The United States, Asia, and “Convergent Security”

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) founded the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1993, it did so to secure the best of both worlds for ASEAN member-states. The ARF helped create a “breathing space” needed to pursue an enduring Asia-Pacific regional order based on multilateral norms. But any such quest was to be temporarily underwritten by American power extended to the region through its alliances.

This approach has sometimes been described as “convergent security” – a progression from a regional security framework focused on bilateral structures to a framework increasingly focused on multilateral arrangements. Yet the shift from bilateral to multilateral security politics was always going to be difficult. Because bilateral security relations are inherently exclusivist, multilateral security politics has often been regarded by the US and its regional security partners as too unwieldy.

RECENT AMERICAN POLICY

More recently, however, Washington has adopted a more positive approach to multilateral security in the Asia-Pacific. The Obama administration signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in July 2009 as a prerequisite for joining the East Asia Summit (EAS). A year later, the US agreed to join the EAS. Similarly, it has played a key role in revising the agenda for the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting+8 or “ADMM Plus.”

Indeed, the US has become increasingly supportive of inserting “minilateral” security diplomacy into its existing regional alliance frameworks. Yet it has chosen not to endorse a single, overarching approach, but has instead pursued a more discriminate strategy of promoting the application of different multilateral bodies to specific issues.

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping, for example, has been the principal method for advancing America’s economic interests, although it is increasingly being supplanted by the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The EAS has been prioritized for developing regional security dialogues, since it includes all of the region’s major powers and is considered less prone to Chinese domination.

The challenge for the EAS is to shape a distinct structure capable of addressing extended regional crises more directly. However, the degree to which ASEAN or China would support the merging of their preferred institutions with the EAS is uncertain. Without such a consensus it is likely that the US will continue to regard multilateral arrangements as most appropriate for dealing with “functionally-oriented” non-traditional security concerns, such as disaster relief, rather than with traditional security problems.

Given such a demarcation, the US alliance
The system seems well positioned. Washington’s emphasis on “capacity-building” with regional partners has led it to develop “minilateral” or “plurilateral” structures that can draw on the relative strengths of bilateralism and multilateralism. Capacity-building is sufficiently amorphous that it can be interpreted as applying allies’ increased material assets to either traditional or non-traditional security challenges. This in turn has generated a subtle process of bilateral–multilateral co-existence, what has been described as a “complex patchwork” of security arrangements sustained by the major powers and their smaller regional counterparts.

**IMPOR TANCE OF DOMESTIC POLITICS**

Yet these policies are subject not only to changes in the regional order, but also to domestic changes in the US itself. The nature of the American foreign policy debate makes Obama’s strategy difficult to “sell,” both to Washington’s policy elites and to the wider American public. The major Republican candidates for the 2012 US presidential election are unlikely to support multilateralism to the same extent as the current administration.

Consequently, unless care is taken to separate short-term domestic political point scoring from longer-term policy formulation, the Obama administration is likely to find multilateral cooperation increasingly subject to domestic politics. This could easily influence the administration’s judgment of, and behavior toward, key regional powers.

The current uncompromising partisanship in US politics could undermine the American government’s capacity to project a consistent and coherent strategy. It would then become more difficult to utilize the strengths of multilateralism on behalf of US interests without also reigniting regional concerns about American unilateralism. The type of extreme rhetoric that some Republican candidates have employed so far in the 2012 presidential election could easily exacerbate matters.

America’s current economic turmoil might conceivably draw this administration’s, or its successor’s, attention away from important but less pressing diplomatic and security problems. The Obama administration is projecting significant cuts in defense spending. Yet the quantitative dimension tells only part of the story. The US technology base and its edge in deploying advanced weapons systems are unlikely to change soon. This represents a qualitative component to future calculations about alliance politics.

**THE ROLE OF THE “SPOKES”**

The major challenge confronting US alliance politics in a broader convergent security context is to supplement or even replace the “exclusivist” component of America’s bilateral ties with more contemporary, symmetrical relationships. Importantly, this must be achieved without giving up the advantages of bilateral security collaboration.
The opportunity as well as the risk of convergent security on the part of the US is the dependence of such a strategy on America’s Asian allies being sufficiently capable of conducting relations with others beyond their traditional US alliances. Greater independence from the US is not inherently inimical to America’s interests if it leads to a more self-confident, but still supportive, collection of security partners.

It would be particularly beneficial if such partners were able to generate a more comprehensive spirit of cooperation across previous divides without losing the “insurance” of existing frameworks. Closer, more effective relationships among the “spokes” within the framework of the overall US alliance system would fit with such a pattern.

CONCLUSION

What do these alternative approaches imply for the future of “hub and spokes” alliance politics in the region? New approaches will necessitate that the US and its regional partners creatively revise and credibly operationalize their security collaboration.

- Old defense burden-sharing debates, for example, will assume new forms that emphasize niche areas of collaboration and demand higher levels of allied commitment to US strategic postures – the air/sea battle doctrine is a graphic case-in-point.

- The broadening of “intra-spoke” alliance relations will also proceed and intensify. This may well be in the form of the US working with its allies in a plurilateral or minilateral context.

The challenge the US confronts for implementing convergent security in this manner is to find and pursue ways for bilateral and multilateral strategies to do more than just coexist. Complementary strategies must be identified and pursued, so that current arrangements can be superseded by policies more coherent, overarching, and enduring.