

**23<sup>rd</sup> Asia-Pacific Roundtable**  
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**Plenary Session Nine:**  
**The Three Most Compelling Future Challenges Confronting**  
**the Asia-Pacific Region:**  
**A Discourse across Generations**

Chin-Hao Huang  
huang@sipri.org  
Researcher, China and Global Security Program  
Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)  
Stockholm, Sweden

As Asia-Pacific evolves to become one of the most dynamic regions, it is presenting a unique set of challenges and opportunities to global growth, security and stability. The region, as a whole, has an increasing bearing on the interests of the international community. In trying to extrapolate the future direction of the Asia-Pacific region – whether it will turn toward greater integration and interdependence or toward growing divergence, suspicion and rivalry – one of the most important determining factors is how the region will respond to emergent regional and global challenges.

Going forward there are many topical issues with which the region needs to grapple. These could be summarized and grouped more broadly into three main baskets or themes:

**Democratic consolidation**

The Asia-Pacific region is by and large composed of democratically elected governments. In the last two decades, rapid economic developmental take-off has also been coupled with increasing political openness. Notwithstanding these encouraging developments, there are signs of democracy receding in the region, where the process of democratization risks backsliding and remains lurching at best. From Seoul to Bangkok to Manila, a wave of massive scale grassroots movement organizing anti-government protests and

demonstrations have sprung up. The waning confidence could further deepen as a result of weak governance and corruption charges and other related scandals.

The demonstrations are reflective of the general public's growing understanding and perception that democracy is more than elections, with rising expectations for political representatives and governments to deliver and address bread and butter issues more effectively. If left unheeded, the growing discontent of the general public could turn to greater radicalism and other more violent measures that could have significant, paralyzing effects on both national and regional security and stability.

Strengthening democratic consolidation in the region requires each country to more fully and readily embrace such global values as: rule of law, human rights, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and good governance, to name a few. These are not only Western values and should not be regarded as ideas imposed by the West. Such criticisms, while understandable, are limited in helping to move the debate forward. In fact, these are principles that are very much compatible with Asian values. The ASEAN Charter, for example, espouses many of these very same principles. As such, the critical issue and next step is the effective implementation of these global values and principles by governments across the region.

### **Managing China's rise and regional power balance**

The prevailing approach toward managing China's rise adopted by policy elites across the Asia-Pacific region reflects both engagement and cautious accommodation. While a majority of the governments see China emerging as the most important country in the region, there are also increasing uncertainties with regards to what China's rise will portend. As such, China's growing military capability remains a topical and legitimate concern. According to the SIPRI Yearbook 2009, China ranks as the second largest military spender globally (behind the United States). At nearly \$85 billion, its military expenditure is the largest in Asia. The worry is the lack of transparency and continued opacity in China's regional intentions and ambitions.

Looking ahead, the region as a whole will need to press ahead and strengthen policies that further engage and embed China more deeply into regional institutions of common interests and normative values. This would not only help ensure that China is part and parcel of the regional and global system. It would also allow for China to contribute more positively toward regional growth and stability as well. The various political and economic dialogue and engagement with China under the frameworks of ASEAN, East Asia Summit, APEC and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, for example, are important steps in the right direction. More important, military-to-military cooperation through regional peacekeeping, joint patrol on the high seas and military exercises needs to be stepped up even further to allay fears and address the region's lingering concerns of Chinese military capabilities and intentions.

### **Responding to transnational, non-traditional challenges to regional security**

The increasing risks of such non-traditional challenges as disease outbreaks, climate change, disaster relief and human and drug trafficking are some of the most pressing threats to human security in the Asia-Pacific region. With a strong adherence to and strict interpretation of state sovereignty and non-interference in the region, there remains a high degree of cautiousness and reluctance to open up their borders to forge a more common and effective response. In turn, the implementation and coordination of any sort of regional policy remain a serious concern and impediment.

While these challenges are generally categorized as “soft” security issues, they are no less important and require, in many respects, cooperation through greater pragmatism. There are existing mechanisms and platforms within the region – such as the ASEAN Regional Forum – to respond to these concerns, but the region’s leadership must invest greater political capital and will to pursue a more proactive approach toward these emergent security challenges.

To the extent that there are generational differences, they are perhaps more evident in ways to manage these new security concerns. Left unattended, these non-traditional challenges have an increasing impact and dire consequences for human security. The younger and successive generations, having been more fully exposed to the effects of globalization, are more willing to prioritize these concerns and accept that these challenges trespass traditional state boundaries that require far-reaching, comprehensive and action-oriented policies.