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“A SECURITY REGIME FOR EAST ASIA”

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Discussion Paper

A SECURITY REGIME FOR EAST ASIA

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Introduction

This discussion paper focuses on the desirability or otherwise of a security regime for East Asia, and the features that such a regime should take. It focuses particularly on threats such as terrorism and challenges such the North Korean issue as required, even though, in my view, neither terrorism nor the North Korean issue are “emerging” issues. Terrorism is a very old problem, and the threat of terrorism in the region has in fact declined in recent decades. As for the North Korean issue, it is almost 50 years old, and it is essentially unfinished business having its origins in the Second World War and the Korean War.

Although both national and international terrorism are old problems (e.g. Reign of Terror in France; Irzun of Israel; Hamas of Palestinian Territory; New IRA in Northern Ireland; Khmer Rouge in Cambodia; Aum Shunrikyo in Japan, Communist Internationale, the Japanese Red Army), the threat of the Al-Qaeda especially through the Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia is a recent development, and in this sense it is indeed an “emerging” threat.

Similarly although the North Korean issue is not a new one, fears of a nuclear capable North Korea are new, and in this sense it is an emerging issue too.

There are other emerging security issues in the region as well particularly in the non-conventional field, such as deadly contagious diseases like AIDS and SARS, and transnational crime, which has burgeoned in recent times due among others to radical improvements in technology.

Structure of Discussion

This paper discusses the subject in the following order:

1. The importance of multilateral security cooperation in dealing with threats and challenges to East Asian security.
2. The priority attached to security cooperation in the context of East Asia community building and institutional arrangements for the purpose in the East Asia Vision Group Report and the Final Report of the East Asia Study Group.
3. Fundamental factors to be taken into consideration when making choices regarding institutional approaches to multilateral security cooperation in East Asia.
4. Recommendations.

The time frame of this discussion is the near-term, five years. Longer-term measures, such as the conceivable inclusion of North Korea in the East Asia community initiative and in regional security dialogue processes are not discussed.

The Importance of Multilateral Security Cooperation for East Asia

Security problems can be addressed in a number of institutional ways depending upon the nature of the problem: domestically (nationally), bilaterally, or multilaterally. In the case of multilateral security cooperation there are again various options for East Asia involving incrementally larger numbers of participants. If East Asia is conceived of as a region, it can be sub-regional (ASEAN and a Northeast Asian security process), regional (East Asian), extra-regional (Asia Pacific) or global (such as the United Nations).

Security problems can also be addressed in more than one forum, though their rationale and discreteness must be clear to avoid duplication.

In the case of terrorism, both domestic (national) and international terrorism require external cooperation. Domestic terrorist movements can receive external political, financial and military support, or use neighbouring countries as retreats, safe havens, bases and launching pads for terrorist activities. Border areas are especially attractive for such purposes.

External cooperation and assistance to fight local terrorism however, is normally limited to bilateral cooperation, and wider multilateral regimes are not very relevant or useful.

International terrorism, that is terrorism networks operating in several countries even if their specific targets are outside some of these countries, cannot be effectively dealt with without wider multilateral cooperation. Wider multilateral cooperation is in fact indispensable, although the participation of some countries may be more important than others.

That said, firm action by national agencies against terrorist elements operating within their countries is often more important than international action. If each country is able to create a political and security environment that is hostile to terrorists, and root causes are addressed, international terrorism will largely take care of itself, though cooperation in areas such as intelligence will still be vital.

As far as international terrorism in East Asia is concerned, especially of the Al-Qaeda/Jemaah Islamiyah variety, it should be noted that the involvement and cooperation of some states are more important than others. For instance, the countries directly involved are all confined to Southeast Asia, and even here Laos and Myanmar are not involved. The relevance of the other countries in the East Asian region is limited to factors such as interdiction of terrorist funding and tracking of terrorist movements.

As for the North Korean issue, international cooperation involving the main protagonists as well as those seriously affected by any conflict would be most relevant. The main protagonists are the two Koreas and the United States. Those most closely affected as well are Japan, China and Russia. Farther afield would be the rest of the countries of East Asia for whom a conflict would raise serious security concerns.

Other major problems with a security interest in the East Asian region would include the following:

1. Sovereignty and territorial issues such as the China-Taiwan issue, the Senkaku Islands issue and the overlapping claims in the South China Sea.

2. Insurgencies and separatist movements like the CPP/NPA, MILF and the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka.
3. Transnational crime.
4. Piracy.
5. Lethal contagious diseases such as AIDS and SARS.

Concerns regarding interference in internal affairs will make it difficult for external engagement in some sovereignty issues such as the China/Taiwan issue although they do have enormous external security interest. All the other problems listed above however will benefit from bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Such cooperation will in fact be indispensable for addressing non-conventional threats such as transnational crime, piracy and SARS.

The Thinking of the East Asia Vision Group and the East Asia Study Group

The EAVG prescribed a more ambitious and substantive security role for East Asia. The institutional architecture it recommends consists of the following:

1. Institutionalisation of regional dialogues through regular meetings of foreign ministers and “leaders of other sectors” on political and security.
2. Strengthening of mechanisms for cooperation on combating piracy, drug trafficking, illegal migration, smuggling of small arms, money laundering, cyber crime, international terrorism and other human security issues.
3. Sub-regional security dialogues.
4. A network of East Asian think tanks to explore long-term policy issues of strategic importance to the region.

While these are structures recommended specifically for East Asia, the EAVG also calls for the strengthening of the ARF to enable it to serve as a more effective mechanism for cooperative security.

The EAVG also recommends the adoption and implementation of a code of conduct governing relations among states, as well as the development of rules and procedures to guide cooperation.

The more conservative and pragmatic EASG on the other hand recommended a more modest role and mechanism for East Asia. It advocates the strengthening of the role of the ARF for confidence building. As for East Asia the only specific institutional recommendation is for the building of a network of think tanks.

Aside from the above all the EASG endorses is intensification of consultation and cooperation on transnational issues relating to human security and regional stability.

Fundamental Considerations for Building a Security Regime for East Asia

Seen from the perspective of creating a credible community of East Asian nations, a security regime specific to the East Asian region is vital and indispensable. There cannot be a balanced and wholesome community without cooperation in all spheres. This is why the vision for an East Asian community encompasses cooperation in the economic, financial, political and security, environmental, and social and cultural spheres.

However, the building of a security regime specific to the East Asian region is complicated by several factors:

1. The most important is the existence of the ARF, whose footprint is essentially the East Asian region. Despite its slow progress, the ARF has at least two important advantages: it is an already established process with strong foundations in several areas of security cooperation; and it engages the United States, which is heavily networked into the security arrangements in the region. Another ARF-like process for East Asian states would be largely duplicatory and a wastage of resources.

2. An East Asian security regime that excludes the United States will not be very welcome to the latter. It can be expected that the United States, working directly as well as through its allies and friends in the region, will seek to undermine any such initiative.
3. A Northeast Asian cooperative regime still seems premature given strong antipathies among countries in the region.
4. North Korea is not engaged in the prevailing East Asian community initiative, and the North Korean issue therefore cannot be effectively addressed in this process.

Recommendations

Given the above, the following network of cooperative security structures are considered feasible and practicable for East Asia:

ASEAN+3

1. The ASEAN+3 SOM, Foreign Ministers and Summit (and later the East Asian Summit apparatus), should include security matters in their agenda. Discussions in the ASEAN+3 should be of a consultative nature, and any decisions should be the product of consensus. The aim should be confidence building and problem solving where feasible (for example with regard to international terrorism, the North Korean issue, transnational crime and SARS).
2. ASEAN+3 consultations could also be used to secure consensus among ASEAN+3 members on ARF-related matters prior to discussion at the ARF. This however does not preclude ASEAN+3 members from deciding and acting upon security matters strictly within East Asian purview.

Track Two Processes

3. Track Two processes such as the Network of East Asian Think Tanks and the East Asia Congress should include dialogue on security matters as part of their agenda though greater weightage may be given to economic, financial and social cooperation.

Bilateral processes

4. Bilateral processes for security cooperation will be extremely important to the security architecture of East Asia. In fact, in many instances bilateral mechanisms for confidence building and problem solving especially between neighbours will be far more important than multilateral regional processes. This has been the experience in the ASEAN region.