

The Rules of the Game in the Asia-Pacific Security Architecture

Ralf Emmers, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Singapore.

Security Agenda and the Emerging Architecture

A stable Sino-US relationship is key for peace in the Asia-Pacific and the most important factor shaping the regional order. One immediate challenge is to institutionalize great power ties in the midst of shifts in the regional power balance. In addition, the Asia-Pacific faces a series of factors of instability, ranging from territorial disputes, historical legacies that fuel nationalism, and signs of arms races.

An embryonic architecture is emerging in the Asia-Pacific today to address this challenging security environment. It is the result of an incremental process that started in the 1990s and it consists of overlapping bilateral and multilateral structures. The alliance system with the United States remains at the core of the regional security landscape. Complementing bilateral strategic ties, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its associated forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting Plus (ADMM+) provide multilateral venues for regional countries to exchange strategic perspectives and work toward mutual understanding on important security issues.

The core principles of the Asia-Pacific architecture are based on national sovereignty, the non-interference in the affairs of other states, and the non-use of force to resolve inter-state differences. Based on the United Nations (UN) Charter, these principles are well known in the study of International Relations. In addition, an informal process of interaction defines the norms of behavior in the emerging multilateral architecture. It includes a high level of informality, dialogue, self-restraint, consensus building and conflict avoidance rather than resolution.

The Rules of the Game

The multilateral security architecture in the Asia-Pacific is characterized by four functioning rules, namely, a balance of influence between the involved parties, a reliance on a cooperative security approach, the so-called 'ASEAN centrality', and the absence of a hierarchical structure.

First, a balance of influence between the great powers is critical to the stability of the overall multilateral architecture. The latter locks in the United States, China, India and Japan as well as a series of middle powers like Australia, Indonesia and South Korea. In particular, the architecture tries to secure the long-term US engagement in the region while socializing China to standard international rules. By bringing all the key players to the table, the architecture attempts to deny regional hegemony and guarantee the sovereign rights of its smaller participants.

Second, the multilateral architecture adopts a cooperative security approach to security management. Based on the principle of inclusiveness, the cooperative model seeks to

enhance security with potential adversaries. It focuses on dialogue and confidence building measures and aims to complement rather than replace military alliances. The multilateral forums try to lessen mistrust by providing platforms to discuss contrasting views on security and integrate isolated countries into the regional security system. A cooperative security approach also comes at a cost, however. It is remarkably slow due to its reliance on consensus and it is mostly unable to resolve the sources of conflict. For example, the multilateral architecture has failed to tackle the situation on the Korean Peninsula as well as in the East and South China Seas.

Third, in the absence of an alternative acceptable to all participants, ASEAN has established its centrality in the emerging security architecture. The United States and China have not questioned ASEAN's managerial role in the cooperative process and they remain sensitive to the views of smaller states. Still, there is a need for ASEAN to better implement its joint initiatives. ASEAN has to demonstrate the substance of its centrality so that the cooperative process can be more effective and outcome driven.

Fourth, the multilateral architecture is complex, fluid and messy. Its institutional design consists of numerous arrangements with different memberships and areas of cooperation. These forums overlap with one another in terms of agenda setting and they compete for resources and capacity. Yet a division of labor or hierarchy between the existing parts is unlikely in light of ASEAN's leadership style and the diversity that exists in the Asia-Pacific. While perhaps unavoidable, this messiness comes again at a cost. Existing security cooperation has weak structural capacities that restrict its response to security threats. This is true in response to non-traditional security challenges but also in the prevention of inter-state conflicts.

The Role of Smaller Parties

Small and middle powers in the Asia-Pacific have an interest in strengthening the multilateral architecture to multiple their influence and to prevent the emergence of a concert of power system that would exclude them. The ASEAN states already realized in the 1990s that they had to develop cooperative mechanisms to maintain their relevance and avoid being excluded from a strategic landscape dictated solely by the great powers. Likewise, Australia and New Zealand have long advocated the benefits of Asia-Pacific multilateralism and been actively involved in various initiatives, including the ARF, the EAS and the ADMM+. It is understood that such forums can help sustain the US involvement, socialize China and address security concerns.

The challenge for the small and middle powers is to strengthen the conflict management capabilities of the multilateral security architecture. The latter remains weak in its ability to prevent disputes from escalating into open conflicts. For instance, the ASEAN-led structures have failed to prevent the recurrence of incidents in the South China Sea while no attempt at preventive diplomacy has been tried to manage the East China Sea situation. Perceived as less threatening by others, small and middle powers can assume the role of third-party mediator or facilitator in specific conflicts that have immediate implications for peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific. They should therefore be encouraged to play a greater role in regional conflict management and resolution.