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Trends in Southeast Asia

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Trends in Southeast Asia

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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THE EDITORS

Bipolarity and the Future of the Security Order in East Asia

By William Tow

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ASEAN is in danger of becoming marginalized as East Asian security becomes increasingly shaped by such volatile flashpoints as a nuclear North Korea and a South China Sea increasingly dominated by quarrels over sovereignty and maritime security.
- Accordingly, the notion of "ASEAN centrality" is now being seriously challenged and is unlikely to prevail against the growing bipolar security environment shaped by China and the United States.
- ASEAN and other Asia-Pacific states could gravitate toward one of five alternative order-building scenarios:
  (i) A Sino-American condominium that defines and accepts each other's geopolitical sphere of influence;
  (ii) The replacement or substantial revision of the United States' bilateral alliance system with the expansion of multilateral norms and instrumentalities;
  (iii) The gradual predominance of an "Asia for Asians" concept led by China but endorsed by a substantial number of Southeast Asian states;
  (iv) Effective balancing and hedging by smaller states and "middle powers", leading to eventual great power acceptance of a regional power equilibrium;
  (v) An intensification of regional "community building" via an amorphous but wide-ranging series of economic, ideological and strategic compromises to make war unthinkable and to strengthen regional interdependence.
- However, none of these five scenarios is likely to predominate in a literal sense. Instead, the "realist" explanation for understanding

security in the region is the most accurate forecast for understanding an East Asian security environment that is becoming increasingly disorderly.

- ASEAN can still play a constructive — if not central — role in shaping East Asia's strategic environment by working with China and the United States to strengthen confidence-building in regional security politics and to encourage their respect for strategic constraint.

Bipolarity and the Future of the Security Order in East Asia

By William Tow[1]

INTRODUCTION

Not long after the Cold War, Aaron Friedberg, a prominent American representative of the realist outlook on international security, argued that a "new multipolar sub-system" was beginning to emerge in East Asia after the Cold War, making that region "ripe for rivalry".[2] Among other impediments to regional stability, he argued that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was no more than a "loose collection of the region's less powerful states" with no real legacy of cultural identity or institutional collaboration. Friedberg concluded that, unlike in Europe, the type of institutionalism ASEAN designed to mitigate Asian tensions comprised "a very thin gruel indeed".[3] This relatively dour outlook was contested at the time, not only within ASEAN but also by those who credited that organization as representing a more promising trend in Asian stability and order-building.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) convened its inaugural meeting in July 1994 as an extension of the ten ASEAN members' annual dialogue with ten external powers, including those pan-regional "great powers" nominally recognized as shaping Asia's balance of power: the United States (U.S.), the People's Republic of China (PRC), Japan, and India.

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[2] Aaron L. Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia", *International Security* 18, no. 3 (1993–94).

[3] Ibid., p. 22.

ASEAN's initiation of the ARF constituted an effort to diversify rather than completely negate the U.S. postwar bilateral alliance network. The latter had long dominated Asia-Pacific security politics but Washington was gradually realizing the value of supporting new multilateral security initiatives as an effective supplement to its bilateral alliances.[4] The ARF embodied, soon after it was created, an effort to impose a distinct 'Asia-Pacific Way' as the preferred avenue for pursuing overall regional-order building, as Amitav Acharya noted.[5] He further observed that Southeast Asia's cultivation of pan-Asian regionalist discourses in the 1950s — with their emphasis on sovereign inviolability and their rejection of formal NATO-like regional collective defence arrangements — was a uniquely Southeast Asian sub-regional pathway for shaping Asian security politics. Northeast Asia — constrained by great power geopolitics — could not replicate this approach.[6] Over time, and for their own diverse reasons, the region's great powers gradually came to accept the principle of "ASEAN centrality" for underpinning Southeast Asian security.

More than twenty years after the ARF's founding, the ASEAN centrality approach as the best means for pursuing regional order-building is being seriously questioned. Realist critics have reiterated Friedberg's original assertion that growing strategic competition emanating from an increasingly multipolar Asia-Pacific security environment and especially

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[4] See Winston Lord, "Confirmation Hearing", Assistant Secretary-designate for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, D.C., 31 March 1993, 1997–2001 <state.gov/www/regions/eap/930331.html>. Lord listed "(d)eveloping multilateral forums for security consultations while maintaining solid foundations of our alliances" as one of the top ten US foreign policy goals for the Asia-Pacific region.

[5] Amitav Acharya, "Ideas, Identity, and Institution-Building: From the 'ASEAN Way' to the Asia-Pacific Way?", *Pacific Review* 10, no. 3 (1997): 324.

[6] Amitav Acharya, "Regional Institutions and Asian Security Order: Norms, Power, and Prospects for Peaceful Change", in *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features*, edited by Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 216–17.

that intensifying between the United States and China, has overwhelmed ASEAN. They posit that in this environment ASEAN has little or no ability to delineate credible rules or norms of great power behaviour in East/Southeast Asia or to mitigate the roles of power and force in that part of the world.[7] They point to the ARF as doing nothing more than deliberating non-traditional security issues and defending a "toothless declaration" about the need to observe a code of conduct in the South China Sea at a time when China's unprecedented strategic assertiveness is threatening to create a geopolitical *fait accompli* of Chinese dominance. ASEAN's expansion in membership, its member-states' growing preoccupation with their own internal politics and the noticeable lack of long-term relationships between many of ASEAN's current national leaders, as compared to previous generations, further cripple efforts to breathe life into Southeast Asia's community-building initiatives. In the words of one particularly harsh detractor, "ASEAN centrality … look(s) distinctly faint".[8]

The key policy deficiency resulting from this situation, according to two respected American observers, is that neither ASEAN nor any other regional actor has "offer(ed) a viable middle ground between the current U.S.-centric [alliance] architecture and [Chinese President] Xi Jinping's call for a new [regional] security architecture of 'Asia for Asians'".[9] If this assessment is correct, the Asia-Pacific will indeed continue to evolve

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[7] See, for example, David Martin Jones, Michael Lawrence, Rowan Smith, and Nicholas Khoo, *Asian Security and the Rise of China: International Relations in an Age of Volatility* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013); Evelyn Goh, "ASEAN-led Multilateralism and Regional Order: The Great Power Bargain Deficit", *The Asan Forum* (Special Forum), 23 May 2014 <www.theasanforum.org/asean-led-multilateralism-and-regional-order-the-great-powewr-bargain-defecit/>.

[8] Michael Vatikiotis, "ASEAN Deconstructs", *New Mandela*, 11 March 2016 <asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2016/03/11/asean-deconstructs/>.

[9] Robert A. Manning and Jim Pryzstup, "What Might a New Asian Order Look Like?", *East Asia Forum*, 12 April 2016 <www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/04/12/what-might-a-new-asian-order-look-like/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter2016-04-17>.

into a chaotic and largely bipolar environment dictated by Sino-American strategic competition. Those arguing that ASEAN centrality does remain germane to the contemporary Asian security environment insist that "punitive measures and an interventionist approach" cannot meet the aspirations and order-building requirements of Southeast Asian peoples. Consensus-based decision-making must prevail because there is no other credible alternative to regional rivalries and conflict escalation. Patience must be exercised for a new set of Southeast Asian leaders to define and shape their national agendas and priorities "via non-interference in domestic affairs and flexibility in implementing collective agreements as guiding principles".[10] Even realists have maintained that, on the one side and given sufficient time, the U.S. bilateral regional alliance network can respond and adapt to fast-moving changes in the Asia-Pacific security environment, engaging in more order-building while still maintaining credible deterrence and projecting effective balancing strategies.[11] Why could not ASEAN recalibrate the ASEAN centrality idea along similarly flexible lines? After all, as Rizal Sukma has observed, ASEAN "has managed to place itself at the centre of multilateral security arrangements in East Asia, which links the two sub-regions of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia" — a development which arguably complements the U.S. regional alliance system as one of the 'two pillars' of regional security politics.[12]

Unfortunately, however, ongoing structural change in the Asia-Pacific's balance of power and the risk of Southeast Asia's marginalization in an increasingly competitive strategic environment shaped predominantly by an intensifying Sino-American geopolitical rivalry will not allow

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[10] Ong Keng Yong and Kyaw San Wai, "ASEAN and the EU: Different Paths to Community-Building", *Multilateralism Matters* 19, April 2016 <www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Multilateral-Matters-Apr-2016.pdf?utm_source=getresponse&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=rsis_publications&utm_content=Multilateral+Matters+April+2016+Issue>.

[11] Manning and Pryzstup, "What Might A New Asian Order Look Like?".

[12] Sukma, "ASEAN and Regional Security in East Asia", in *Security Politics in Asia and Europe* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2010), pp. 109–10.

ASEAN and those institutionalists who support multilateral approaches to Asia-Pacific security the luxury of time to cultivate the diplomacy and enduring norms required to overcome what is an increasingly bipolar and zero-sum regional security environment. A major impetus for ARF's creation was the imperative to keep the United States strategically involved in Southeast Asia in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War and in a context where the long-standing American basing presence in the Philippines was about to be discontinued. This had little to do with ARF's aspirations for or concrete application to Asian security challenges beyond ASEAN's own sub-region, and hardly circumvented the reality of intra-ASEAN divisions over what "regional security" actually meant or how to achieve it.[13] Over a decade later, prospects are increasingly remote that ASEAN or the ARF, in their current form, will have relevance in future Asian crises that would have region-wide consequences for all of East Asia.

The Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea have been acknowledged by those analysts whose work has been seminal in Asian order-building as the two conflicts with the most "systemic impacts on regional peace and security".[14] Five order-building alternatives will be briefly assessed in the succeeding subsections of this analysis. Succinctly put, these include: (1) a Sino-American dominated partition of regional spheres of influence emanating from a power sharing arrangement reached by Beijing and Washington but one that is nevertheless sensitive to ASEAN and other regional actors' concerns and prerogatives; (2) a revised U.S. bilateral security alliance network that gravitates away from its original 'hub and spokes' context and towards greater compatibility with multilateral security politics; (3) a gradual evolution towards an

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[13] For an earlier but still highly prescient analysis of these points, see Maria Consuelo C. Ortuoste, "Reviewing the ASEAN Regional Forum And Its Role In Southeast Asian Security", Center Occasional Paper, Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, February 2000 at <http://apcss.org/Publications/Ocasional%20Papers/OPAseanForum.htm>.

[14] Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 24.

"Asia for Asians" approach led by China that may be grudgingly accepted by Washington in the face of its other global security responsibilities over time; (4) a regional power balancing scenario in which ASEAN states and middle and small powers in the region increasingly "hedge" against any great power domination; or (5) a gradual process of regional community-building already formally endorsed by ASEAN as the "ASEAN Way" in its key policy pronouncements and gradually accepted by China and the United States as the best means to achieve war avoidance while preserving their own regional strategic interests.

None of these alternatives are likely to prevail as the dominant trend in the Asia-Pacific's security environment over the near future. The region is instead heading towards a more anarchical situation in a predominantly bipolar setting inimical to regional order-building. This setting will be dominated by great power rivalry between China and the United States, presuming Washington's policymakers continue to view a formidable U.S. strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific as a core national security interest. This Sino-American rivalry will, however, involve a broader, more multipolar setting than was the Soviet-American bipolar competition that highlighted the Cold War. An American–Indian–Japanese maritime coalition could face off against an increasingly powerful China, with Russia intermittently supporting selected Chinese positions. ASEAN states will find it increasingly difficult to hedge between these two entities as both sides offer inducements for affiliating with them on key issues, and raise the costs for declining such affiliation. Ad hoc coalitions that include normally rival powers forming to address specific and urgent security crises are even less likely to emerge.

If the realist scenario prevails, ASEAN's role in shaping the long-term Asia-Pacific security environment will be limited. This outcome will hardly conform to the ASEAN centrality principle reaffirmed by the Sunnylands Declaration released during the February 2016 U.S.-ASEAN summit convened in Palm Springs, California.[15] If realism proves to be

[15] ASEAN Secretariat, "Joint Statement of the ASEAN-US Special Leaders' Summit: Sunnylands Declaration", 17 February 2016 <www.asean.org/joint-statement-of-the-asean-u-s-special-leaders-summit-sunnylands-declaration/>.

accurate in looking at the future of Asian security politics, the Obama administration's rebalancing policy as it pertains to Southeast Asia may be most remembered as a laudable but ultimately unsuccessful effort to sustain ASEAN centrality at a time when the region's bipolar regional security environment is irrepressibly consolidating.

REGIONAL FLASHPOINTS: CONSEQUENCES FOR ASEAN CENTRALITY

In March 2012, the ASEAN Regional Forum's Political and Security Community blueprint proclaimed that ASEAN centrality could be the "driving force in charting the future of regional architecture", insuring that ASEAN's fundamental interests would be promoted effectively throughout East Asia and in the broader international arena.[16] The subsequent history of ASEAN's and the ARF's overall impact on broader regional and global security, however, has been decidedly mixed.

In part, this is because of intra-ASEAN differences over whether ASEAN should be a "leader and driver" of Asian and international security politics or that individual ASEAN states should act as "levers and facilitators" in promoting their national security interests within the regional/international framework dominated by the great powers.[17] This debate links closely to the fundamental nature of ASEAN centrality and how it might be compared to two "concentric circles" or alternative levels of policy emphasis: (1) centrality *within* Southeast Asia and major power interactions within that sub-region; or, (2) centrality as it applies to *the wider East Asian or Asia-Pacific* regional architecture. As intimated at this paper's outset, this second level of ASEAN centrality may reflect

[16] ASEAN Political and Security Community Blueprint, 9 March 2012, cited in Benjamin Ho, "ASEAN's Centrality in a Rising Asia", RSIS Working Paper No. 249, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Singapore, 13 September 2012.

[17] Ho, "ASEAN's Centrality", p. 4.

an overreach in institutional ambition; notwithstanding intermittent ASEAN and ARF attempts to play a role in the Korean peninsula as a prime example. Yet, at its extreme, ASEAN centrality not only claims that ASEAN should be in the "driver's seat" in Southeast Asia (a relatively defensible position) but that it should also exercise that prerogative throughout East Asia or the Asia-Pacific, at the exclusion of other cars and other drivers.[18]

To an even greater extent, however, the ARF's geopolitical constraints are attributable to the sheer geopolitical realities of two great powers intensifying their own strategic involvement — and rivalries within — the Asia-Pacific. The creation of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 was arguably designed to function as a buffer, preserving ASEAN's original rationale for creation during the Vietnam War — to avoid Southeast Asia's balkanization as the great powers competed for access to and influence within that sub-region's critical littorals and growing markets. Unfortunately, the ASEAN centrality formula has had little impact on the resolution of what are currently the region's two major flashpoints: the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea. ARF formulas for implementing "preventive diplomacy", especially as they may pertain to North Korea, have not been effective or enduring. This is the case despite ASEAN focus on and consensus about the need to address and reverse North Korea's nuclear weapons programme. Neither has the EAS been successful in drawing China into serious multilateral security discussions on the South China Sea's territorial disputes. Indeed, China seems to be increasingly prone to applying "divide and rule" tactics. Such tactics are intended to preclude the need to bargain with a united ASEAN front as opposed to China's preference to negotiate with each ASEAN state bilaterally.

The Korean Peninsula

The Democratic Republic of North Korea's (DPRK's) unbending determination to develop and deploy a formidable nuclear deterrent,

[18] This author is indebted to Malcolm Cook for underscoring this point more centrally in this paper than would otherwise be the case.

and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's tendency to apply strategies of brinksmanship, have sharpened the risks for strategic miscalculation in Northeast Asia. The ARF has promoted the Korean peninsula's denuclearization. There has, since 2010, been regular participation of North Korean diplomats at the ARF's annual summit. They have occasionally conducted informal sideline meetings with U.S. and South Korean counterparts. Relatively comprehensive statements focusing on North Korean nuclear issues, inter-Korean unification talks and other developments on the peninsula are usually included within the ARF Chairman's Statement disseminated at the conclusion of each annual summit.[19]

Unfortunately, such patterns hardly represent a viable ASEAN centrality role in what may well be the gravest Asian regional security crisis of our time. Some Southeast Asian observers have recently argued that Pyongyang's interest in facilitating expanded bilateral trading ties with selected ASEAN countries (Thailand and Singapore, for example, are two of the DPRK's largest trading members) could generate a "soft landing" or gradual approach for opening up and developing the North Korean economy.[20] Yet the value of such ASEAN or ASEAN-

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[19] See, for example, Point 13 of "Our People, Our Community, Our Vision", Chairman's Statement of the 22nd ASEAN Regional Forum, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 6 August 2015 <aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/library/ARF%20Chairman"s%20Statements%20and%20Reports/The%20Twentysecond%20ASEAN%20Regional%20Forum,%202014-2015/01%20-%20Chairman"s%20Statement%20-%2022nd%20ARF.%20Kuala%20Lumpur.pdf>. For further background on the "ASEAN-North Korean connection", consult J. Berkshire Miller, "Leveraging ASEAN's Role on North Korean Denuclearization", *Forbes*, 23 July 2012 <www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanmiller/2013/07/23/leveraging-aseans-role-in-north-korean-denuclearization/#5070d369201d>; J. Berkshire Miller, "When North Korea Meets ASEAN", *The Diplomat*, 21 July 2011 <thediplomat.com/2011/07/when-north-korea-meets-asean/>.

[20] Er-Win Tan, Geetha Govindasamy and Chang Kyoo Park, "The Potential Role of Southeast Asia in North Korea's Economic Reforms: The Cases of ASEAN, Vietnam and Singapore", *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (2015), doi: 10.1177/0021909615570952.