23rd ASIA-PACIFIC ROUNDTABLE

1 June – 4 June 2009
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

# Strengthening Comprehensive and Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific

PS 8 (d)

**PLENARY SESSION EIGHT**
Thursday 4 June 2009, 0900hrs – 1030 hrs

## THE REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: IDENTIFYING WEAKNESSES AND REFORM

*A Post-ASEAN Security Architecture in the Asia Pacific?*

*by*

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# A POST-ASEAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC?

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Paper prepared for the 23rd Asia-Pacific Roundtable
Kuala Lumpur, 1-4 June 2009

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## Introduction

When the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in October 2003 adopted Indonesia's proposal to transform itself into a security community by 2020, I was so excited about a renewed prospect for ASEAN to continue playing an indispensable –albeit by default-- role beyond Southeast Asia. Indeed, multiple strategic challenges confronting ASEAN at the dawn of the 21st century reinforced the imperative for change, and ASEAN –so it seemed—finally agreed to stand up to the challenges by pledging to consolidate itself and bringing its political and security cooperation into a higher plane. My enthusiasm, however, began to evaporate quickly when, by the end of 2008, it became clear that ASEAN had become a prisoner of both conservatism and its past achievements. ASEAN, as many have suspected for decades, remains resistant to any bold and meaningful change. Various agreements and measures undertaken by ASEAN have since registered more rhetoric's than actions.

ASEAN is now at the risk of missing a golden opportunity to maintain its relevance and role beyond Southeast Asia. ASEAN remains a significant sub-regional actor in Southeast Asia trying to play an important role at regional level within the larger theatre of the Asia-Pacific region. To be successful, however, that undertaking requires the willingness and ability to adjust, adapt and change; a quality that is seemingly no longer possessed by ASEAN. Consequently, ASEAN's role as an architect of regional security order –a role it has skillfully played together

with the United States (US) for more than four decades[1]-- has begun to come to an end. The ASEAN-based regional security architecture -exemplified by ASEAN-driven institutions such as the ASEAN-Post Ministerial Conference (PMC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), and the East Asian Summit (EAS)—remains an exercise about process not progress. While it has been primarily successful in fostering a relatively stable and peaceful strategic environment in Southeast Asia, ASEAN continues to face tremendous difficulty in expanding the ASEAN model of regional security order into the East Asian context. Indeed, Dr. Hadi Soesastro has described the ASEAN-driven process as "many clubs, little progress."[2]

**The Inadequacy of the Existing Security Architecture**

The current security architecture in East Asia has often been described as comprising two components or layers.[3] The first is the US-led bilateral security alliance. Shambaugh, for example, maintains that "the US-led security system remains the predominant regional architecture across Asia."[4] In this system, the US serves as the hub of a wheel with each of the five bilateral alliances (Australia, Japan and South Korea, and also two major non-NATO allies of the US: Thailand and the Philippines) serving as spokes. Strong security and defence ties between the US and Singapore are also part of this component. The US often describes this bilateral security alliance as the foundation of security architecture in Asia.[5] It has even been claimed that "it is this US-led system that provides for regional stability and security—public goods from which *all* Asian nations derive benefits".[6] This system

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[1] See, William Tow and Brendan Taylor, "What Is Regional 'Security Architecture?'", paper prepared for the ISA 2008 Annual Conference, San Francisco, 26-29 March 2008, p. 2.

[2] Hadi Soesastro, "East Asia: Many Clubs, Little Progress," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January-February 2006, pp. 50-53.

[3] See, for example, Tow and Taylor, "What Is Regional 'Security Architecture?'", and David Shambaugh, "The Evolving Asian System: Implications for Regional Security Architecture, paper prepared for 8th Waldbroel Meeting on the European and Euro-Atlantic Coordination of Security Policies vis-à-vis the Asia Pacific, Berlin, 14-15 December 2005.

[4] Shambaugh, "The Evolving Asian System , p. 2.

[5] See, for example, James A. Baker III, "America in Asia: Emerging Architecture for a Pacific Community," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, no. 5, Winter 1991/1992, pp. 1-18.

[6] Shambaugh, "The Evolving Asian System," p. 7.

has also been described as "the cornerstone" of Asia's security architecture "for more than a generation."[7]

The second component of East Asian security architecture is the ASEAN-driven process of multilateral security dialogue and cooperation. This component of regional security architecture in Asia has been described as "a relatively thin fabric of multilateralism, woven from a multiplicity of different organisations and processes."[8] Shambaugh calls it "the growing multilateral architecture that is based on a series of increasingly shared norms (about interstate relations and security)" with the ARF as "the cornerstone" of the system.[9] The ASEAN-driven component of security architecture are comprised of four main institutions: the ARF, the APT, the EAS and of course ASEAN itself.[10] The focus of these institutions has been primarily on building cooperative relationship among the participants through the intensification of cooperation and consultation on economic and non-traditional security issues among its participants. This focus reflects ASEAN's belief that regional peace, stability, and prosperity can be achieved through economic cooperation and cooperation on non-sensitive or soft security issues.[11]

What are the problems and weaknesses of these two components of the current Asia's security architecture? It is important to note that both components have served their functions well over the last four decades. The question is really about the viability of these two components in coping with strategic challenges resulting from the changing dynamics of international relations in the Asia-Pacific. One characteristic of that dynamic is clear: the US, while it still yields immense economic and military power, is no longer a dominant security architect. The closest

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[7] Defense Secretary Robert Gates's Speech at Sophia University, Tokyo, 9 November 2007, quoted in Tow and Taylor, "What Is Regional 'Security Architecture?'", p. 11.

[8] Desmond Ball, *The Evolving Security Architecture in the Asia-Pacific Region*, Working Paper No. 340 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, ANU, Canberra, September 1999), p. 25.

[9] Shambaugh, "The Evolving Asian System , p. 11.

[10] Some would also include APEC into this category.

[11] Rizal Sukma, "The Future of ASEAN: Towards A Security Community," Paper presented at A Seminar on "ASEAN Cooperation: Challenges and Prospects in the Current International Situation", New York, 3 June 2003.

ally of the US, Japan, is no longer the only post-Cold War major power in the region. The rise of China, and now the emergence of India, has undermined the influence of both the US and Japan in the region as the only two actors to whom many regional countries look into for solutions to regional economic and security problems. Due to their growing economic clout and military might, both China and India are increasingly playing a more assertive role in determining the shape of regional order. As China and India have now emerged as two regional major powers capable of becoming inexorable architects of regional security architecture along with the US and ASEAN, they need to be recognised and accommodated as such.

In that context, the U.S.-led bilateral alliance does not augur well to such strategic need, especially in terms of the need to accommodate the rise of China. In light of the current debate in the US with regard to the nature of China's rise and its implications for the US (whether China is a threat or a partner), the US-led bilateral security alliance proves to be problematic. In this regards, we have often heard from Chinese scholars and policy makers about the "obsolete Cold War mentality or thinking." While this rhetoric does not translate into an active effort by China to undermine and challenge the U.S.-led bilateral alliances, it nevertheless registers a degree of China's uneasiness to the system.[12] More importantly, it has been noted that "alliance relationship, in which governments commit themselves to come to each other's defense in the event of attack, are not relevant in a multifaceted environment."[13] In short, it is safe to assume that China would not seek any place for itself in the US-led bilateral alliances. Similarly, the US-led bilateral alliance component of regional security architecture is obviously not meant "to accommodate" the rise of China.

With regard to the second component, a lot of expectations have revolved around the role of ASEAN in shaping the emerging regional architecture with the

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[12] See, Alastair Iain Johnston, "Beijing's Security Behavior in the Asia-Pacific: Is China Dissatisfied Power?" in J.J. Suh, Peter J. Katzenstein and Allen Carlson, eds., *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency* (NUS Press: Singapore, 2008), p.57.

[13] Richard Smith, "Regional Security: Is 'Architecture' All We Need?" *Policy Analysis Brief* (The Stanley Foundation, December 2007), p. 6.

ability to address the above mentioned strategic challenge. However, those expectations are misplaced. It has been argued that "it is increasingly doubtful whether ASEAN will be able to take the lead in institution building in the East Asia region" because "ASEAN's limited cohesion has become a limiting factor."[14] The problems with ASEAN have been widely discussed and known both within and outside the region. It is suffice to say that signs of ASEAN's growing irrelevance (in terms of the utility of the ASEAN-driven regional order) to the wider Asia-Pacific context are abundant. While ASEAN's role in fostering the habit of cooperation and in mitigating hostile behaviour among its members need to be acknowledged, its efforts in employing the so-called the ASEAN way in the East Asian context are still far from being effective. The ASEAN-based regional security architecture has not been effective in addressing the challenges of the day, and is not adequate for coping with future uncertainties resulting from the dynamics of East Asia's international relations in the 21st century.

**What Architecture Will Prevail?**

The most fundamental weakness of the current security architecture lies in the uncertainty regarding its future viability. Both elements of the current security architecture –the US-led bilateral alliances and the ASEAN-driven processes—are not comprehensive enough to address strategic challenges in the region. Is it capable of accommodating the rise of China and the emergence of India? Would it continue to assure the prominent place of Japan and the US as existing crucial players in the region? Would it continue to guarantee that the interests of lesser powers will be served? Are the existing structures of the architecture strong enough? It has been acknowledged that "there is a persistent perception that they are not, that the security burden is too heavy for the structures the architects have given us."[15] If that is the case, we have three options: build a new one, renovate what we have, or continue using the existing one until it completely collapses.

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[14] Jusuf Wanandi, "The ASEAN Charter and Remodeling Regional Architecture," *The Jakarta Post*, 3 November 2008.

[15] Smith, "Regional Security," p. 4.

The debate on this pertinent issue is ongoing and will continue to attract considerable interest from both scholars and policy makers in the region. Several proposals have emerged so far. For example, there is a proposal by Australia's Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on the Asia Pacific Community. The other proposal is provided by my mentor, Jusuf Wanandi of Jakarta-based CSIS. There is also one from Richard Smith, former Secretary of the Australia's Department of Defense. It is also important to acknowledge an earlier thought provoking piece on the subject by Allan Gyngell of the Lowy Institute in Sydney.[16] While I would not dwell on their proposals here, it is clear that they all refer to two important requirements. First, there is a need for a post-ASEAN regional security architecture for the Asia-Pacific region. Second, they all suggest that while a new regional architecture should be based on the existing structures, a major renovation or modification is absolutely needed.

The need for a Post-ASEAN regional architecture is self-evidence. It has been mentioned earlier that the ASEAN-driven regional security architecture has not been effective in addressing the challenges of the day, and is not adequate for coping with future uncertainties resulting from the dynamics of East Asia's international relations in the 21st century. The region needs an architecture that will guarantee that relationship among major powers -the US, China, Japan and India—would be primarily cooperative rather than competitive. It should also prevent strategic rivalry among the four major powers from becoming the main feature of regional relations. At the same time, it should also prevent the emergence of a concert of powers among the four powers at the expense of other lesser powers in the region. The current ASEAN-driven processes or system has not yet provided such guarantee. The same can also be said regarding the US-led bilateral alliance.

In this context, the ASEAN-driven component of regional architecture faces three crucial questions. First, will *all* major powers continue to regard the ASEAN-

[16] See, Allan Gyngell, "Design Faults: The Asia Pacific's Regional Architecture," *Policy Brief* (Lowy Institute, Sydney, July 2007).

based regional security architecture as a design capable of accommodating their individual national interests? Second, will the four major powers see the existing ASEAN-driven regional security architecture as being effective in responding to their common strategic interests, namely the need to create a power relationship that can guarantees patterns of cooperative and prevents patterns of competition among themselves? Third, will the major powers be assured that the current structures in the Asia-Pacific would be adequate to resolve global and regional crises that might emerge in the future? No one can guarantee that the answers to these questions would be positive.

Various changes and strategic re-aligments in the relationship among the major powers, as a result of global transformation and regional power shift, have the potential to marginalise the central role of ASEAN within the current security architecture. This might result from the deteroriation of confidence in ASEAN among its strategic partners regarding the relevance and ability of ASEAN to serve as an effective driver or manager of regional order. This challenge is evident in the growing dissatisfaction among ASEAN's partners over regional institutions created and managed by ASEAN. The ARF, for example, has been critised as a tired forum. The future of the EAS is still uncertain. The APT functions well as a platform for functional cooperation, but its membership is limited. Even APEC has been disoriented, both in terms of its agenda and direction, not to mention the fact that many of its members are not relevance to, or not interested in, security issues in Asia-Pacific.

ASEAN itself is in a deep crisis, both in terms of its relevance and utility in facing the ongoing strategic transformation. Even though ASEAN leaders, on the initiative by Indonesia, have agreed to consolidate and strengthen ASEAN's cohesiveness through the promise of an ASEAN Community, the process towards that direction is still fraought with difficulty and uncertainty. Different levels of economic development, diversity in political system, would lead to more divergent interests among ASEAN members. The ugly face of Burma has also undermined

ASEAN's image further. The inability of ASEAN to host the EAS has raised critical question about the inefficacy of the Association in the post-Pattaya incident. All these problems have in turn undermined ASEAN's credibility. If these unfortunate trends continue, then it is likely that great powers would begin to look beyond ASEAN in their efforts to craft a new security architecture best suited to their individual and common strategic interests. If this becomes a reality, than a post-ASEAN architecture will soon be in place. If a great powers-driven security architecture becomes a reality, ASEAN would soon find itself in the passenger's seat. Unfortunately, judging from where ASEAN is now, this is not unlikely scenario.