

‘New Rules of the Game for Asia-Pacific Security’

On the 23rd of August the Ministry of Defence hosted a discussion on the topic ‘New Rules of the Game for Asia-Pacific Security’, which formed part of the ‘Capital City Universities Initiative’ symposium organised by Victoria University Wellington. The discussion brought together academics from Victoria University and officials from the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to discuss the contemporary regional security environment with academics from leading universities in Asia. Policy areas covered by officials included Asia, the Pacific, maritime security and emerging technologies. Visiting academics in attendance were Associate Professor Thitinan Pongsudhirak of Chulalongkorn University Thailand, Associate Professor Ralf Emmers of Nanyang Technological University Singapore and Professor Seong-ho Sheen of Seoul National University.

Key points of discussion included the South China Sea dispute, tensions on the Korean Peninsula, other current and future flash points in the region, as well as the perspectives and activities of major powers China and the United States, and the current and future role of ASEAN in mitigating tension and encouraging regional integration. Overall, the discussion was extremely engaging and provided a worthwhile opportunity for academics and officials to exchange perspectives on a range of issues that have had a significant and lasting impact on the regional security environment.

The South China Sea featured heavily throughout the discussion. All agreed it was a key source of tension in the region and whilst open conflict was unlikely, there was nevertheless a need to be careful, given the differing strategic perspectives across the region. Professor Emmers pointed out the reluctance of some states (such as Cambodia and Laos) to endanger the financial support they receive from China. Professor Sheen discussed the polarisation in responses to South China Sea tension between mainland and maritime South East Asia, noting that mainland states are increasingly part of a Chinese sphere of influence, whilst this is not the case for maritime states. Overall it was agreed that the South China Sea was a key driver of increasing regional tension and instability.

In response to a question from the floor, Professor Sheen discussed the Korean Peninsula, noting that the situation in North Korea has become increasingly unstable and uncertain. He raised concerns about the wider region being “sucked in” were things to escalate, and stated that any provocative actions from North Korea would be directed towards South Korea instead of the US. He said South Korea found itself in a challenging geographical and political situation, likening it to a ‘shrimp’ surrounded by ‘whales’, and discussed the decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense anti-missile defence system which has provoked a strong reaction from both China and North Korea.

When asked about likely future flash points, the academics identified land, sea, cyber and space domains as areas of potential conflict, and noted the South China Sea issue was likely to persist into the future. Professor Pongsudhirak offered resource competition and climate change as more long-term sources of instability.

Panel members were asked about India and Russia’s interest in the region, as well as presence of the US following the end of the Obama Administration. All agreed that both India and Russia have a limited footprint in the region and have tended to concentrate their focus westwards. Professor Emmers noted an increasing desire in the region for India to be more engaged and stated the need for India to decide what role it wants to play in South East Asia. He noted the potential for India to contribute positively to regional stability through economic engagement and was hopeful they would be a “stabilising force” in the future. Countries further afield, including New Zealand, could also make a significant contribution towards regional stability through positive economic and diplomatic engagement. All agreed that it was important for New Zealand to have a presence in the region as it no longer enjoyed a “luxury of distance”. Professor Emmers suggested New Zealand could act as an

“honest broker” in the region by engaging in “quiet, long-term” diplomacy to foster goodwill with South East Asian states.

All agreed that the US rebalance strategy has had a significant impact on the region. However, the future of this pivot towards the Asia-Pacific is unclear. Professor Pongsudhirak described President Obama as the most Asian-focussed president we are likely to see for some time, an approach that will be missed in the region. The US will still demonstrate an interest in the region but such a significant level of engagement may not be maintained. Professor Pongsudhirak acknowledged that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, as a key architect of the rebalance, would ensure some level of continuity were she to win the election, but warned the same level of sensitivity would not be there.

The region has seen rapid economic growth and significant economic integration which is reflected in the structure of ASEAN. However, as membership has grown, divisions have increased and as such, political dialogue has failed to keep pace with economic integration. Professor Pongsudhirak acknowledged a division between the newer members of ASEAN, who tend to be more aligned with China, and the original members. It was noted that ASEAN is one of several institutions that are struggling to keep up with an increasingly uncertain regional environment. Professor Emmers pointed to the South China Sea as a “major irritant” preventing regional institutions from reaching their full potential. Significant economic integration and interdependence will likely provide a check and balance on conflict in the region.

Closing remarks focussed on the ability of ASEAN to play a positive role in mitigating regional tension and uncertainty by shifting from a broad, consensus-based approach in which implementing decisions is difficult, to more of a rules-based community.