

The Current State of Regional Organizations in the Asia-Pacific Region

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There has been a proliferation of regional organizations in the Asia-Pacific region in recent years as multilateral cooperation has seemed a natural fit in a region inhabited by rising powers. The most recent institutions of significance have been the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM Plus (which now mirrors the EAS membership). They both build upon the grandfather of East Asian multilateral institutions, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its regional security extension, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The three ASEAN offshoots – EAS, ADMM+, ARF – can all be viewed as efforts to promote regional stability by keeping the U.S. (among others) engaged while integrating a rising China. This paper will focus on these ASEAN-driven organizations. Other multilateral initiatives, such as ASEAN Plus Three (involving South Korea, Japan, and China) and the more broadly based Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) “gathering of economies” will not be addressed since their focus is more economic than security-oriented.

ASEAN Coming of Age?

While ASEAN – which links the 10 nations of Southeast Asia – has been around for more than 40 years, it has only recently instituted a charter and begun work on developing a true security community.¹ Under Indonesia’s leadership this year, it tried to be a bit more proactive, getting involved directly in trying (without much success) to mediate the Thai-Cambodia border dispute and also putting pressure on Burma to take significant steps along its self-proclaimed “Seven Step Roadmap to Democracy.”

ASEAN’s main contribution to regional stability, current South China Sea and Thai-Cambodia difficulties notwithstanding, has been to keep traditional tensions and disputes among its member countries swept under the rug. This has helped ASEAN, or at least its key members, to rise economically and helped foster political development among most of its members (Burma, Laos, and Cambodia in particular still have a long way to go). In terms of regional security, ASEAN’s primary contribution to regional security has been through the afore-mentioned regional institutions that it has helped create and continues to manage from its position in the “driver’s seat” for ARF and EAS. In truth, ASEAN is allowed to lead in this area since the major powers in and around the region – China, Japan, India, even South Korea – do not sufficiently trust one another to take the lead, allowing ASEAN to play this role by default. Given the rules of consensus that govern ASEAN and its by-products, these organizations play a confidence building and conflict avoidance role more than a conflict resolution or intervention role.

ASEAN Regional Forum: Moving Beyond CBMs?

The 26-member ARF brings together foreign ministers from throughout and beyond the Asia-Pacific region for annual security-oriented discussions.² While initially focused exclusively on East Asia, the introduction of more South Asian members in recent years should be ringing warning bells about ARF's future focus and effectiveness. Broadening its membership reduces ARF's attractiveness as a framework for East Asian or Asia-Pacific community building, although the presence of all key Northeast Asian players (except Taiwan) does permit occasional six-party (and more) side discussions on Northeast Asia security issues. The 2011 ARF meeting in Bali, for example, provided a venue for nuclear negotiators from South and North Korea to meet in what could be the first step toward a resumption of Six-Party Talks aimed at Korean Peninsula denuclearization.

Generally speaking, ARF seems well-suited to serve as the consolidating and validating instrument behind many security initiatives proposed by governments and at non-official gatherings. Various ARF study groups have provided a vehicle to move multilateral security cooperation forward in areas such as preventive diplomacy, enhanced confidence-building, counterproliferation, counterterrorism, and maritime (including search and rescue) cooperation, all of which help promote greater transparency and military-to-military cooperation. But its contribution to the regional security order remains somewhat constrained.

Few expect ARF to solve the region's problems or even to move rapidly or pro-actively to undertake that mission. The agreement to "move at a pace comfortable to all participants" seems aimed at tempering the desire of more Western-oriented members for immediate results in favor of the "evolutionary" approach preferred by the ASEAN states, which sees the process as being as important (or more) as its eventual substantive products. The Asian preference for "noninterference in internal affairs" also has traditionally placed some important topics essentially off limits, although this may be changing (witness ASEAN's increased willingness to comment on Myanmar's domestic politics). Nonetheless, the evolution of ARF from a confidence-building measures "talk shop" to a true preventive diplomacy mechanism (as called for in its 1995 Concept Paper) promises to be a long and difficult one.

East Asia Summit: will Washington's participation make a difference?

In December 2005, in an effort to further promote East Asia community building, Malaysia convened the first East Asia Summit involving the 10 ASEAN leaders, their Plus Three partners (China, Japan, and South Korea), and Australia, New Zealand and India. Still undefined seven years later is how EAS will interact with broader regional organizations such as APEC or ARF. To its credit, the Chairman's Statement from the second EAS confirmed views that EAS complements other existing regional mechanisms, including the ASEAN dialogue process, the ASEAN Plus Three process, ARF and APEC in community-building efforts. However, details as to how these various efforts will mesh or work together are still lacking.

The big question today is, how (if at all) the organization will change now that the U.S. and Russia have become members – both were officially invited in 2010 and Presidents Obama and Medvedev attended their first EAS meetings in November 2011 in Indonesia. Stay tuned on this one, but the odds are that both new members will continue to quietly blend in and let ASEAN continue to lead, even though President Obama clearly signaled his preference for the EAS to dig more deeply into regional maritime security issues.

ADMM+: the beginning of real security cooperation?

The advent of the ADMM+ opens the door for closer security cooperation since, unlike ARF, it is comprised primarily of defense rather than foreign ministry officials. The first meeting was held in Hanoi in the fall of 2010, during Vietnam’s tenure as ASEAN Chair. It was the first official defense forum involving ASEAN defense officials and the EAS dialogue partners. While applauding the contributions of the “plus” nations to regional peace, security and development, the group reaffirmed ASEAN’s central role in any institutional initiative and stressed that any mechanism should abide by “ASEAN principles of respect for independence and sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs of member states, consultation and consensus, and moving at a pace comfortable to all parties.”

Drawing from the discussion paper “Potential Prospects and Direction of Practical Cooperation within the Framework of the ADMM-Plus” that was tabled at the meeting, the group agreed to set up five expert working groups (EWG) on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), maritime security, military medicine, counter-terrorism, and peacekeeping operations (PKO). Vietnam and China offered to co-chair the EWG on HA/DR; Malaysia and Australia took up the EWG on maritime security, and the Philippines will work with New Zealand on PKOs. The ADMM+ set up an ASEAN Defense Senior Officials Meeting Plus (ADSOM+) to monitor progress. Brunei will host the next ADMM+ in 2013.

The ADMM+ initiative seems long overdue. Foreign ministries have traditionally monopolized regional security gatherings. For some critics, that explains their (lack of) effectiveness and their attention to style over substance. Others counter that militaries should be subordinated to bureaucracies and a little pomp is a small price to pay for civilian control over the military. Others worry that a one-day meeting every three years is unlikely to yield much in the way of substance; more astute commentators counter that a lot can get done under the radar if militaries are given the chance to cooperate out of public view. Finally, there is the view among some that the forum is ASEAN’s attempt to regain the initiative on regional security initiatives, and to parry the growing importance of the non-governmental Shangri-la Dialogue which has brought defense officials from the region and beyond together for informal discussions under the leadership of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies. Clearly Southeast Asians prefer an organization that is ASEAN-driven over one arranged by a British think tank.

Engaging a rising China

Finally, a few words about engaging a rising China and the role of regional organizations like those mentioned above in this process. When one looks at China's current and potential future role in the international community there is cause for both cautious optimism and for serious concern. In many respects, China is becoming the "responsible stakeholder" that it claims to seek to be, especially in a regional context, helping to drive economic growth in East Asia and beyond, and cooperating both with its ASEAN colleagues and its Plus Three partners both politically and economically. Chinese leaders constantly profess their commitment to peace and stability globally, regionally, across the Taiwan Straits, and on the Korean Peninsula, and there are many statements and even some actions to back up these claims.

On the other hand, one can also point to a number of Chinese actions that are considerably more troublesome and point to an even more worrisome future once China has risen. While Chinese colleagues tend to dismiss it or claim that it has been over-exaggerated (or is the product of increased U.S. sensitivity), most China-watchers in America and in Asia are firmly convinced that 2010 marked the beginning of China's increased aggressiveness both in word and in deed. Some have warned then that what we saw in 2010 was a "sneak preview" of what China will look like, and how Beijing will behave, once China has risen. While such concerns should not be overstated – and Beijing has clearly taken a step back as it has seen how counterproductive this increased assertiveness has been – they likewise cannot and should not be dismissed.

It is not clear today what direction Chinese leaders will take the country as its share of political, economic, and military power continues to rise; perhaps even China's current and future leaders do not know for sure. One suspects that there are "internationalists" within the Beijing leadership who see cooperation and compromise as the best way forward. We have even heard leaders like departing Premier Wen Jiabao speaking out about the need for greater domestic reform. On the other hand, clearly there are others who see China's rise as evidence of a "new reality" in Asia and demand respect, even before it is fully earned. They seem increasingly impatient when things do not go their way – the embarrassing berating the Chinese foreign minister reportedly gave his ASEAN colleagues at the 2010 ARF meeting being one case in point. Which camp will prevail or at least become the predominant view is uncertain.

China's International Role As a veto-wielding member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), China has a global leadership role whether it seeks one or not. From an American perspective – and clearly not from a Chinese perspective – China has not only not exercised this role responsibly but has taken steps in the past two years that have rendered that body ineffective almost to the point of irrelevance especially when it comes to security on the Korean Peninsula. Their actions provide considerable insight into China's international role and Beijing's perception of international priorities.

In the constant struggle between the principle of non-interference in another country's sovereign affairs and the equally compelling (at least in my view and, I would argue, that of most governments of the world) responsibility to protect, there is little question what side of the debate China comes down on. With the exception of the UNSC vote on Libya, where even the Arab League was demanding action, China has consistently blocked the protection of human rights, using the non-interference principle as the justification or excuse.³ Even Chinese scholars admit the Libya vote was a "one off" and not a signal of a change in Chinese attitude regarding responsibility to protect.

More relevant has been Beijing's clearly one-sided protection of North Korea at the UNSC in the face of clear and continued violations of resolutions that China claims – and is legally bound – to support. Beijing has refused to allow debate on the Yeonpyeong Island shelling despite it being an obviously violation of the UN Armistice Agreement. It likewise refuses to discuss Pyongyang's clearly illegal (under UNSC resolutions) uranium enrichment activities, which Pyongyang has chosen to flaunt. It has consistently blocked the release of reports from expert groups that have pointed out North Korea violations of UNSC resolutions and sanctions (especially those that indicate that violations have occurred via "third countries"). And it significantly watered down a UNSC statement on the Cheonan attack to the point that Pyongyang declared the outcome "a great diplomatic victory." I fear that Beijing's defense of Pyongyang at all costs and under all circumstances has empowered and emboldened the North and has thus contributed to Pyongyang's unacceptable behavior. But this type of Chinese behavior is also having a negative impact on the credibility and utility of the UNSC.

Beijing cannot have it both ways. It cannot (as it does) criticize the U.S. and ROK for employing military "show of force" or "demonstration of resolve" tactics to send Pyongyang a message that future aggression will not be tolerated, when it almost single-handedly blocks U.S. and ROK attempts to deal with the matter politically or economically. Continued Chinese protection of North Korea, Iran, Burma and others at the UNSC will help ensure that future ad hoc "coalitions of the willing" are formed to deal with serious world problems, if the UNSC continues to abrogate its responsibilities as a result of a China veto (actual or threatened). It is a sad commentary about China's current international role, and perhaps an equally bad sign about China's future, that the world's greatest tyrants all have the same best friend in common. Nations, like people, can and should be judged by the company they keep, and the list of countries that claim China as one of its closest (perhaps only) friend should be a cause for shame in China.

China's Role and Behavior Regionally As noted earlier, China has played a generally positive role in regional organizations like the EAS, ARF, ADDM+, etc. It also plays a commendable leadership role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with Russia and the nations of Central Asia. But despite this broad-based cooperation, individual actions, especially these past two years, have raised concern. Chinese claims, no longer repeated but never denounced, that the South China Sea represents a Chinese "core interest" sufficient raised concerns among the ASEAN Nations (and in Washington). Tensions with the Philippines over areas of the disputed territories have reached a new high, and its approach to managing this regional flashpoint will provide a solid indicator of the nature of its regional leadership in the decades ahead.

Then there was the incident in the Senkakus, where the Chinese reacted strongly to the Japanese Coast Guard arresting a drunken Chinese fishing boat captain after he repeatedly rammed a Coast Guard cutter with his boat. What should have been a simple legal issue – such behavior cannot and should not be tolerated – became an international incident, with China reportedly arresting Japanese citizens and cutting off rare earth exports in retaliation, in addition to diplomatic threats and insults which continued, even after the captain was released. Japanese are referring to the incident as their “Sputnik moment,” a wake-up call to the real threat a rising/risen China will pose. This incident informs the context of the latest and dangerous stand-off with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands that is making the region nervous; this is a territorial dispute that has the potential to transform the regional security environment, and as one of the claimants yet again, China’s response will provide insights on how it balances its core interests with its regional leadership.

Added to this were repeated Chinese protests and warnings to the United States not to send an aircraft carrier into the Yellow Sea for combined ROK-US exercises aimed at sending a sobering message to the North, on the grounds that the Yellow Sea constituted Chinese territorial waters, a claim so preposterous that it compelled the US Navy, which had originally not planned on sending a carrier there (since they had conducted carrier operations in the Yellow Sea within the past year), to redeploy the USS George Washington Battle Group, not only to remind North Korea that future acts of aggression would not be tolerated, but also to remind Beijing what the meaning of “international waters” actually is.

Following US push-back – at the ARF, in the Yellow Sea, and through a reaffirmation of the US defense commitment to Japan (including the Senkakus) – China has taken a kinder, gentler approach and we have seen an upswing in Sino-US cooperation, just before, during, and since the Hu Jintao visit to Washington in January 2011. Clearly someone in Beijing remembered Deng Xiaoping’s dictum about maintaining a low profile, but the damage has already been done and serious questions have been raised about whether this increased Chinese assertiveness was a sneak preview of things to come. One hopes not, and I am not predicting that it is. But there is no denying that recent Chinese assertiveness has raised US and regional concerns about Chinese future intentions and the implications of a fully risen and more militarily-capable China.

One side note here. There has been much written about China’s development of an aircraft carrier, which made its sea trials this past year. Most of it has been wrong or misguided, especially as regards claims that this will significantly shift the power balance in Asia. If and when China’s first carrier actually becomes fully operational (which is still years away), it will bring China up to the level of where the Soviet (or Ukrainian) Navy was circa 1984. It will still give China only the second best navy in Asia (in terms of capability and professionalism) behind Japan. China may quickly become the 800-pound gorilla in Asia, but the US remains a 1600-pound gorilla and a significant qualitative and capabilities gap will remain for decades to come.

Despite the above-mentioned concerns and challenges, I remain generally optimistic about the future of US-China relations and thus about the prospects for regional and global stability. For better and for worse, the U.S.-China relationship remains one of the most important bilateral

relationships in the world. Today, the two nations face a growing number of political, economic, and security concerns which can best, perhaps only, be solved if there is cooperation between Beijing and Washington. In instances where our core interests, objectives, and tactics or approaches coincide or are complementary, continued cooperation can and should be expected. Since Washington still respects China's core interests when it comes to Tibet and Taiwan – recognizing Tibet as part of China and rejecting any unilateral change in the cross-Strait status quo – these issues can be managed. The area of greatest concern, when it comes to Sino-US relations and to regional stability, deals with Beijing's policies toward North Korea, which makes it increasingly more difficult to build a “positive, cooperative, and comprehensive U.S.-China relationship for the 21st century.”

Meanwhile, Washington and Beijing both remain committed to supporting ASEAN-driven multilateral cooperation in East Asia and the existing forums which provide venues to promote greater cooperation and give China added incentive for integrating peacefully in the region. At the last Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2011, we saw first-hand the extra effort made by senior defense officials on both sides to put on a cooperative face. Likewise, along the sidelines of last year's ARF meeting, we saw progress on the development of guidelines to govern conduct in the South China Sea. These are all positive developments both for China's peaceful rise and for the role multilateral organizations can play in bringing this about.

Notes

1. The ASEAN member states are: Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.
2. The 10 ASEAN states plus Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Russia, South Korea, North Korea, New Zealand, and the U.S., plus more recently Pakistan, Timor-Leste, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.
3. One cannot help but think that at least part of China's motivation is not to set any precedents that might come back to haunt China vis-a-vis Tibet or other areas where China's treatment of its own citizens is less than ideal.