Nesting the Alliances in the Emerging Context of Asia-Pacific Multilateral Processes: A U.S. Perspective

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As Americans consider their options for protecting and advancing their interests in Asia in the twenty-first century, it is natural that there will be wide-ranging views and vigorous debate. Recent events such as the 1996 Taiwan crisis, the Asian economic meltdown in 1997, and the exchange of state visits by presidents Bill Clinton and Jiang Zemin in 1997 and 1998 have intensified, then moderated and redirected, much of the debate over a very short span of time. Two years ago, for example, the Chinese were worrying aloud about American efforts to "encircle" China. Now they talk about "building a constructive strategic partnership with the U.S." Despite these ups and downs, however, the fundamental choices for the United States have remained largely the same.

The United States has the option to seek to maintain the status quo, in the hope that its allies' and its own internal politics will not undermine current arrangements over time. To assuage domestic opinion, Washington might become more overtly demanding of Tokyo and Seoul in economic as well as security terms. Alternatively, the U.S. leadership can prepare to back out of Asia over time, relying on American power-projection capability to assert its interests there when required. Furthermore, it might view its traditional allies as relatively declining powers and seek to center future strategy on association with the rising power of the region, China. Full-blown isolationism, though running contrary to the history of the last fifty years, is not off the table politically. Other variants for consideration as U.S. policy options probably can be imagined.

This paper will not argue the advantages and disadvantages of each of these options. Rather, it will address specifically an additional option: nesting the alliances in the emerging context of Asia-Pacific multilateral processes. The paper will identify the pluses of such an approach and some of its minuses. Then it will make suggestions as to how to realize movement in this direction.

The concept of nesting America's alliances in the Asia-Pacific region's emerging multilateralism is essentially an extension of the status quo option. The concept recognizes that the existing alliances still serve American interests, but that these relationships by themselves may not be adequate to address the unfolding and changing strategic realities of the region. The concept seeks to have the United States actively participate in creating and shaping new and increasingly sophisticated multinational institutions, with a view to creating Asian institutions that will meet Asian needs in some ways as European multilateral institutions meet Europe's needs. It soberly accepts that early-stage institutions will more likely than not be "talk shops," but presses on in the hope and expectation that over time the need to address real problems, in a fashion that reduces costs in an increasingly interdependent environment, will create incentives for intra-regional accommodation. For Americans who support it, this approach rests on the assumption that U.S. *leadership* will offer an opportunity to shape the outcomes of multilateral processes to American advantage.

It needs to be said that this concept is by no means new or original. The Bush administration implicitly endorsed it; the Clinton administration explicitly endorsed it and has from time to time sought to implement aspects of it, although with a frustrating inconsistency. This paper will offer the outline of a plan to make the concept operational.

The explicit premises of the nesting approach are the following:

- The existing alliances have current value and are likely to remain valuable for a long time;
- Ending the alliances would do little for American interests in regional stability and would probably be harmful to those interests;
- Multilateralism is already a feature of U.S. security behavior in the region, even if it is not yet systematic or formalized;
- America's allies are themselves societies undergoing change and may at any time be placed under consuming internal stress, for example by a sudden collapse of North Korea or continuing drift in Japan, hence the United States should hedge more broadly;
- The United States has an oft-stated interest in creating mechanisms that give rising power China a stake in the existing international order, while China eschews traditional alliances;
- And, due to its unique record of international diplomacy through coalition building, America is more likely to gain than lose from pursuing regional multilateralism.

Advocacy of increased reliance on multilateral institutions and behavior inevitably invites criticism for:

- Compromising American sovereign rights;
- Threatening to dilute outcomes or reduce them to a least common-denominator approach;
- Tying the United States to unreliable foreign entities;
- Ignoring that Asia is not yet ready for an OSCE type of arrangement, given the region's lingering territorial disputes and ethnic, economic, and political differences;
- Failing to note that the multilateral mechanisms that exist have made only marginally positive contributions to security problem solving.

Embryonic Regional Multilateralism

Unlike Europe, where the alliance against first Germany, then the Soviet Union, directly created habits of multilateralism on a broad front, multilateral institutions in Asia have tended to insinuate themselves indirectly. Simple, direct all-American attempts to plant European-style institutions, such as SEATO, in Asian soil proved fruitless institutionally, although subtle, informal cooperation managed to develop in resisting the expansion of communism in Southeast Asia, for example. The Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) is one result.

Occasionally, observers with predominantly European experience suggest that Asia may be ready to forge a Pacific institution comparable to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Sometimes this is considered as an appropriate response in the event that China should grow increasingly belligerent toward its neighbors.

While a Pacific Treaty Organization cannot be ruled out in theory, in practice it is difficult to imagine a taller challenge. First, NATO was the creation of a group of relatively homogeneous nations facing a common and mortal threat from the Soviet Union. By contrast, Asian states are remarkable for their economic and political diversity.

Second, Japan would necessarily be the core in Asia of such a grouping if it were to have meaning in security terms. Yet, the internal inhibitions of Japan's constitution (article 9) eschew a vigorous defense role, at least for the foreseeable future. The difficulties encountered in organizing Japan's still modest physical contributions to Desert Storm and United Nations peacekeeping operations further illustrate the impediments to organizing a NATO-like institution around Japan. Finally, the debate and constraints surrounding the 1997–99 effort to write into law revised guidelines for cooperation under the Mutual Security Treaty with the United States demonstrate the widespread reluctance of the Japanese public to embrace new security obligations.

In Northeast Asia, the character of the bilateral disputes and historical animosities between China and South Korea and China and Japan, and between South Korea and Japan, has so far prevented effective multinational institution building at a level even much less ambitious than a NATO-like arrangement. What multilateralism that exists is usually watered down at the insistence of one or more of the parties. Two sensitive areas where conflict is always just below the surface are North Korea and Taiwan, threatening regional peace, yet they are almost completely excluded from official discussions of multilateral security frameworks. In North Korea's case, that is by its own choice; in Taiwan's case, by Chinese fiat.

In the last two years, requirements to file claims under the much-lauded Law of the Sea Treaty have forced back onto the public agenda troublesome conflicting territorial claims between Korea and Japan over Tokdo/Takeshima Island and between Japan and China/Taiwan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and shoals. So far the parties refuse to admit that their claims are anything but absolute, and thus they remain unwilling to submit to the treaty's means of arbitration.

The United States, for its part, harbors a considerable body of influential sentiment that fears that advocates of increasing multilateralism may "throw the baby out with the bath water" by weakening the U.S. alliance structure in Northeast Asia in the hopes of replacing it with an unproven framework. Some argue further that advocacy of multilateralism is really a way to oppose American preeminence in the region.

APEC

Despite these real problems, cautions, and concerns, however, embryonic regional multilateralism has inched ahead. The foremost institutional achievement for the region was the creation of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation ministerial forum (APEC), which by virtue of its economic focus was able to embrace the "economies" of Taiwan and Hong Kong in its membership, finessing the sovereignty issues their presence normally evokes. With the addition in 1993 of an annual "leaders meeting" at the time of the APEC ministerials, an important step was taken toward the introduction of at least an informal agenda of political and security issues, in addition to the normal agenda of advancing freer trade arrangements.

APEC has demonstrated at least temporary limitations, however. The business community is increasingly impatient with its slow implementation of trade liberalization, although they welcome the stated direction. Security issues have remained off the table. Even in the aftermath of the Asian financial (now economic) crisis, the APEC response was decidedly anemic. Remember President Clinton's characterization of the crisis as a "few glitches in the road."

ARF

Although, like APEC, its writ is larger than Northeast Asia, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which is led by foreign ministers, has begun to address concrete security problems. They range from the disputed Spratly Islands to arrangements for rescue at sea. In the past year, delegations have been expanded to include defense ministry representatives under foreign ministry leadership.

Yet throughout Northeast Asia a palpable sense prevails among security experts that ARF is an inappropriate, highly diluted forum to address the issues of sovereignty, territory, and arms that beset Northeast Asia. According to one expert, "it's like confusing popguns with heavy artillery." Northeast Asians are not eager, for example, for far-off India, as an ARF member, to have a voice in their region's significant security deliberations.

Track-Two Dialogues

As is well known, over the past decade informal dialogues have proliferated throughout the region. Think-tank specialists, academics, and government officials acting in their private capacity gather over and over in a seemingly nonstop round of discussions.[1] The Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue, funded by the U.S. Department of Energy, and the ISIS Roundtable, organized in Kuala Lumpur every summer by the semiofficial think tanks of ASEAN, are among the longest standing of these forums.

Generally speaking, these dialogues have served a positive role in making people who were not previously in the habit of talking seriously with one another more comfortable in doing so. As China, Vietnam, and other reforming socialist states sent participants on varying lengths of leash, the dialogues have become perceptibly more frank and open, if not completely so. In

[1] Paul Evans, at Harvard's Fairbank Center, is compiling an authoritative catalogue of these dialogues. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade publishes a similar calendar of dialogues.

retrospect, wary governments appear to have used these forums as "scrimmages" to test policy ideas and personnel in the expectation of direct governmental multilateral discussions in the future.

CSCAP

Perhaps the most earnest of these bodies is the Council on Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), which is made up of the Asia Pacific's "national committees" representing a broad range of private and quasi-governmental institutions which focus on security studies. CSCAP was for a long time hobbled by its effort to maintain participation in its activities by Taiwan, which is obviously one of the outstanding security issues in the region, while enticing China to full participation. Compromises have significantly diminished Taiwanese participation to attendance by "individuals, " but China has begun active membership. North Korea regularly sends delegates to the broad CSCAP forum, but so far has been unwilling to participate in CSCAP's subordinate task force on Northeast Asian security. CSCAP has institutionalized its relationship with the ARF, as a supporting track-two mechanism.

In sum, the region generally, and Northeast Asian states somewhat more hesitantly, have embraced multinational dialogues even as they have edged toward discussion of serious security issues. The questions now have become:

- Should the United States pursue an official multilateral security process?
- If so, in what manner should it be pursued?

The Alliance with Japan

As has been extensively discussed in other papers in this series, the Japanese-American security alliance faces a number of challenges. Among them are maintaining domestic support and a common purpose in both countries, adjusting force levels and the size of the American "footprint" on Japanese soil, and beefing up Japan's contribution to regional security through the revised guidelines for self-defense-force activity.

It is plain that whatever the degree of enthusiasm one brings to trying to maximize the present-day effectiveness of the alliance, the task will not be easy. Japan's inhibitions and those of its neighbors are further compounded by a sense of drift in Tokyo's political elite. In observing the Japanese political scene today, it is possible to identify similarities to Great Britain at the turn of the twentieth century. Both wealthy countries, they had a choice of undertaking painful internal reforms or coasting on past successes. Like Britain, Japan may opt for only slow reforms in the way it does business at home, dragging out its recovery and that of its neighbors. And although one would not wish it, Japan's recovery of its previous economic dynamism—and with it international energy—may take decades rather than years. If that is so, the ongoing shift of the power balance in East Asia may be accelerated toward China.

American interests are likely to continue to embrace as close a relationship with Japan as Tokyo will allow. As in the period of Britain's decline, and with due respect for differences between the two alliances, the alliance will still be valuable. Japan provides critical support in

terms of power projection through the air and naval bases at Kadena and Yokosuka, host-nation support, the U.S.-Japan international division of labor, and in other ways. But the relative contribution of Japan to regional security seems at risk of shrinking. In the absence of a politically acceptable alternative ally, the United States has an additional interest in exploring the creation of a framework of multilateral processes that will contribute to maintaining stability in a period of shifting regional power.

The Alliance with Korea

An even more pressing case can be made for building on the existing alliance to establish a multilateral process for Korea. Here the argument rests not so much on South Korea's present economic and social difficulties, although they are real and pose challenges for armed forces modernization, sustainability, and host-nation support. Rather, the issue is how best to prepare for the possibility of suddenly confronting a need to manage reunification of the Korean peninsula.

The reunification of Germany is in many ways instructive. Condoleezza Rice and Philip Zelikow documented, in their *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, that despite fifty years of active, high-profile Franco-German reconciliation and NATO experience, a vibrant economy in the West, a dispirited Moscow looking for cash, and widespread awareness among Easterners of their diminished state compared to their brothers in the West, the reunification process was a close-run thing.

In the case of the Korean peninsula, a sudden reunification would evoke efforts to achieve agreement among its neighbors on its territorial integrity and future security arrangements. Having been the cockpit of Northeast Asia for much of this century, to do otherwise would be highly risky. Yet the powers concerned are far from the stage Germany's interlocutors had reached in 1989. Korean-Japanese reconciliation has been barely tended to, China is not a weak and cash hungry backer of the North, the South is in economic distress, and there has been virtually no flow of people and information across the Demilitarized Zone.

South Koreans have come to understand the difficulties they would face in managing reunification as they have contemplated the possibility of a collapse of the North over the past seven years of economic decline there. Today, policy elites in Seoul generally accept President Kim Dae Jung's go-slow approach and they hope they will face these tough issues later rather than sooner.

The Key to a Regional Security Process

It is quite clear from its declaratory policy that Washington recognizes the interests of Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow in any future guarantees for Korean reunification. Leaders in Washington and Seoul have also stated their intention to perpetuate the U.S.-Korea security alliance in some form even after reunification, although both sides have done relatively little to prepare their publics to support it. As Wu Xinbo has written in his paper,[2] Beijing may well be prepared to live with this outcome, provided its security interests receive deference.

[2] Wu Xinbo, *Integration on the Basis of Strength: China's Impact on East Asian Security* (Stanford: Asia/Pacific Research Center, 1998).

As track-two forums continue to meet and the relevant governments continue to express reservations about a range of possible official security dialogues, it seems safe to say that it may be at least several years before any real talks occur on issues of significance. It will take a major, unavoidable event, probably the impending reunification of Korea, to mobilize governments to overcome their many doubts and act in a multilateral security process. Hence, in this line of analysis, the future of Northeast Asian multilateralism is probably in North Korea's hands.

What should the United States and concerned governments do in advance? If the United States wishes to shape the outcome to maximize its own interests in maintaining influence in the region, preventing the rise of a hostile hegemon, securing the benefits of plural alliances, and stabilizing security arrangements there, it should move preemptively to express its interests and preferences. That is, it should exercise leadership.

Moreover, Washington has a responsibility, together with the other concerned states, to learn from the German example. It should encourage and, if necessary, facilitate Japanese-Korean efforts to reconcile. It should sponsor forums for bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral dialogues at successively higher levels of officiality on the issues pertaining to reunification. It should join with Seoul in an effort to open the North to outside influence through family reunification, investment, and the like.

To its credit, Washington is actually pursuing these policy objectives to a large degree. The difficulty in doing so cannot be overstated. Simple discussions on evacuation of civilians between Korean and Japanese mid-level defense officials, for example, broke down in acrimony. Four-Party Talks involving North and South Korea, China and the United States have been convened to establish a "peace mechanism" for the peninsula and to facilitate North-South dialogue, but the North remains reluctant to continue them without being paid in advance for showing up. Pyongyang uses the talks to show disrespect to Seoul and to impede any progress. Meanwhile, the North continues provocations against the South that would try any leader's patience.

With Korea likely to be the key to inauguration of any real multilateral security arrangement that deals with important issues in Northeast Asia, it is necessary for the United States and its partners to persevere. China is in a particularly awkward situation. As the North's ally and necessary economic supplier of last resort, it has its own distinct interests in the Korean peninsula that will not be identical to American and South Korean interests. Finessing those differences will be a significant challenge, which Beijing appears to recognize as it slowly opens to more meaningful dialogue with other states about the peninsula.

Taiwan

Taiwan remains of course a major potential flash point in the region. The peculiar nature of China's and Taiwan's claims and the diplomatic histories of their relationships with outside parties make official multilateral action regarding Taiwan-China relations particularly difficult to envision. Nonetheless, the advancing pace of unofficial forums on topics related to Taiwan has had a visible effect on the levels of understanding among the parties concerned, and should be pursued further, with expectations held well in check.

Other Means to a More Secure Multilateral Future

Two other concepts lend themselves to better integration of interests in Northeast Asia. First, it is a truism that the Bretton Woods institutions promoting free trade and liberalized finance have greatly improved living standards in most of the world, helping the West to win the Cold War peacefully. It is especially important that in difficult times such as Asia is now experiencing the Bretton Woods approach be broadened and deepened, not set back, so as to build a firmer foundation for economic growth as a basis for peace.

The United States should reestablish the administration's fast-track negotiating authority, press within APEC for achievement of voluntary sectoral liberalization of trade, as agreed in Vancouver in 1997, and seek a new round of WTO-based negotiations on further liberalizing information technology, financial services, and telecommunications, among others.

Second, military-to-military dialogue remains highly uneven within the region. Since the 1950s, European uniformed and civilian defense officials have met annually under private auspices for *Wehrkunde* conferences, exchanging views on their respective military policies. These conferences grew from humble beginnings into the preeminent defense dialogue on the continent. It is time for a similar institution to begin to develop in the Asia-Pacific region.

In 1995, then defense secretary William Perry called for a regional defense ministers conference. The thunderous silence that greeted his call was a clear indication that he was trying to move too fast for those who are skeptical of American intentions. In January 1998, Singapore's defense think tank tried another approach. It invited regional defense intellectuals, some uniformed and some civilian, to a speech by and private dialogue with Secretary William Cohen. While little noticed outside the circle of invitees, the event set a precedent that should be followed with successively better prepared and attended meetings. The proceedings probably should be off-the-record for the near term, as participants reach higher comfort levels. The long-term goal should approximate that of the *Wehrkunde* approach, building personal confidence among the region's military leaders as their governments seek to build confidence among themselves on Northeast Asia's most difficult issues.

Robert Manning, currently of the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, D.C., has proposed a helpful step toward significant regional cooperation in the form of "Pacatom." This is a concept suggested by the success of Euratom in regulating European safety standards, waste disposal, and other issues involved in the growing use of nuclear power generation. Asia has until recently rapidly increased its dependency on nuclear power. As economic growth resumes at a healthier rate in the future, and assuming that petroleum prices eventually recover, a further expansion of nuclear power plants should be expected.

Japan and the United States are already heavily involved in rescuing sick facilities in the former Soviet Union. They should offer to share technology and experiences in the realm of civilian energy production with China and South Korea, as well as with each other.

Another arena for cooperation with security overtones is in pipelines for the fossil fuels natural gas and petroleum and in transmission lines for electricity. Gas, fuel, and electricity grids are contemplated on a bilateral and trilateral basis among China, Russia, South Korea, and Japan. The current economic slowdown is likely to retard these developments for the short-term. But in time, the economic requirement to develop these will reemerge.

The announced plans for cross-border cooperation between Russia and China, and similar plans for the nations of Southeast Asia, have outpaced previous assumptions about the importance of preserving energy sovereignty, especially for China. The U.S. lead in these technologies, together with capital from Japan and Korea and Southeast Asia, presents an oppor-

tunity for Washington to lead in another area of potentially sensitive cooperation. It is possible to offer mutual assistance, perhaps through the APEC process, that will reinforce interdependence and habits of cooperation in the region, while promoting economic benefits as well.

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