

EAST ASIA INSIGHTS

TOWARD COMMUNITY BUILDING

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East Asia Community Building: Toward an “East Asia Security Forum”

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The East Asian region today barely resembles that of only a decade ago. The recent proliferation of ministerial conferences and multilateral dialogues, along with increasing calls for the creation of an “East Asia Community,” are welcome developments that will go toward building confidence between states and ensuring stability in the midst of such a rapid transformation. However, to this day the primary impetus for enhancing regionalism and East Asian economic integration has been more or less market driven. Enhanced cooperation between states in a wider range of areas would greatly facilitate the realization of a more cooperative, comprehensive, and stable regional community.

While much of the regional transformation in recent years has been positive, particularly in the economic sphere, challenges abound, such as proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), infectious disease, and trafficking in people and drugs, that have the potential to destabilize the region and reverse recent achievements. The creation of a multilateral institution to efficiently deal with such non-traditional and transnational security issues would not only foster a more secure environment for continued economic expansion but also—through joint action on issues of common concern—push the regional community-building process forward. One effective way to achieve these goals is the creation of an “East Asia Security Forum.”

The Situation in East Asia

Discourse on East Asia in recent years has been dominated by talk of a rising China, whose continued economic growth and increasingly active role in foreign affairs have transformed the geopolitical landscape in the region and sent policymakers in neighboring countries searching for an effective means to cooperate, while still hedging against uncertainty regarding its future course. A further look into the continent finds India, whose economy and international political influence are also expanding quickly. Somewhat in contrast to relatively guarded engagement strategies vis-à-vis China, many in the region see India as a potential contributor to regional stability, manifested most clearly in a successful campaign to include India as a member state in the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Yet another trend in the region not to be overlooked is Japan’s own gradual transformation. China’s growing regional and global political influence, along with rapidly growing (and non-transparent) defense expenditures, has stirred up Japanese public sentiment toward China. Additionally, the situation on the Korean peninsula has in recent years become an increasingly destabilizing security and geopolitical flashpoint. With domestic opposition to Japan playing a more assertive role in the region on the decline in the face of the changing regional environment, Japan’s security

policy has undergone a significant transformation in the new century as it seeks a more pro-active and “normal” role.

Farther south, despite substantial progress, ASEAN countries continue to face a number of challenges with respect to their domestic governance. While annual GDP growth among Southeast Asian states has continued to clip along at rates of over five percent for several years, corruption, environmental degradation, and an expanding disparity between the rich and poor remain serious issues of concern and pose substantial threats to sustainable development. Additionally, transnational environmental and health challenges such as HIV/AIDS and avian influenza all pose direct threats to regional stability.

Thus, we are presented with an East Asia that, in stark contrast to remarkable GDP growth rates and increasing economic interdependence throughout the region, faces a number of serious challenges outside of the economic sphere. Not only do these circumstances pose a direct threat to the security of individual states in the region, the lack of an efficient mechanism to tackle such problems in a cooperative way poses a significant challenge to regional community-building processes.

Moving Forward: Policy Options for Regional Stability

Given current realities, it goes without saying that a return to a Cold War–era strategy of containment to pre-empt China’s rise is impractical. Such a strategy would serve only to reverse many of the region’s economic gains in recent years. In its stead, regional powers are most likely to pursue a policy of cautious engagement predicated on a traditional balance-of-power approach, which addresses, but does not fall victim to, the uncertainty and skepticism surrounding China’s rise. Such a policy would allow states to effectively hedge against the unpredictability of China’s future course without simultaneously antagonizing it. In pursuit of this goal, we are likely to see a consolidation of strategic links among the region’s four largest democratic states (Japan, India, Australia, and the United States) as well as continued emphasis on US bilateral security alliances with Japan, Korea, and Australia and its strong security partnerships

with nations such as Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines.

While the contribution that such a traditional approach can make to regional stability should be acknowledged, the most sensible way forward has as its keystone an expanded emphasis on inclusive multilateralism. The US focus on ad-hoc multilateralism—building coalitions only with countries supportive of US policy—is not necessarily applicable to a region as large and diverse as East Asia. Rather, what is critical is a forum predicated on an inclusive policy of multilateralism, actively engaging all states in the region, in which matters of concern are addressed directly, without ostracizing any individual state or group of states. As will be discussed below, an East Asia Security Forum would not only contribute to a more stable and secure region but also itself strengthen a sense of community among states that cooperatively solve problems, thereby indirectly facilitating the realization of an East Asia community.

East Asia Security Forum vs. the ASEAN Regional Forum

Critics may argue that an East Asia Security Forum would be a mere redundancy given the existence of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), an organization already tasked with managing security issues in the region. Such individuals would argue that an attempt to create another security forum is tantamount to an attempt to destroy the ARF. However, such critics would fail to realize two key points: 1) the limits of the ARF’s capabilities; and 2) the potential for an East Asia Security Forum to complement, rather than substitute for, the ARF.

Despite its designation as “Asia’s leading security forum” the ARF has not accomplished much outside of a conference room since its establishment almost thirteen years ago. It has proven itself ineffective when faced with either specific threats to regional stability, such as the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula, or crises requiring a specific and quick response, such as the December 2004 tsunami. The former has been primarily handled in the context of the Six-Party Talks while the latter was more or less handled by a “coalition of the willing” whose main members included the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. The ARF’s

response to last year's earthquake in Indonesia, increased efforts to jointly combat cyber-terrorism, and this past January's joint exercise in Singapore (the ARF's first ever operational exercise) suggest that it is indeed evolving, but two things nevertheless remain uncertain. First, there are doubts as to how far the ARF, with such a wide-ranging group of member states, will be able to move beyond its original mandate to promote confidence building, transparency, and stability in the region. Second, even if it is ultimately able to move forward on the 1995 Concept Paper's road map and engage in preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution,* it remains unclear how many years it will take before those goals are achieved. The simple fact of the matter is that there are a number of urgent issues demanding attention in East Asia, and the ARF is currently not sufficiently capable of dealing with them.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize here that the ARF's function as a forum for regular ministerial dialogue and confidence building remains an invaluable contribution to regional stability. As mentioned above, the goal of an East Asia Security Forum would not be to supplant the ARF but to complement it by establishing a community of states pro-actively working together through operations to solve issues of common concern.

The Key to Community Building: An Action-Oriented Regionalism

The obstacles to achieving a genuine community of states in a region as diverse as East Asia are considerable, both in number and degree. The community-building process is going to take time. In light of this fact, it is clear that recognition of shared interests, rather than divisive issues, should be the point of focus for the foreseeable future. In addition to addressing the specific problem in question, such a process would strengthen regional identity and facilitate the creation of a more stable and secure environment for the region as a whole. The spread of a regional "East Asia" identity could be a means for individuals to develop an identity

beyond the nation-state and help absorb and dissipate destabilizing nationalistic sentiment that the region has seen rise sharply in recent years. An East Asia security community would serve as an effective way for states in the region to cooperatively address common security threats such as terrorism and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, leaving not only the region but also the rest of the world more secure in the process.

The best way to facilitate the strengthening of community ties is to emphasize functional issues that serve the interests of all regional partners. Action-oriented regionalism, through which a small number of core actors are bound together by rules and operations—rather than values, religion, or political systems—will effectively push the community-building process forward. While the expansion of economic ties in the region is well known, one potential area for extensive cooperation yet to be adequately addressed is that of security. As touched on above, despite the ARF's valuable role as a broad security dialogue forum effective for confidence building, very little in the form of concrete cooperative action ever results from its meetings. With issues such as piracy or terrorism, merely discussing the issue, while not absent of value, does not go far toward actually solving the problem. Rather, specific and proactive operations are necessary.

It should be emphasized that an East Asia Security Forum would not function as an alternative to existing bilateral security alliances with the United States as a guarantor of regional stability any time in the foreseeable future. Rather, for the time being, its function should be to complement such alliances. While the global strategic environment has changed such that war between states is now relatively rare and the greatest risk often comes from non-state actors, such "hard" security alliances are an effective hedge against unpredictable future threats. There is an increasing consensus among regional players—even China—that bilateral alliances are fundamentally stabilizing for the region as a whole.

In addition to maintaining the ARF as a forum for dialogue on security issues, the Six-Party Talks format could emerge as an effective sub-regional security dialogue forum for resolving North

* The 1995 Concept Paper for the ARF delineated a three-stage evolutionary process: 1) confidence building; 2) preventive diplomacy; and 3) conflict resolution. However, for all intents and purposes, the ARF has yet to move beyond the first stage.

Korea's nuclear issue. Such a forum, which brings together the most powerful states in the region to cooperate on a security issue of common concern, was not feasible even ten years ago. Although originally ad hoc in nature, the forum should continue to exist even after the nuclear issue is settled and address remaining issues on the peninsula, such as normalization of relations with the United States and Japan, the establishment of a permanent peace regime, and continued economic development of North Korea. In addition to hopefully leading to effective solutions to these issues, such interaction also has value through its function as a confidence-building mechanism.

Although both the ARF's and the Six-Party Talks' contribution to regional stability will remain invaluable, an East Asia Security Forum would consist of a small number of core members, such as ASEAN+6 and the United States, and be operational in its orientation. An East Asia Security Forum would handle non-traditional/cooperative security issues, such as non-proliferation of WMD, counter-terrorism, counter-piracy, and human security issues, addressing these challenges through cooperative action somewhat similar to the American-led Proliferation Security Initiative.

Given that in a region as diverse as East Asia the interests and values of states are often at odds, an East Asia Security Forum should not be expected to function as efficiently or cover the same breadth of issues as other multilateral regional security forums, such as NATO. One example of the challenges an East Asia Security Forum would face is the fact that the region's two most powerful players, China and Japan, do not maintain similar traditional threat perceptions. Despite this fact, there

nevertheless remain a number of issues, such as those mentioned above, which all regional actors have a common interest in addressing. The act of cooperation itself will also play a role as a confidence-building measure and gradually minimize the perceived threat posed by neighbor states.

If an East Asia Security Forum is successfully established, it could in some sense be considered more progressive than NATO in its insistence on cooperative security despite vast and fundamental differences among member states. At the same time, however, it is important to emphasize the fact that no security institution has a legitimate chance of success without US cooperation. Simply put, without US support, an East Asia Security Forum would likely fail. Thus, regional actors must make every effort to ensure that the United States feels welcome and remains engaged in the region. In this regard, the United States should be encouraged to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and join the EAS as soon as possible.

Even if the United States does not sign the TAC, there are signs that it is likely to be included in a regional security forum anyway. Statements coming out of January's EAS in Cebu suggest increased support for expanding the conceptualization of regionalism to include joint efforts to address infectious disease, energy security, and other challenges. If the EAS continues to discuss strategic issues such as non-traditional security threats, it is all but a foregone conclusion that members will agree that US involvement in any countermeasures to address these threats is indispensable. The hope is that these statements will ultimately lead to the establishment of an East Asia Security Forum with full US support and participation.

East Asia Insights

East Asia Insights is an occasional newsletter focusing on East Asia community building from a Japanese perspective.

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