

# The Substructures of Regional Security Architecture: Some Cautionary Notes

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As presently configured, there is no single regional organisation with a pan-regional mandate that covers the full policy spectrum. In June last year, I proposed the development in the long term of what I have called an 'Asia-Pacific Community' (APC). An APC could help ensure that the process of regional, economic and financial integration keeps moving forward. An APC could also help to nurture a culture of cooperation and collaboration on security, including a culture of military transparency, helping to build confidence and security-building measures by providing information that reassures neighbours, rather than alarms them. An APC could also provide a vehicle for discussion and cooperation across the range of challenges with trans-national reach, such as climate change, resource and food security, bio-security and terrorism. ...An APC could be seen as a natural broadening of the processes of confidence, security and community building in Southeast Asia led by ASEAN, while ASEAN itself would of course remain central to the region, and would also be an important part of any future APC.

...PM Kevin Rudd, speaking to the Shangri-la Dialogue, Singapore, May 29, 2009<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction:<sup>2</sup>**

While professional architects may be experiencing a slow down of business during the current economic hard times, "regional security architects" are experiencing a boom—there being a seemingly limitless (albeit largely self-generated) demand for analysis and commentary on the condition of regional security institutions in the Asia Pacific.<sup>3</sup> A cursory review of their recent output suggests that their authors generally proceed from the following premises:

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2009/plenary-session-speeches-2009/opening-remarks-and-keynote-address/keynote-address-kevin-rudd/>

<sup>2</sup> The author acknowledges support for research on Asia Pacific security through the Security and Defence Forum Program of the Centre of International Relations, UBC. The views expressed are the author's and do not represent those of any institution.

<sup>3</sup> Much of the dialogue on regional security architecture now occurs on the internet through the working papers and commentary series of think tanks. Prominent among them (of the English language sources) are the *RSIS Commentaries* ([www.rsis@ntu.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.ntu.edu.sg)); the *East Asia Forum* ([www.eastasiaforum.org](http://www.eastasiaforum.org)); *PACNET Newsletter*

- The Asia-Pacific region lacks the institutional framework required to manage the political, security, and economic challenges of today and of the foreseeable future.
- Existing Asia-Pacific institutions under-perform and are inadequate to deal with these challenges. Indeed, new institutions are required.
- Priority should be given to formulating regional and subregional institutions because global/systemic level institutions are absent or fail to address regional needs or suffer from lack of legitimacy.
- New institutions must be grounded firmly on principles of inclusion, sovereignty protection, and non-interference.
- ASEAN is a keystone in any regional institutional endeavor, sustaining its “driver’s seat” role.

As the latest and, for the moment, the most prominent call for revamping regional architecture, Australian PM Kevin Rudd in his call for building new institutions for an Asia-Pacific Community, implicitly or explicitly, invokes all of the above.

While not looking to target specifically PM Rudd’s agenda, or to question the merits of the general call for more effective management of regional affairs (in which the author has participated)<sup>4</sup>, it is worthwhile to cast a critical eye on whether or not these “substructural elements” of regional security institutionalism are appropriately conceived.

- Are these prescriptions, for instance, addressing operational symptoms rather than structural causes of institutional formation and performance in the region?
- Will adherence to established norms and institutional formations (especially ASEAN) facilitate the creation and operation of new, effective Asia-Pacific regional institutions?

In what follows, I argue that the answer to both of these key questions is negative. Careful second thoughts are required about what I term the critical, substructural features of regional political/security architecture. The purpose of this examination is not to argue that institutional change, indeed transformation, is not required, but rather to advise a combination of caution and boldness in moving forward—caution regarding the diagnosis of the flaws of existing institutions, boldness regarding the need to move beyond the restraints of current norms. Indeed, in concluding comments, I suggest that there are grounds for optimism for the (re)building of regional security architecture in the emerging signs of significant attitudinal shifts among the key regional actors (the US and China).

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(<http://www.csis.org/pacfor/pacnet/>); the *Nautilus Institute* (<http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/dr/index.html>); and the *Stanley Foundation* (<http://stanleyfoundation.org/programs.cfm?id=3>).

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, “2008: A Wake-Up Call for Asia-Pacific Regional Security ‘Architects’”, delivered at the 7<sup>th</sup> Canada-Japan Symposium on Peace and Security Cooperation, November 25, 2008, Ottawa; and Brian L. Job and Erin Williams, “2008: A Wake-Up Call for Regional Multilateralism,” *2008: CSCAP Regional Security Outlook*, Chapter 1, available at <http://www.cscap.org/uploads/docs/CRSO/CRSO%202008.pdf>.

### **New Institutions are the Solution?**

There is a general consensus regarding the lack of multilateral institutional mechanisms in the region, and especially in the Northeast Asia/North Pacific subregion, and that existing institutions (most particularly the ARF and increasingly APEC as well) are incapable or unwilling to address the key political, security, economic, and environmental challenges facing their members. Similar concerns are expressed about the deficiencies at the global/systemic level. The UNSC is blamed for lack of action in humanitarian crises such as Darfur, the NPT and IAEA are seen as failing to thwart aspiring nuclear states, and the Kyoto Accord has accomplished little.

The question must be asked as to whether the creation of new institutional mechanisms *themselves* will provide remedies to these deficiencies. The answer at present is no. The failings of the Six Party Talks will not be resolved by their institutional reconfiguration, as experience has demonstrated. Combining the ARF and APEC may achieve some efficiencies; it might clarify what some see as the confusion of mandates as APEC leaders wander to increasingly speak less about economics and more about political/security matters. But, these architectural redrawings will not yield improved institutional performance on either security or economic dimensions. Similarly, reforming the UNSC will not result in more proactive action to address human security crises. The real issues to be addressed are those of political will, in the short term, and attention in the longer-term to evolution of the normative underpinnings of regional and global institutional forms.

This is borne out by examination of the details of proposed new regional institutions. Debates about any new Northeast Asia/North Pacific institution, apart from marginal concerns about the membership of Mongolia or Canada, continue to hinge upon the question of North Korea. Those who argue for a Northeast Asian institution going forward, without North Korean participation, i.e., a Northeast Asian institutional mandate that goes beyond resolution of the Korean Peninsula security crisis, fail to consider what has prevented such institutional arrangements from proceeding to date. Institutional fine tuning is not the fault or remedy, rather what must be addressed are the normative foundations on which states found and participate in multilateral fora.

One sees equivalent questions being directed towards Rudd's apparent advocacy of an Asia-Pacific institutional forum that would conflate APEC and the East Asian Summit.

### **Westphalian norms remain the pillars of new architecture?**

Existing regional institutions, ASEAN and its associated institutional family and the ARF, are grounded on what are commonly referred to the Westphalian norms: sovereignty protection, non-interference, inclusive membership, and consensus decision making. Here is where one locates the crux of moving forward on any new regional or global architectural developments. Given the nature of the current international state system—the historical legacies of many states, the recent behavior of major powers, etc.—the abandonment of these normative principles can not be contemplated. However, absolutist interpretations of these norms in conceptual terms and rigid insistence upon their implementation in practice dooms prospects for institutional innovation. On the one hand, one sees the positive results achieved by limited relaxation of these norms, certainly in the broad scale of the European Union but more narrowly in the compromises required in the operation of defence alliances and free-trade agreements.

On the other hand, one sees in the Asia-Pacific region the effects of current governments' unyielding insistence on their operationalization. Recent developments in ASEAN unfortunately, in my view, provide telling examples of the frustration of institutional advancement. Demands for inclusion, based on geographic logics and regional "visions" rather than on complementarity of interests and minimal sharing of principles of governance, effectively foreclose on all but limited cooperation on functional matters. Insistence on principles of equality, as in ASEAN's determination that membership contributions be equal, thus limited to what the least capable or least willing will provide, directly restrict what the organization can undertake but (more significantly) indirectly serve the interests of states who do not want to see institutional capacity increase. Insistence on consensus decision making has effectively hobbled ASEAN, seeing it become a hostage to its most recalcitrant and unprogressive member(s). Unless and until these strictures are lifted, a lowest common denominator standard will prevail and institutional architectural ambitions, as articulated at the onset of the Charter process, will see minimal to limited realization.

(Much the same can be argued concerning the ARF. Despite repeated reviews and nominal approval of institutional innovations, including enhancing the role of the ARF Chair, the creation of an Expert and Eminent Persons Group, the authorization of a "friends of the Chair" mechanism, the ARF continues unchanged in its refusal to grapple proactively with the region's primary security concerns. This does not dispute the value of the information sharing achieved through the myriad of meetings of member state bureaucrats on functional issues. However, this is not what is being challenged in the calls of regional security institutional enhancement.)

### **ASEAN is in the drivers' seat?**

Proclaiming that "ASEAN is in the driver's seat" has become a requisite mantra in any call for revised regional institutional architecture—witness Rudd's (some would say belated) acknowledgement, as seen in the statement quoted earlier.

I dispute the validity and the necessity of maintaining such a requirement. Arguing that ASEAN (a) has or should have the determining voice in structuring new region-wide institutions, or (b) actually is capable of exercising the primary leadership role in future regional institutions misconstrues ASEAN's role and contribution.

I further suggest that a shifting of metaphors is in order to better describe the key role that ASEAN has and will continue to play. Rather than being seen as in the driver's seat, ASEAN now should be regarded as the "road-builder" of regional institutionalism, (perhaps "infrastructural engineer" is more appropriate). What ASEAN has accomplished is the region-wide acceptance of the normative foundations of regional interstate engagement. The significance of this achievement should not be underestimated. The apparent imminent US ascension to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, as prerequisite to its consideration for joining the East Asia Summit, stands as the culmination of a cumulative process of successful multilateral diplomacy that now encompasses all key regional actors outside Southeast Asia in a network of overlapping ASEAN-affiliated organizations (notably the ARF, ASEAN Plus Three, ASEM, etc.). Having solidified this base of normative principles, centred around the commitment to resolution of disputes through peaceful means, ASEAN's efforts can be viewed as engineered the first essential, (albeit preliminary), step towards a regional security community.

For ASEAN, however, this does not translate into assumption of the driver's role in a new institutional architecture. ASEAN commands neither the material capacity nor the ideational force to compel the creation and functioning of the systemic and regional institutions required to manage the contemporary global order. Thus, whether it be concerning challenges on economic (both trade and finance), environmental (in particular climate change), and regional security (the Korean Peninsula) dimensions, first commitment and then leadership must come from the major powers.

### **The responsibilities and costs for global architects**

The functioning of international regimes that sustain a "peaceful" and stable order in any domain depends upon the provision of key "collective goods". Historically, these have been provided by either a hegemonic state or a coalition of mutually interested major powers. In the aftermath of World War II, it was the US that directed formulation of both global and regional orders, (certainly in accord with its own interests), and in turn assumed the collective goods costs associated with its leadership roles. In the two decades following the end of the Cold War, while the US has asserted a hegemonic status, the willingness of the major powers to accept the structure of the existing regimes (and their associated "bargains" and tradeoffs) and the capacity of Washington to absorb unilaterally the collective goods costs of regime management have declined. The recent, sudden decline in US economic fortunes serves to highlight what, on the security dimension, has been developing for over a decade and a half. On the environmental dimension, one has seen instead the abdication of regime leadership by all major powers.

The result is that today the bargains, the compromises, the contributions of material and ideational resources that are required to devise and implement new institutional architectures can not be provided by a single state. We are in a situation where the prerequisite to moving forward is the achievement of a common understanding and willingness to bear the costs of the collective goods of regime maintenance by a cohort of major powers.

The specification of the necessary participants in each of the key domains of economics and security varies. Concerning the environment, a global bargain must be struck among the United States, China, and India to achieve a post-Kyoto regime. Concerning the threat of nuclear weapons, an agreement between the US and Russia is a necessary, but not sufficient, first step towards alleviating the dangers posed by nuclear arsenals. Concerning the restoration of a global financial stability, a sorting out of the core group will not be easy but is underway in the maneuverings of the G8, the G20, etc. (While commonality of interests between the US and China is essential, a G2 is non-starter for various reasons.) The unavoidable participant in all of these domains must be the United States.

It is the attitude of (re)engagement by the United States as a central and contributing, but not dictating, player in the design and functioning of global regimes demonstrated by the Obama administration that provides optimism that these challenges can be met.

### **The nesting of global and regional architectures**

There are significant implications of the above for consideration of regional architecture. Before significant progress can be achieved in transforming the regional institutions of the Asia Pacific, fundamental agreements must be achieved first at the

systemic/global level. Basic parameters of regional institutional orders are constrained and enabled by those of the systemic/global level. In part this is the result of regional players assuming global status and roles. Thus, China and India can not be managed, nor manage their affairs, at the regional level. They, like the US, are now necessary participants at the global level, where the institutional arrangements and bargains they create and support, in turn determine their attitudes and engagement in regional architectures.

This places anxious Asia-Pacific regional security architects in a dilemma. There is a perceived need for institutional innovation, but without prior movement at the global level it will not be possible to (re)design economic and environmental institutions that can function effectively in the broader context. (Thus, for instance, concerning climate change, agreement on overall targets and the principles of accounting for carbon cap-and-trade or other mechanisms will set the stage for subsequent regional environmental arrangements.) On the security dimension, more specifically, it will be agreement between the US and China on key principles and objectives that is prerequisite to formulating any new regional or subregional institutional forms. Rudd's ambitious plan hinges on a meeting of the minds in Beijing and Washington, not on ASEAN's approval. Movement towards resolution of the security dilemmas posed by North Korea likewise will be achieved only when the US and China achieve an understanding and resolution to act on interests that go beyond the status quo of containing/restraining Pyongyang from sparking a system-destabilizing event.