Calibrating Regional Security Architecture: ASEAN Still Our Best Hope

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Calibrating Regional Security Architecture: ASEAN Still Our Best Hope

I approach the questions listed in this session as an Australian, and an historian, and also speak on the basis of having been involved in the 2014 Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) initiative to enhance the security architecture of this region. In my view, the CSCAP Memorandum[1] — which highlighted the leadership potential of the East Asia Summit (EAS), and argued a case based on a cross-regional consensus — made sense, not only because of what it tried to do, but also because of what it did not try to do. Let me explain — and in doing so make some general observations about the task of upgrading security architecture in Asia and Asia-Pacific. In particular, there are a number of critical distinctions that ought to be made if we are to be able to formulate proposals for recalibration that have some chance of gaining traction.

First, in thinking about this session I have no doubt about urgency of calibrating regional security architecture. The need for effective regional security institutions is obvious, and appears to be becoming more important. We face real challenges that require cooperation between states — functional tasks in such areas as counter-terrorism, nuclear proliferation, conventional arms proliferation, territorial disputes, maritime relations, transnational crime, irregular migration, disaster management, search and rescue, and energy security[2] — and, of course, the immense challenge of the world-changing geo-strategic shift that is at present underway. Many concrete tasks are being dealt with in the current existing regional institutions — in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) and so forth — but sometimes the officials involved see an urgent practical need for greater inter-institutional coordination. One example concerns rules and procedures to avert incidents at sea — and, as Bilahari Kausikan has argued recently, the 'main risk' today is not a 'war by somebody's design,

but conflicts by accidents'.[3] These rules need to apply not just to naval ships, but also to vessels under the control of other arms of government. In the case of China and Japan, their coast guards clearly have to be incorporated in these deliberations. The problem here, however, is that ADMM-Plus is specifically a defence organisation with no brief to coordinate beyond defence ministries.

To take a further issue, in the case of counter-terrorism initiatives these obviously need to reach beyond the province of defence ministries if they are to address the social and/or religious drivers of violent extremism. When we turn to inter-state rivalries, whether they are intra-ASEAN — as in the Thailand-Cambodia confrontation of recent times — or contest between major external powers, these are unlikely to be managed solely by defence or even foreign ministers. Such issues almost certainly need to engage heads of government — in the context either of ASEAN or the EAS (or perhaps the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, APEC). What is clear from the above is that the functionalist needs for calibrating the region's security architecture are of vital importance. The 2014 CSCAP Memorandum sought to address these needs.

A second starting point for me is the growing academic literature on so-called regional security architecture — including a recent report[4] from Australia's former Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, now working with the Asia Society in New York. In his study, which makes some useful proposals regarding US-China relations, Rudd revives the idea of an Asia Pacific Community (APC) — an initiative he first launched as a political leader in 2008. He now suggests that the EAS could be 'transformed into an APC'.

As an historian it troubles me how many analysts, including Rudd, focus on proposing new institutions and outlining new concepts, and tend to be dismissive of current arrangements — dismissive even when, as some at this year's Asia-Pacific Roundtable have pointed out, the current ASEAN institutions have actually had a genuine measure of success in building stability. There seems to be a methodological problem here. In

considering the calibrating of the region's security institutions some analysts treat the problems with current arrangements — complex, messy as they may appear to be — as the product of faulty design, and this is not helpful. These arrangements are better understood as institutional initiatives that responded to specific historical, geostrategic contexts — contexts that were themselves complex and messy — and were shaped by established traditions of thinking about regional relations. Correspondingly, any new attempt to calibrate current institutions also needs to take account of regional realities. It may be easy, for instance, to formulate an institutional structure for the region more elegant than current arrangements — but we must ask whether implementing that structure could exacerbate the inter-state tensions that it is designed to moderate.

To be context-blind in analysing security architecture, it could be said, contradicts the very idea of 'architecture'. In fact, much current analysis — with its reference to 'intelligent design', 'interlocking mechanisms', 'functionally-distinct mechanisms', and 'efficacy indicators' — seems to take not an architectural but rather an engineering approach. The architect, compared with the engineer, tends to prefer a more holistic, grounded approach — with a sensitivity to environmental and sociological context. Thinking in engineering terms — rather than from a genuinely architectural point of view — encourages an issues-based, problem-solving, functionalist approach to regional institutions. Given the scale of the security challenges facing the Asian region there is merit in such an engineering approach. Nevertheless, it does sharpen the risk of downplaying context — including the specific values and aspirations operating in the relevant, regional societies.[5]

In this respect, I will say a little more about Rudd's APC concept — and do so in order to try to throw light on two further possible misunderstandings. I would stress here though that whether or not the APC proposal is attracting new support in the United States, it is pretty clear that both sides of Australian politics have cast the idea aside — and

are focusing on how best Australia might contribute to the development of the ASEAN-led EAS.

In thinking about the APC, we might start with the word 'community'. This term should not be taken lightly. The idea of a 'regional community' is one area where would-be calibrators need to pay attention to regional thinking. When the APC was first proposed in 2008, Prime Minister Rudd (and his officials) argued the case almost entirely in functionalist terms — stressing that the APC would 'engage in the full spectrum of dialogue, cooperation and action on economic and political matters and future challenges to security'. One reason why Rudd's initiative failed to gain support among Asian countries, I think, was a divergence in approach to regional community-building.[6] An important distinction needs to be made here between functionalist and identity regionalism. While the functionalist approach to region building stresses functional or practical dimensions, pointing to the advantages of regional cooperation in security, economic and other areas, identity regionalism emphasises the promotion of a sense of community, of 'we-ness'. The identity approach is influential in the Asian region. An Australian National University research project on the 'languages of security' in Asia-Pacific has suggested that even the Asian-language terms relating to 'region' and 'regional community' tend to convey a sense of organic, cultural or historical unity.[7] In proposing an APC — and not merely, for instance, a new Leaders' Meeting — Rudd came up against these Asian expectations regarding what a 'regional community' implied, and yet (in the style of the engineer not the architect) he continued to focus primarily on the proposal's functionalist advantages.

A second problem the APC idea faced arose from the highlighting of 'Asia-Pacific' — and this preference too has continuing relevance today. In terms of community-building in the Asian region, the concept of the 'Asia-Pacific' possesses far less emotive substance than the idea of 'East Asia' or 'Asia'.[8] The 'Asia-Pacific' concept is a more recent development; it covers an immensely diverse region, and tends to convey a sense of US

leadership. In the early 1990s the prominent Malaysian foreign policy thinker, Ghazali Shafie, described APEC as possessing no sense of 'togetherness' — and being rather 'some kind of foreign guided jamboree with an imperialistic odour', with members possessing 'different visions and paradigms'.[9] His condemnation was colourful but it captured a widespread suspicion of the 'Asia-Pacific' project in the Asian region.

By contrast, a century and more ago the idea of a specifically 'Asian' identity was being developed with enthusiasm, particularly in India and Japan, and partly in the context of the struggle against Western imperialism. Despite the defeat of the Japanese 'Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere' in 1945, two years later Nehru brought Asian leaders together in New Delhi in the Asian Relations Conference. The Cold War and the Sino-Indian War of 1962 were obstacles to a wider Asian unity, but Southeast Asian leaders took up region building with determination. In the 1940s Burmese leader Aung San contemplated a Southeast Asian 'entity' and felt it might one day be brought into a 'bigger union with the participation of other parts of Asia as well'. In Malaya in the 1950s Tunku Abdul Rahman spoke of 'linking between nations within our ethnological and geographical group',[10] and proposed a South East Asia Friendship and Economic Treaty (SEAFET). In 1967 ASEAN was launched — and over the last decade and a half this organisation has been playing the role in a wider Asian regionalism — in particular, the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) process — which Aung San had anticipated. This is no time to present a detailed argument — and some may well disagree strongly with — but my impression is that Asian regionalism is gaining momentum, and the prospects for Asia-Pacific regionalism are discouraging.

Certainly, when we examine the current official documentation relating to regional building, the ASEAN/East Asian/Asian projects are given priority. The phrase 'community-building' (so central to identity regionalism) is used first with reference to ASEAN, but we also encounter 'East Asian community-building' — for instance, in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration of 2005, and the Chairman's Statement of the 16th APT Summit of October

2013 in Brunei. In the current official overview of the 'APT Cooperation' it is pointed out that the APT countries gave a commitment to 'deepening and broadening the APT process', and it is expected to serve as a 'main vehicle towards the long-term goal of building an East Asian community'. It needs to be emphasised here that it is not the EAS that is designated for this purpose. The repeated, official purpose of the EAS is to be 'a Leaders-led Forum for strategic dialogue and cooperation on political, security, economic and social issues of common regional concern' (to cite the Chairman's Statement of the November 2014 Summit). When EAS official documents (and also those of the ADMM-Plus) do refer to 'community-building', it is my impression that it is with specific reference to community-building in ASEAN (as in the 2013 Chairman's Statement) or 'the East Asia region' (as in the Ha Noi Declaration of 2010). There seems to be no suggestion that the whole range of countries engaged in the EAS could be forged into a 'community' — and this is particularly obvious in the discussion of 'functional cooperation'.

In the official documents it is recognised that certain forms of 'functional cooperation' can assist community-building, but cooperative activity is focused in ASEAN and, if engaged in more broadly, the APT. Apart from finance and monetary cooperation — in particular, the Chiang Mai Initiative — there is a formidable range of initiatives, deliberation and action in the APT, including in the security area. Some officials involved report that the level of country commitment — especially Northeast Asian commitment — to the APT processes exceeds the commitment to elements of 'functional cooperation' that have developed in the EAS, and that in many cases the APT cooperation is simply more developed. Reading official documents, the language of EAS Statements is relatively passive: the Summit 'welcomes', 'appreciates', 'notes', 'commends' and 'recognises' — and sometimes 'discusses' and 'underlines'. In the APT documents, the stress is on 'implementation' and 'work plan' — including the APT 'Cooperation Work Plan (2013–2017)', adopted in 2013.

Having made this observation, the fact remains that the EAS has

instituted a number of 'priority areas' for functional cooperation — including Disaster Management and Pandemic Diseases, and seems also to be moving into other areas. Although community-building is not a designated objective for the EAS, it is nevertheless the case that participation in this priority cooperation offers the opportunity for such countries as Australia and the United States to engage more deeply in the region.

With respect to the specific identity objectives of community-building, some analysts will be inclined to see this as peripheral in terms of real security measures. In fact, the ASEAN attitude towards community-building — and to that mysterious term 'resilience' — seems to me to be interesting, and to require serious analysis. It does not tend to be theorised in a way that might attract international relations specialists — and yet it might be examined as a possible Southeast Asian contribution to international relations theory.

In numerous ASEAN policy statements, community-building is treated as being of fundamental importance in the quest for regional security — and this needs to be understood by anyone wishing to approach the calibration of regional institutions from a genuinely architectural perspective. When the Malaysian government, for instance, makes statements — as it has over the last year — about promoting a 'sense of community' in ASEAN, stressing the ASEAN 2015 objective of promoting a 'People-Centred ASEAN' — a community involvement that reaches beyond elites to 'all sectors of society' — it is invoking a long-standing approach to international affairs, including security relations. Creating 'an ASEAN identity', as the government-supporting *New Straits Times* pointed out (20 October 2014), will 'strengthen the resilience of ASEAN as it deals with others'. It is not just a way of moderating security relations between Southeast Asian states — but also a strategy for building the capacity to deal with Northeast Asia and the wider world. Prime Minister Tun Razak (father of Malaysia's current Prime Minister) put the point clearly back at the time of the founding of ASEAN. He stressed that 'we cannot survive

for long as independent but isolated peoples', so must 'act together' and 'prove we belong to a family of Southeast Asian nations'.[11]

There are indications here of a deeply-embedded commitment to community-building, perhaps going back to the pre-modern Malay states. One of the founders of Malaysian foreign policy called it an impulse towards 'togetherness', and suggested it is exemplified in the old village or kampong tradition in Malay society.[12] There is also still work to be done in gaining a better understanding of the significance — and origins — of the important term 'resilience', which is employed time again in official statements from ASEAN. Much academic attention has been given to nation-building and the role of national sovereignty in Southeast Asia, but region-building is also a persistent theme — and it may be productive to learn more about how it is conceptualised. My impression is that there is plenty of need for new, historically-informed comparative studies which view ASEAN regionalism against regionalism in Europe and other parts of the world.

In assessing relationship building beyond the ASEAN core, one should think first of the way the original ASEAN countries reached out to the victorious Communist states of Indochina and to Myanmar. Then, over the last couple of decades we have seen ASEAN building relations with Northeast Asia, and developing wider regional institutions through which to do so. There seems to be an imperative in Southeast Asian countries to embrace rather than retreat from a larger state — even when that state could be potentially dangerous. Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi was perhaps getting at this when he said at one point that 'close relations and cooperation' between Malaysia and China would discourage China from military action — because such action would then 'also be detrimental to China'.[13] The present Malaysian Defence Minister recently insisted (*The Star*, 22 November 2014) that 'international cooperation' is about 'people-to-people relations', about 'bonding, trust and finding common terms of interest'. Similarly, last year the Permanent Secretary of the Thai Foreign Ministry said that 'constructive engagement' was

what was necessary 'in order to promote stability and manage change and conflict' — and he stressed the importance of 'shared rules and norms'.[14]

One reason it is important to highlight the serious commitment to relationship building in regional security thinking is because some analysis of the region's security institutions is disdainful of this tendency. The somewhat muscular dismissal of the 'talk-shop' dimension of the region's present security institutions — especially on the part of Western analysts — can also be counter-productive in that it is disrespectful of Asian priorities (and, incidentally, ignores the world-breaking failure of Western diplomacy over the last century). In relation specifically to ASEAN, it is too early to tell how successful this organisation's attempts will be at drawing China, Japan and South Korea into a wider Asian framework. It must be said, however, that no other country or grouping of countries in our part of the world has established a better record in region building than ASEAN.

Dialogue partners and other states active in the Asian region might do well right now to get behind ASEAN in its attempts to promote order in the region — and even take pains to see if something might be learned by examining more closely ASEAN techniques, poorly theorised as they tend to be.

Let me finish by returning to the CSCAP proposals for architecture calibration. These, I think, were more sensitively formulated for the regional context than some other proposals — sensitive both in what the proposals contained and in what they did not contain. This diplomacy was largely a product, it must be assumed, of the intensive and lengthy discussions that were required to achieve a consensus. The CSCAP did not call for a new, elegant institution or community, or for turning the EAS into a 'community'. It did not advocate Asia-Pacific unity as an alternative to East Asian or Asian unity (though it did speak of promoting as a 'long-term goal' a 'stable regional community in Asia-Pacific'). The CSCAP

proposals did not question the central role of ASEAN in this community-building — nor did they argue against the strong regional commitment to community-building as a security as well as economic or social strategy. The CSCAP did not seek specifically to move functional cooperation away from other institutions — the APT, ADMM-Plus, ARF, and so forth. What the CSCAP proposals did do was focus on the EAS's mission as a 'Leaders-led Forum' for 'strategic dialogue and cooperation' (as spelt out in the EAS Chairman's Statement of 2013). The proposals accepted the complexity of current institutional arrangements, but also recognised the urgent need for coordination — and suggested that as a 'Leaders-led Forum', the EAS was ideally suited to provide 'strategic direction' for the region's security architecture. To this end, the CSCAP recommended longer EAS meetings, the establishing of an EAS secretariat and the implementation of arrangements that might give non-ASEAN member countries a greater sense of ownership of the EAS process. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the CSCAP proposals, however — the aspect that gives them authority — is that they were based on a consensus involving all countries participating in the CSCAP organisation.

Just how useful the CSCAP initiative has been at Track 1 level is of course difficult to judge — but some reports suggest it has been taken seriously. Certainly, there are indications from numerous quarters that ASEAN is currently in a serious process of strengthening the EAS — including with the assistance of an official 'High Level Task Force'. While not attributing a specific community-building function to the EAS, ASEAN has already made moves that go well beyond the informal discussion mode of the first five years or so (2005–2010). Regular Foreign Minister and Finance Minister meetings have been added to the Leaders' Summit, and Ministers in other areas are also organising meetings. Senior Officials' meetings are proliferating. EAS discussions clearly raise suggestions for discussion issues and practical initiatives in the security area: the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum — which first met in 2012 and is a Track 1.5 body — was initiated at least partly in response to a request from the EAS for a dialogue of EAS countries to address maritime challenges. Another

important development is that EAS leaders have been deliberating 'measures, including those of follow-up and coordination within the EAS … to further enhance the effective implementation of the EAS decisions'.

To conclude: it is true that the building of security architecture is only one strategy for managing security issues. Nevertheless, when we focus on this strategy, perhaps the most sensible option — though perhaps not the most exciting option for an analyst to propose — is to support ASEAN's current endeavours, and on that basis, continue to stress the urgent need to achieve greater coordination of the region's different insitutions.

The strategic context in East Asia is so dangerous at present that it seems prudent to work with what is here — what is actually operating — and not indulge in abstract schemes and designs. Some commentators on the security issues of this region might prefer a more robust or comprehensive response to the challenge of calibration; but this may well be counterproductive. Architecture politics have the potential to damage regional relations. It may be wise (and time-saving) to be patient with the current complexity of Asian/Asia-Pacific security institutions — which should be understood as a result not of bad design, but of the dynamics of a highly complex region undergoing transformative change. Taking a genuinely 'architectural' rather than 'engineering' approach to calibration, our best option today might be to support and assist ASEAN's 'driver's-seat' role — recognising ASEAN has a better track record than many when it comes to region building and achieving relative stability in inter-state relations. As one contemplates the security challenges outlined at this Roundtable, ASEAN may well be our best hope.

[1] Memorandum 26 under the "Publications" tab on the CSCAP website: http://www.cscap.org/.

[2] See the report of AusCSCAP's 33rd meeting, Brisbane, 2010, by Brendan Taylor: http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/sdsc/aus-cscap.

[3] "Look of New Asian Order Still Anyone's Guess, says ex-Diplomat," *Nikkei Asian Review*, 11 March 2015: http://asia.nikkei.com/print/article/79833.

[4] The Honourable Kevin Rudd, "US-China 21: The Future of US-China Relations under Xi Jinping" (Asia Society Policy Institute, 2015).

[5] Anthony Milner, "Analysing Asian Regionalism: What is an 'Architectural Perspective'?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 65, no. 1 (2011): 109–26.

[6] Sheryn Lee and Anthony Milner, "Practical vs. Identity Regionalism: Australia's APC Initiative, A Case Study," *Contemporary Politics* 20, no. 2 (2014): 209–28.

[7] http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/blogs/languagesofsecurity/.

[8] I have discussed the Asia-Pacific and Asia/East Asia narratives in "Regionalism in Asia," in Europa Publications, *The Far East and Australasia 2015, 46th edition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 68–76.

[9] Ghazali Shafie, *Malaysia, ASEAN and the New World Order* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2000), pp. 224–5.

[10] Nicholas Tarling, *Regionalism in Southeast Asia: To Foster the Political Will* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 101.

[11] Quoted in Prime Minister Najib's speech to the National Colloquium on Malaysia's Chairmanship of ASEAN (2015): http://www.pmo.gov.my/home.php?menu=speech&page=1908&news_id=700&speech_cat=2.

[12] Ghazali, *Malaysia*, p. 355.

[13] Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Malaysia's Post-Cold War China Policy: A Reassessment" in Jun Tsunekawa (ed.) *The Rise of China: Responses from Southeast Asia and Japan* (Tokyo: The National Institute for Defense Studies, 2009), p. 51, and Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "Making Sense of Malaysia's China Policy: Asymmetry, Proximity, and Elite's Domestic Authority," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* (Oxford University Press), vol. 6, p. 461, quote a former Malaysian diplomat as saying "Malaysia has always held the view that the correct approach towards China is not to isolate China but to engage China."

[14] Opening Address by Permanent Secretary of Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Sihasak Phuangk, "The Future of Security in the Asia-Pacific: Emerging Challenges, Promoting Conflict Management and Enhancing Cooperation in Maritime Areas," 25 August 2014: http://www.mfa.go.th/main/en/media-center/14/48898-Opening-Address-by--Permanent-Secretary-of-Ministe.html.

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