilateralism, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 2005. There was no NATO in Asia, but there was an alliance system that worked. This hub and spoke alliance system was not a result of the failure of a NATO in Asia and thus the function of local culture, norm and identity, but the success and effectiveness of US strategy and platform preferences at the time. As Victor Cha explains, “bilateralism emerged in East Asia as the dominant security structure because of the ‘powerplay’ rationale behind U.S. postwar planning in the region.” Victor D. Cha, “Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia,” International Security 34(3):158-196, 2010. See also Kai He, Huiyun Feng, “Why is there no NATO in Asia? revisited: Prospect theory, balance of threat, and US alliance strategies,” European Journal of International Relations 18(2):227-250, 2012.
not made efforts to transform its Cold War alliance of mutual assistance into political capital and strategic assets for regional security, as the US pivot to Asia seems to have achieved. In fact, it has constantly complained about the US “Cold War mentality” in revitalizing its alliance system.

At a more profound level, there is the matter of China’s overall reading of the evolving problem of international security in the post-Cold War Asia-Pacific and consequently its conviction of the most appropriate methods, platforms and strategy to achieve a regional security order. There is a large literature on how China has transformed itself since the end of the Cold War and embraced the ideas and initiatives of multilateralism, cooperative security and regional security community.\(^{13}\) China engaged with and contributed to ARF, CSCAP, ADMM Plus and the Shangri La Dialogue in more recent years, along with China’s active, and an almost leading role in APEC, ASEAN Plus 3, and EAS. This seems in tune with the policy makers’ vision of China’s overall international posture of tao-guan-yang-hui.\(^{14}\) One can argue whether this is an intentional strategy or a short term tactics of a rising power,\(^{15}\) but all of these led China to invest more in multilateral engagement and promoting cooperative security.

China’s enthusiasm and active participation in multilateral platforms, however, has two built-in stoppers. First, the collective bargaining and hence constraining power of multilateral institutions always works in favour of smaller countries. This implication is true for China as well as for the United States. There are different methods for major powers to go around the power of multilateral institutions: either to make multilateral institutions less “institutionalized” and therefore less effective in constraining in the first place (e.g. soft, or Asian regionalism), or to seek alternative arrangements such as the hub and spoke alliance system. China seems to be conformable with the ASEAN way, or soft/Asian regionalism it has found itself in, but has no alternative arrangements to fall back. Second, for multilateral institutions to be effective and useful, it must be built on common security interests. However, it is rare that common interests can arise over traditional security issues among the members.

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Traditional security issues, however, die hard. Increasingly, China has found itself in conflict-prone situations over traditional security issues with Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and India, and many others where issues are there but have not inflated into “conflict” at the moment: Korea, Taiwan. The ASEAN security community has over the decades accumulated rich experience in how multilateral platforms manage traditional security issues among its members. In some way, compromise between national interests on traditional security issues and multilateral institutions in promoting collective interests and solutions shaped significantly the unique ASEAN way.\(^{16}\) Traditional security issues among stakeholders in larger multilateral platforms for regional security, such as the AFR, the Shangri La Dialogue, ADMM Plus and the EAS, put the ASEAN way in real test. Whether these issues can be and should be dealt with through multilateral platforms is not that convincingly clear, as least to China.

While China has kept itself relevant to the multilateral processes and platforms, it does not see the multilateral institutions have established themselves as effective or even credible institutions operating on common security interests. This is perhaps being exacerbated more so by the effects of the US pivot to Asia engaging with the multilateral platforms in the emergent alliance arrangements. When China sees Japan declared at the Shangri La Dialogue this year that the “US–Japan alliance is the cornerstone for regional peace and security” and “Taking our alliance with the United States as the foundation and respecting our partnership with ASEAN…” It must have wondered whether this is turning the Shangri La Dialogue into a platform for dialogue and to forge common security interests, or a platform for security alliance and making it part of the security order. This seems not a trivial question for China. This is a key point of rationale for China to have embraced multilateralism, common security and security community.

China of course is not sitting idle waiting to be incorporated into the emergent security order. The developments of past several years or so must have led China to rethink some aspects of the new security theory and concepts, and the interpretations of the security structure and dynamics that have been popular among those in some parts of the public policy sector in China and influencing China’s shift toward multilateralism and security community in recent years. It perhaps added to China’s long suspicion that the gun and money matter in international relations, and institutions are man-made rules to shape others. It must have led China to consider a wider range of different methods and platforms for international security in the region.

More specifically, the limits in China’s institutional resources in pursuing regional security interests and the lack of traditional allies to fall back on, will move China to further rely on its economic means and ways to shape regional order and hopefully to reduce the

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tensions arising from the traditional security issues. This includes deepening of economic relations with countries in the region, more investment and more innovative forms of trade, financing and people’s movement, connecting them directly to economic growth and social development of countries in the region. The current state of the Chinese economy requires and enables this in the Asia-Pacific. We have seen China intensifies its move in that direction, and rapid development and progress on China-ASEAN FTA upgrading, the trans-Asia railway system, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the China-HK-Taiwan FTA areas, Japan-Korea-China FTA areas, RCEP (TPP) leading toward a FTAAP. There is potentially space for some forms of economic collaboration in South China Sea, and East Sea. This perhaps is a modern day instance of Kant’s idea of “trade to peace” in action.17

Facing significant difficulties, costs and risks in developing a China-friendly security environment in its East and Southwest oceanic front and with dubious returns from its political investment in the new, multilateral security community, China is broadening its strategic horizon, taking countries on its North (Eurasia, Russia), Central Asia (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, CICA), West (India, Pakistan and Afghanistan), and Southwest (India-Bangladeshi-Myanmar-China corridor) fronts for a more comprehensive “security environment” where security pressure on the East and Southeast front can be lessened, risks can be neutralized, and assets and political capital can be utilised across a wider spectrum of countries, relations, stakes and assets.

Finally, China “demanded” US to give up its Cold War thinking and alliance-based platform for regional security. It doesn’t seem to have had any effect. China might as well think, in the long term, how to develop “allies” of its own for security in the region in the 21st century. More importantly, China has learnt some lessons from its past experience of building alliances, shall invest in strategic relations, institutionalize partnership, and develop a sense of interests as well as purpose and values. This indeed is an important part of the process of China becoming a world power.

3. ASEAN and the Emergent Security Landscape

Now how ASEAN fits in all of this? More specially, what these great power dynamics mean for ASEAN? In particular, if there are shifts in the regional security landscape where both multilateral institutions and alliance structures are employed to bringing about and maintaining peace and security in the region, and where both the United States and China are seeking more effective arrangements and platforms to protect, promote and advance their security interests in the region? The first part of the question is relatively easy. The existing literature speaks volumes on the role of ASEAN in great power politics, particularly between China and United States, and between China and Japan.18

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18 See for example Patrick M. Cronin and Cecilia Zhou, “US and China’s Duelling Visions of ASEAN,” The Diplomat August 10,
structure in the region - Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia and external powers, ASEAN, as a collective entity standing for Southeast Asia, is an important player in power politics itself. In reality, for ASEAN to be an effective player, it requires ASEAN to be able to act as a unitary entity itself, with definable common interests as well as the capacity to shape interests and relations.

On each of these counts, however, ASEAN is insufficient. ASEAN does not have a common interest on some key critical issues (maritime security or territory disputes for example). ASEAN doesn’t have the capacity to advance its interests and agenda. ASEAN’s GDP collectively is about 20% of China’s in 2013, changing from 87% in 1990, 175% of Japan’s (46%), 33% of US’ (19%). Its annual gross capital formation collectively is about 20% of China’s (from 87% in 1990), 175% of Japan’s (47%), 53% of US’ (28%); ASEAN’s total consumption is 49% of China’s (from 116% in 1990), 102% of Japan’s (51%), and 27% of US’ (17%); its total export is 67% of China’s (from 292% in 1990), 506% of Japan’s (200%), 140% of US’ (89%), and import is 70% of China’s (from 368% in 1990), 387% of Japan’s (226%), and 110% of US’ (80%). There are trends increasingly not to take ASEAN collectively as a stakeholder in regional politics and economy. TPP, the Asian Pacific Community of Kevin Rod, and the East Asian Community of Yukio Hatoyama, and China’s well known position of not approaching territory issues with ASEAN as a collective body, are just some of the evidence. Even with the current programme of the ASEAN community and integration, it would still be miles away for ASEAN to be an effective player in regional power politics. Conversely, power politics between US and China is hardly aimed at ASEAN as a party to their great power politics.

ASEAN can then been seen as a “balancer” in the classical balance of power scenario. This seems to better depict ASEAN’s role, reflecting its historical experience and position in the strategic structure. Precisely because of ASEAN’s much smaller stakes and capacity, ASEAN can play a balancer’s role. ASEAN’s practice in regional security since the Cold War has been a balancer between two major powers China and the United States, and between China and Japan, at least that’s so often narrated. The balancer is not of equal distance from the contending great powers. A balancer rather dynamically maintains the balance of power with neither of the major powers to dominate over the other. In this regard, in both Beijing and Washington, there is always an ambivalent feeling about ASEAN, particularly some of its leading members, with hate and love, so to speak.

The ability to play a balancer role between the major powers is the foundation of the ASEAN’s centrality and this has worked well in an unstructured geopolitical environment. It does not work well in a geopolitical environment where an alliance system dictates. For a period of time, South Korea, under Roh Moo-hyun presidency, once declared it wanted to be a balancer in East Asia, presumably between China and Japan, and between China, and

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19 In PPP, 2011 current price, World Bank WDI data, the same with the rest of the data cited below.
US/Japan. In reality, this has proven to be a difficult task – not least because of South Korea’s unsettling alliance with US and Japan which left little room for it to be a balancer. The working of an alliance system exerts pressure on related countries to take sides. If ASEAN is not taken into the alliance system, individual ASEAN member states are. To be an effective balancer, one will need potentially to be able to balance its asymmetric relations with the major powers in a hope to neutralize each other. The purpose of balancing through a balancer is for an equilibrium among the powers so that the balancer will be indispensable for either power’s strategic arrangements and deployment. As history teaches us, the more great powers involved, the much easier for the balancer to play. In the setting of two major opposing powers, the chance is higher that the balancer can play but also be played with.

It is here that much of the recent shifts in the regional security landscape become relevant. These shifts confirmed the US’s long held lack of confidence in the role of multilateral institutions for regional security in Asia. If this was unclear or ambivalent in the early post-Cold War years, the movements around the US pivot to Asia have made clear and firm. The preferred and assumingly the most effective platform for US in international security in the Asian Pacific is the hub and spoke alliance system.

The above has two implications for ASEAN and its role in regional security. First, the realignment of the strategic relations in the region under the US pivot to Asia reduced the number of great powers for ASEAN to play with as a balancer. ASEAN could have potentially played with not just the US, China, but also Japan, Australia, India with which ASEAN can find more room to act and have influence on the shaping and direction of the balance of power and thus regional security. Policy debates and political discourse and narratives however have effectively shaped ASEAN’s strategic relations into the narrow two great power scenario. The US pivot to Asia has formally realigned Japan, Australia and United States into a coordinated group in regional security. This significantly limits the strategic choices and options ASEAN has been able to exploit in the past. Second, the strategic realignment under the US pivot to Asia does not take ASEAN as a collective entity, as it is primarily a network of bilateral arrangements, some of which are involved with some individual ASEAN members. The same is seen in the economic and trade area where TPP or the Asia-Pacific Community cut through the AEAN members. This has further marginalized the role of ASEAN.

The shifts in the regional security landscape have also reinforced, if not revitalized, China’s long held ambivalence of the role of multilateral institutions in regional security. Over the years, China has built up and invested significantly in multilateral institutions for regional security, as well as in regional economic cooperation and integration, hoping these multilateral institutions can be a platform for China’s voices to be heard, and views understood, given that misunderstandings and the lack of trust and confidence are a major

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source of security tensions; and a process or a platform where countries’ interests and motivations can be reshaped - a sign of strong influence of the new strategic thinking and new security concept.

China however has never taken an underlying dimension of the multilateral institutions seriously that smaller and weaker countries rely on multilateral institutions as devices of collective power of bargaining and constraining to influence major powers and therefore the shaping of the large strategic structure. In Beijing’s view, China has intensified disputes and conflicts on traditional security issues in South China Seas. There have been efforts to pressure China to take ASEAN on collectively in solving these issues. The revitalizing and upgrading of the alliance system under the US pivot to Asia has effected to influence regional multilateral platforms and connect security issues across East, Southeast, and South Asia into a regional security order. All of these must have led China to rethink its interests in regional security, as well as most effective strategy and platform for their security.

ASEAN comes right in the heart of China’s adjusting/upgrading in its security thinking and responding to the rapidly evolving security environment in the region. First, ASEAN will continue to be a very important partner and the ASEAN-centred regional processes and platforms will continue to be important for China’s reaching out to the region, confidence and trust building, particularly with countries in Southeast Asia. However, there is always a question of the value of ASEAN for China’s interests and efforts in the region. Because of the historically close nexus between ASEAN, multilateral institutions in the region, China’s post-Cold War transformation in the regional security setting, and increasingly the great power politics in the region, China will be more careful not to let itself to be forced into an “ASEAN trap” it has been trying to avoid: that to deal with traditional security issues with individual countries through the collective power of ASEAN; not to allow security issues to be connected across the wider Asia-Pacific region where Japan and ASEAN could possibly join hands, and where China can find itself forced into the jurisdiction of a collective body such the EAS; and not to allow itself to be played into the hands of the balancer in the larger great power politics.

Second, ASEAN members, ASEAN, and ASEAN-centred multilateral processes and institutions are to be more clearly separated in China’s regional policy thinking and activity. There is still not a significant large of stakes of both China and ASEAN in the substance of their relations in, compared to, say, China’s relations with other parts of the world, or even other parts of the Asia-Pacific. There are more of asymmetry in size and benefit. China will probably continue to expand its relations with ASEAN. When the multilateral institutions and platforms become ineffective and unfavourably, China has no alliance system to fall back on, economic activities, relations and projects seems to be a way to move forward. On the other hand, more efforts by China are expected to invest diversely in the institutional infrastructure for regional security, and economic cooperation and integration. In tune with the large trend in the region to approach regional institutional building in a bottom up and piecemeal
fashion, this will see China to build regional frameworks and platforms in more manageable sub-regional blocs such as the greater China area (CEA ECPA); mainland East Asia (Korea and greater China); Northeast Asia (Japan, Korea and China); Eurasia (Russia and Central Asia-SOC, CICA, the New Silk Road); South Asia; BCIM Economic Corridor; Indochina (Trans-Asian Railway; Greater Mekong Subregion).

While dealing with matters and relations in Southeast Asia becoming increasingly complicated for China, China will probably focus on cultivating relations with individual ASEAN countries. ASEAN is striking to achieve economic, political and social integration by 2015. But in reality, ASEAN countries have significant differences in the levels of economic development, security interests and national politics and policy, to form a formidable collective presence in the regional security structure. Many of the countries are more “integrated” with China, Japan, or United States than with one another themselves in economics, politics and/or security matters. As the layers of alliances, partners and friends in the emergent new alliance system become more sophisticated, China will find it more effective in setting out relations with countries directly in the region.

Consequently, China will see ASEAN as one of the platforms in its broad security agenda and vision, and the ASEAN-centred processes and platforms will be but one of many for China, given the limits and complications that China sees in their function and utilities. This goes directly to affect the basis of ASEAN-centrality. Moreover, not only the emergent strategic landscape will complicate and perhaps compromise the role of ASEAN and ASEAN-centred multilateral processes and frameworks; the emergent strategic and security landscape itself is dynamic, and part of the evolving global strategic and security structure. The US-China relations of the 21st century is often seen as a rising power challenging the hegemonic power, into which perspective, the narratives of the US pivot to Asia and China’s more assertive posture seeking status, power and influence in the region fit well.

However, US-China strategic relations could well be a normal instance of great power politics in modern international relations. There has been quite a discernible pattern of rhythm in US-China strategic and political relations over the long 20th century, effected by developments in the global strategic structure. One could only go back as far as to World War II where the United States aligned with a much weaker China then in its global military and geopolitical campaign against the Japanese. In the 1970s and 1980s, the strategic competition between US and USSR pushed the two fellows of different dreams, US and PRC, into the same bed. In more recent times, in the aftermaths of the 911 in the 2000s, China and US seemed to be able to tolerate, if not accept, each other’s role in the global geopolitical structure.

It is not unthinkable that, with the increasingly unruly global security challenge in the Middle East, which is intensified with the ISIS taking its shape, and in East Europe, with

21 The ineffective experiences of building regional institutions top down starting with mega giant platforms such as APEC, CSCAPE, ARF, EAS have led to the rapid development of smaller projects bottom up with bilateral alliances and regional groupings of small scope and memberships: TPP, RCEP, hoping this might be a more effective way of building up into a large regional institution eventually into a FATAAP.
Russia reclaiming its role in the global and regional geopolitical structure, US may finally accept “the new type great power relationship” with China, paving the way for their working together to root out the Islamic extremism as a primary global security threat. It may sound like each time it was a marriage of convenience. But in a broad historical perspective, China has come out of the strategic partnership much stronger each time in terms of its position in the relationship and in its stakes and influence in the global strategic structure. Moreover, each time, there was also a set of smaller players associated with the relations effected and often comprised. This large, global security dynamics and structure fundamentally limits the strategic choices of ASEAN and the basis upon which ASEAN can play a balancer role in regional security. It also spells out a much smaller space for ASEAN to hedge for the continual shaping of power balance in the region.

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined the significant shifts in the security landscape in the Asia-Pacific, particularly how the great power politics between US and China affect the role of ASEAN and ASEAN-centred multilateral processes and platforms. The US pivot to Asia and China’s taking more traditional realpolitik approach to security issues in the region reflect an ambivalent view of both US and China over the role of ASEAN-centred multilateral processes and platforms for regional security and for the potential security scenarios in the years to come. These shifts have seen the more traditional, but upgraded, bilateral alliance system to revitalize for the United States; and management of security issues through bilateral frameworks and mechanisms in realpolitik as China insists.

This diversification in the processes, mechanisms and platforms for regional security and the new strategic posture of US and China, have “shrunk” the institutional and material basis for ASEAN to be effective in the shaping of regional security. The US-China relations are first and foremost global and structural, and great power politics in the global structure defines the parameters on the regional security structure, and the role of various stakeholders. The space for ASEAN to an effective balancer is more limited than many have thought.

This does require a more realistic thinking on the position and thus the role of ASEAN in international security in the region. There are several areas where ASEAN can invest to retain or enhance its role in regional security. First, a more substantive material basis needs to develop for ASEAN itself as a stakeholder in regional security. ASEAN’s political, economic integration and community building therefore is critically important. One needs to play a role from strengths and for a coherent set of interests. Second, rich, deep and solid material relations are built with China, US, Japan, Australia, India and others. Strong and rich material basis for the bilateral relations serve as a stabilizing force for the relations to sustain structural shifts that take place from time to time. More numbers of great powers involved provide a better security environment for ASEAN as it diffuses the power of the powers and increases the costs, material and institutional, of structural shifts in great power politics for the powers themselves. Third, there is an art of playing power politics by smaller players.
Neutrality and equal distance do not provide the same set of benefits of stability and security for small players. ASEAN-centrality needs the support of neutrality. Equal distance or even “leaning to one side” limits its capacity and influence, and the trust it has built with the parties, which is essential for any ASEAN-centred multilateral institutions to be effective.