The Bush administration and Asia Pacific multilateralism: *unrequited love?*

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This article challenges the presumed multilateral aversion of the George W. Bush administration. It argues that, at least in its approach toward the Asia-Pacific, this administration has been a more active and stimulatory advocate of multilateral approaches than is commonly acknowledged. The article begins by documenting the Bush administration's multilateral activism in the Asia-Pacific and examines those factors which appear to have contributed towards it. It then goes on to demonstrate, however, that Bush's at times unexpected enthusiasm for multilateral approaches has encountered a high degree of regional reticence. For a part of the world that has been affording an increased prominence to multilateral institutions and activities, this finding is initially both surprising and significant. The article concludes by seeking to account for this apparent anomaly and by considering its possible implications for the emerging regional architecture.

History will remember unilateralism as a distinctive, if not the defining feature of American foreign policy during the George W. Bush administration. Epitomized by the March 2003 invasion of Iraq – which displayed a flagrant disregard for UN authority and broader international opinion—the unilateralist tendencies of this administration have been evident in a range of areas including its withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, rejection of the Kyoto Protocol, ambivalence towards the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and efforts to exempt the US from the International Criminal Court (ICC). Even when signs of a softening in its praetorian mindset have occurred—such as when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice proclaimed during her confirmation hearing that ‘the time for diplomacy is now’ (US Department of State 2005) – commentators have confidently asserted that this administration remains unilateralist at heart. Ivo Daalder, for instance, posits that any shift which has taken place during Bush's second term has not been one ‘from unilateralism to multilateralism’, but rather, ‘a shift from relying on the use of force to doing nothing’ (Daalder 2006). Likewise, while claiming that political,

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fiscal and strategic realities have occasioned a stalling in the so-called 'Bush Revolution', Philip Gordon suggests that 'the president and most of his team still hold to the basic tenets of the Bush doctrine' and that 'the risk of relapse' remains (Gordon 2006: 75, 84).

Such characterizations imply that the Bush administration's unilateralist tendencies are universal; that they prevail across a wide variety of issue areas and show little regard for the peculiarities of particular geographic regions. With reference to the Asia-Pacific, for example, Secretary Rice's recent decision to miss the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) for the second time in three years has been read as a reaffirmation of this administration's multilateral ambivalence. This article challenges that assumption – and along with it the presumed multilateral aversion of the Bush administration – by putting forward the case that, at least in its approach toward the Asia-Pacific, this administration has been a more active and stimulatory advocate of multilateral approaches than is commonly acknowledged. The article begins by documenting the Bush administration's engagement with, as well as its initiation of, multilateral institutions and activities in this region. It examines those factors which appear to have contributed towards this multilateral activism. The article goes on to demonstrate, however, that Bush's at times unexpected enthusiasm for multilateral approaches has encountered a high degree of regional reticence. For a part of the world that has been affording an increased prominence to multilateral dialogue, this finding is initially both surprising and significant. The article concludes by seeking to account for this apparent anomaly and by considering its potential implications for the emerging regional architecture.

Despite the prevalence of its usage, the term multilateralism is a contested and sometimes confusing one. As Robert Keohane has observed, 'when a scholar refers to multilateralism, it is not immediately clear what phenomena are to be described and explained' (Keohane 1990: 731). Following Keohane's own oft-cited definition, this article understands multilateralism as 'the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions' (Keohane 1990: 731). This definition clearly encompasses formal institutions, but also allows for the consideration of informal arrangements and activities which are established to address a particular problem or set of issues, sometimes only on a temporary basis (Keohane 1990: 732–33).

Where a multilateral process is essentially global in scope, but where its underlying rationale is clearly directed toward a particular Asia-Pacific problem or issue, it will fall within the purview of this article. As will become apparent, the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) serves as an obvious example here. By and large, however, the article focuses primarily on US approaches toward multilateral institutions and activities exhibiting a clear Asia-Pacific focus and/or membership, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ARF, the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) process.

One further caveat is in order: this article does not claim that multilateralism has at any stage superseded bilateralism as the preferred *modus operandi* of the Bush administration in its approach toward the Asia-Pacific. From the beginning of the postwar era, successive administrations—including that of President Bill Clinton, whose multilateral credentials few would ordinarily question—have relied heavily upon the US-led network of bilateral security alliances (often referred to collectively as the ‘San Francisco System’) as the central institutional component of their efforts to build and maintain order in this part of the world. In the pursuit of that objective, however, bilateralism and multilateralism have by no means been mutually exclusive. As (Cossa 2003: 193) observes ‘the US does not see bilateral and multilateral efforts as being in tension; rather, they complement one another’.

This longstanding duality in US approaches toward the Asia-Pacific should not be allowed to detract, however, from the multilateral commitment of the Bush administration, particularly when compared with that of its predecessors. Indeed, a strong case could even be made that this administration has been the most multilaterally active and engaged of any during the post-Cold War era. The earlier George H. Bush administration, for instance, was initially highly suspicious of regional multilateral security forums, while these processes remained in such a nascent state by the time Bush Snr left office that there was little opportunity to execute a strategy of meaningful engagement with them. In the case of the Clinton administration, a significant gap between the rhetoric and reality of its support for multilateral approaches is apparent. As Evelyn Goh observes ‘while there is evidence aplenty of a remarkably sympathetic approach to multilateralism by the Clinton administration in terms of rhetorical support and participation, its East Asia policy suffered from an unreconciled duality ... [T]he Clinton administration failed to specify how bilateralism and multilateralism related to each other... There was not a wide following for the liberal notion of security pluralism within the administration’ (Goh 2004: 55). While the same Clintonesque rhetorical support for multilateral approaches has certainly not been evident during the George W. Bush administration, this article seeks to demonstrate that, in practice, the substance of its multilateral activism and engagement in the Asia-Pacific has also been significantly greater than is generally acknowledged.

Bush’s Multilateral Overtures

As with so many features of the Bush foreign policy approach, its interest in multilateralism can be dated back to the period immediately following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In October 2001, for instance, Bush was successful in securing a formal statement from APEC leaders condemning the attacks and calling for enhanced counter-terrorist cooperation internationally (Higgins and Hutzler 2001: 6). Significantly,

this marked the first time in its history that APEC had formally issued a security-related document and this security focus is one that the Bush administration has sought to further inject into the APEC process during the period since. Bush used the November 2006 APEC forum in Hanoi, for example, as a venue for building regional support for a coordinated approach to resolving the protracted North Korean nuclear crisis (Mitton 2006b). The Bush administration officially views APEC as 'the premier organization in the Asia-Pacific' and has indicated its desire to invigorate the process still further (US Department of State 2006). For instance, US officials, including the President himself, have signaled their interest in establishing an APEC-wide Free Trade Agreement (FTA) (Mitton 2006a).

The Bush administration has also utilized APEC to further its engagement with ASEAN, the premiere multilateral grouping in Southeast Asia. On the sidelines of the APEC Summit in November 2005, for instance, Bush announced a new ASEAN-US partnership with the seven ASEAN leaders of APEC (Lau 2005). In July 2006, Secretary Rice and her ASEAN counterparts signed a 'Plan of Action' designed to implement this ASEAN-US partnership. Bush and the ASEAN Leaders subsequently went on to identify eight priority areas of action within this plan encompassing economic cooperation; health; scholarships; information and communications technology; transport; energy; disaster management; and environmental management. A new Trade and Investment Framework Arrangement was signed between the US and ASEAN in August 2006 which will serve as a precursor for future Free Trade Agreement talks and also promises to open the way for a future deepening of Washington's engagement with ASEAN (US Department of State 2007). Detracting somewhat from this forward momentum, President Bush recently postponed a scheduled September 2007 summit with ASEAN leaders that was intended to mark 30 years of US-ASEAN ties. Despite US assurances that the summit will still be held in 2008, and notwithstanding statements from senior ASEAN officials themselves indicating that Bush's re-scheduling was unavoidable due to developments in the Middle East, this recent development has understandably resulted in further questioning of America's regional commitment (McIndoe 2007a).

Growing US interest in joining the EAS, however, provides one obvious counter to this growing skepticism. The EAS agenda is still broad and relatively undefined, focusing on such issues as trade and energy cooperation. Accordingly, the identity of this nascent process remains in a state of flux, and membership is a hotly contested issue. For these reasons, those present at the inaugural EAS in 2005 voted to freeze membership of the body for at least two years (Cossa 2007: 6). While America is therefore still not a member of this grouping (a non-inclusion which, according to some analysts, has been deliberately engineered by regional governments such as China and Malaysia who favour a more distinctive and exclusive East Asian grouping) questions have been raised since the establishment of the EAS as to whether the US was even interested in joining.

The primary obstacle appears to be the requirement that EAS members sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). Concerns emanated from Washington on the grounds that signing the TAC may compromise existing US alliance commitments while also curtailing its freedom of action in response to human rights concerns. A report circulated recently under the auspices of *The Stanley Foundation* and *The Center for Strategic and International Studies* (CSIS), however, recommends that the US should sign the TAC and that it can circumvent this potential hurdle by obtaining similar reassurances to those secured by Australia and Japan that acceding to the Treaty does not in any way alter their existing alliance obligations (The Stanley Foundation and the Center for Strategic and International Studies 2006: 6). Immediately prior to departing for the ARF meeting in August 2007, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill subsequently disclosed to a group of journalists that the US was indeed 'looking closely' at signing the TAC (Pereira 2007).

Unlike in the case of the ARF, prominent officials from the Bush administration have regularly attended the annual IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore – a platform which they have consistently used to issue significant pronouncements regarding US policy towards the Asia-Pacific. In particular, the Shangri-La Dialogue has often served as a barometer for current American thinking vis-à-vis China. In his address to the 2005 meeting of this gathering, for instance, then US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld controversially questioned the voracity of Beijing's declared defence expenditures and asked, given its benign threat environment, why China was dramatically improving its missile and power projection capabilities (Rumsfeld 2005). By contrast, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates used his address to the June 2007 Shangri-La Dialogue to emphasize commonalities in the Sino-US relationship and to reaffirm American commitment to the region (Gates 2007). Consistent with the tone of Gates' address, a plan to establish a permanent hotline between the US and Chinese militaries was also announced on the sidelines of the 2007 meeting (Eyal 2007).

Where the Bush administration's multilateral credentials have been most visible, however, is in the context of the protracted North Korean nuclear crisis. Bush has maintained throughout the crisis that his strong preference is for a multilateral diplomatic solution—unlike President Clinton before him—although he has still made regular reference to the fact that 'all options remain on the table, including the use of force' (Kessler 2004: A14). Notwithstanding these veiled threats, however, the Bush administration has continued to put its faith in the so-called Six Party Talks process, despite the limited tangible progress that these talks have often made, along with Pyongyang's 'on again, off again' approach towards them. This dedication on the part of the Bush administration has also persisted despite the fact that the US is, for all intents and purposes, taking a 'back seat' in this process, with China acting as the host of the talks. In recent years, however, statements have even been made by senior figures in the Bush administration, such as the former Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick and more recently by Condoleezza Rice, indicating that the US would be open to the prospect of using

the Six Party Talks as the basis for a new Northeast Asian security institution, that might also include Australia (Gawenda and Hartcher 2005: 8).

The Bush administration has not only been an active participant in multilateral activities where others have taken the lead. It has also endeavored to play an entrepreneurial role in Asia-Pacific multilateralism by developing a number of new multilateral mechanisms. The most recent example of this is the innovative 'Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate', which was pioneered by the Bush administration (with critical assistance from senior figures in the Howard Government) as a mechanism for developing and deploying clean energy technologies. Along with the US and Australia, China, India, Japan and South Korea are also members of this new multilateral agreement (Sheridan 2005: 22).

Other examples exist. In May 2003, for instance, Bush himself announced the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) – a multilateral effort to prevent the proliferation of WMD, their delivery systems and related materials that now enjoys the 'support' of close to 80 countries. The PSI is very much an ad hoc arrangement and creates no formal obligations. Member states also have the option of participating at various levels, including through interdiction training exercises (of which Australia has already hosted two, in 2003 and 2006 respectively), informational meetings and the carrying out of actual operations. As (Valencia 2005: 7) observes, 'Asia figures prominently in PSI strategy because it contains both suspected suppliers and recipients of WMD-related materials and the main sea and air routes for their transport. Indeed, the first and foremost PSI target is North Korea'. During congressional testimony in March 2004, the Commander of the US Pacific Command Admiral Tom Fargo also foreshadowed a new multilateral mechanism entitled the 'Regional Maritime Security Initiative' (RMSI). While clearly related to the PSI, RMSI was an Asia-specific proposal designed to encourage regional states to cooperate in countering maritime transnational threats, such as WMD proliferation, terrorism, human and drug trafficking, as well as piracy (Medeiros 2004).

The Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) involving the US, Japan and Australia can be seen as a further example of the extent to which the Bush administration has sought to add a multilateral dimension to its traditionally bilateral Asia-Pacific security relationships. The TSD, which was formally announced in 2002 and initially conducted at vice-ministerial level, has since been upgraded to Ministerial level. Speculation is currently rife that the TSD might ultimately be expanded to include India which, along with the three existing TSD members, was so central in providing humanitarian relief following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Perhaps the best practical example of the Bush administration's efforts to 'multilateralise' its security cooperation, however, comes in the form of the *Cobra Gold* series of military exercises. Initially bilateral military exercises held annually with Thailand, no less than 5 militaries (Thailand, US, Singapore, Indonesia and Japan) now participate in *Cobra Gold*. To be sure, skeptics might argue that processes such as the PSI, RMSI, TSD and *Cobra Gold*

do not amount to multilateralism in the true sense of the word. Yet each of these activities remains entirely consistent with Keohane's definition of multilateralism cited earlier in this article.

Cupboard Love?

Skeptics can still point to Secretary Rice's non-attendance at two of the last three ARF meetings as evidence of America's multilateral disengagement under the Bush administration. This charge can be countered, however, on at least two counts. First, despite the Secretary's absence, the US has remained a relatively active participant in ARF processes. At the 2007 ARF meeting, for instance, the US proposed a joint disaster relief force to be established under ARF auspices and was also among a group of countries advocating a new ARF anti-proliferation grouping (Pereira 2007; McIndoe 2007b). Second, Rice's non-attendance may not be a particularly useful indicator of Bush's multilateral commitment when viewed against the performance of other countries and previous US administrations. Secretary of State Warren Christopher also missed two ARF meetings during the 1990s, but few have questioned the multilateral credentials of the Clinton administration. It is important to recognize that the Indian and Japanese foreign ministers also missed the 2005 ARF meetings, while the Chinese foreign minister attended a number of related ASEAN meetings but left prior to the broader ARF gathering. Secretary of State Colin Powell, by contrast, never missed an ARF meeting during the first four years of the Bush administration, while it is worth keeping in mind that Secretary Rice did attend the 2006 meeting in the midst of a Middle East crisis (Cossa 2005; Cossa 2007). When viewed in relative terms, therefore, this record is hardly indicative of an administration that has been completely ambivalent in the approach it has taken towards Asia-Pacific multilateralism.

Critics of the line of argument advanced in this paper might respond that Bush's multilateral engagement in the Asia-Pacific has been predominantly US-centric in orientation and overwhelmingly 'pragmatic' in its motivation. Such claims are also questionable. First, if Bush's state-centric approach to multilateral processes is to be taken as indicative of his administration's lack of commitment to these, then the same yardstick ought to be applied to other countries. This becomes problematic in the case of China, whose commitment to Asia-Pacific multilateralism over recent years few would question. Yet the most prominent multilateral processes which China has engaged with and, occasion, itself engineered – such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Boao Forum for Asia and the Network of East Asian Think Tanks (NEAT) – are underpinned by a clear Sino-centric rationale. Second, regarding America's so-called 'pragmatic' multilateralism, one can question whether governments ever engage in multilateralism for non-pragmatic reasons and whether, in fact, pragmatism is actually the norm and not the exception here.

Even in the case of ASEAN – where the establishment and implementation of collective institutional norms is widely trumpeted as both a cause and effect of cooperation – the more practical motivation of conflict avoidance within a historically fractious sub-region clearly remains a compelling one for many, if not most, of its member states.

Further, the substance of Asia-Pacific security cooperation is increasingly becoming more pragmatic in nature. In recent years, there has been a heightened awareness – particularly at ARF events and in a number of Track 2 forums – regarding the importance of functional cooperation in specific fields and issue areas (Japan Center for International Exchange 2005: 2–3). Functional cooperation in relation to such issues as disaster prevention/mitigation, disease-based threats, energy security and terrorism is appealing not only because these areas are relevant to the region as a whole, but just as importantly because these trans-boundary issues do not typically involve the same degree of sensitivity (particularly in relation to issues of sovereignty and non-intervention) that more traditional, state-based security threats are apt to generate. There is evidence suggesting that these trends have not gone completely unnoticed in the US. One of the key recommendations flowing from the aforementioned Stanley Foundation/CSIS report, for instance, suggests that Washington should:

Encourage greater regional cooperation and coordination on transnational security challenges such as terrorism; maritime security; trafficking of arms, narcotics and people; health issues; and the environment. Greater US participation in and support of joint military interactions on peacekeeping exercises, natural disaster response, and humanitarian relief efforts will pay positive regional institution-building equities. Expand exercises that include not only militaries but also NGOs and civilian agencies. Push for interoperability, but recognize that simply raising reluctant participants' comfort level with multilateral cooperation is also important at this stage. Washington should continue to build upon the positive examples of multilateral coordination demonstrated in responding to the East Timor crisis of 1999, the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004, and the restriction of illicit North Korean funds flowing through the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia in 2005 (Stanley Foundation and CSIS 2006: 10).

To criticize such an approach as purely 'pragmatic', therefore, would essentially be to imply that the US should disregard emerging regional trends towards more functional, issue-specific modes of security collaboration.

So what explains the multilateral activism of the Bush administration—which a majority of analysts seem to have either discounted or simply overlooked—in its approach toward the Asia-Pacific region? There would appear to be at least three factors at play. First, it is important to recognize that the geopolitical configuration of the contemporary Asia-Pacific is not particularly conducive to unilateralism. This is a part of the world where the interests of each of the great powers – the US, China, India, Japan and Russia – intersect. Notwithstanding

the substantial material assets which Washington has at its disposal – particularly those of the military variety which presently far eclipse those available to any other regional player – to unilaterally translate this material might into political influence is highly problematic in a region inhabited (and in some cases directly contested) by these other economic and military ‘giants.’ As US-led operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have dramatically exposed some of the limits of American power more generally, this regional reality has come into even sharper relief. Indeed, this increasingly apparent erosion of US pre-eminence in the Asia-Pacific provides one obvious counter to those who would contend that America’s hegemonic status generates additional ‘responsibilities’ for it to look beyond its own self interest, particularly in the context of multilateral diplomacy (Bull 1980).

Second, the sheer number and range of security challenges in the Asia-Pacific is conducive to multilateralism. This is particularly so in relation to threats of a transnational nature which often simply cannot be tackled on a unilateral basis. Unlike the Clinton administration before it, for instance, the Bush administration has clearly conceded the necessity of adopting a multilateral approach toward the North Korean nuclear crisis, namely because of the seminal role that North Korea’s two closest neighbors and leading trading partners – China and South Korea – will almost certainly play in any sustainable resolution. Likewise, the degree of multilateral cooperation which has been involved in countering the activities of global and regional terrorist networks – Southeast Asia, of course, is officially designated as a ‘second front’ in the so-called ‘War on Terrorism’ (or recently dubbed ‘Long War’) – has served to drive this point home. Furthermore, the fact that the Bush administration is turning to others in the Asia-Pacific for help is not particularly surprising in light of the aforementioned strains which ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are placing not only on the American armed forces, but also on the US budget.

Third, it is virtually impossible to overestimate the role that China’s (re)emergence and increasing regional influence has played in spurring the Bush administration’s growing enthusiasm for multilateral institutions and activities in the Asia-Pacific. Washington sees some benefit, for instance, in binding Beijing into an increasingly dense and complex web of regional arrangements that will at once both test and (in theory at least) strengthen its resolve to commit to becoming a more ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the region and beyond. Concurrently, however, the Bush administration is utilizing multilateral processes (such as APEC) to check the regional influence that Beijing is accruing (often at Washington’s expense) through its encouragement of more ‘exclusivist’ multilateral mechanisms such as the SCO and the EAS. This dynamic is entirely consistent with an increasing tendency amongst the region’s great powers to use multilateral institutions and activities as instruments of competitive influence. The Bush administration’s multilateral activism can also be rationalized as part of a ‘hedging strategy’ vis-a-vis China – a vehicle through which to build support and demonstrate Washington’s ongoing

commitment to the region. Such collateral may ultimately come in useful, particularly should China – a country which the Bush administration has described as standing at a ‘strategic crossroads’ – ultimately opt to go down a path of direct strategic competition with the US (Medeiros 2005–06).

Regional Rejection?

Interestingly, however, the reaction of Asia-Pacific governments to Bush’s multilateral activism has exhibited significantly greater reticence than one might expect in a part of the world that has traditionally encouraged US engagement as a seemingly indispensable pillar of regional order and stability. In the case of APEC, for instance, US efforts to inject a greater security focus into the organisation have generated little enthusiasm and, at times, a degree of regional resentment. At the APEC summit in November 2006, for instance, a verbal statement from the APEC leaders expressing concern at North Korea’s missile and nuclear tests fell well short of the condemnation of Pyongyang’s actions that US officials were reportedly seeking (Noi 2006). A speech delivered by Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi to the 2006 APEC CEO Summit, which was held immediately prior to the leaders meeting, suggested that APEC’s ‘assumption of some security role following the September 11 attacks in the US has compromised its original purpose and blurred its focus’ (Badawi 2006). Even Prime Minister John Howard – so often seemingly indivisible from Bush on a range of issues – has, on occasion, found himself at odds with the President when re-iterating APEC’s primary function as a trade and economic facilitator (Shanahan 2004: 1).

Little regional support has also been evident towards the prospect of US membership in the EAS. China and Malaysia, for example, initially expressed their preference for of a more ‘exclusivist’ EAS grouping that did not include the US. The aforementioned freezing of EAS membership for a two year period has indeed had the effect of preventing American membership in this grouping. To be sure, recent statements out of Beijing suggesting that the US may not forever be excluded from this nascent grouping could be interpreted as representing somewhat of a softening in this stance, or at least a tacit acknowledgement from China concerning the limits to its ability to implement its preferred ‘exclusivist’ approach (Kun 2007). That said, it is still important to bear in mind here that even close US friends and allies such as Japan, Singapore and South Korea appear to have been in agreement that the US should not be included in the first EAS of December 2005 (Tay 2005: 14).

Regional reticence towards US multilateral engagement, however, has been most apparent in the maritime domain. Only, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and Singapore, for instance, are declared PSI participants. Indonesia has indicated that it will join the PSI, but that its participation will be ‘ad hoc’ and limited to ‘several aspects – not all of the initiatives’ (Siboro 2006). Likewise, South Korea has sent observers to PSI exercises, but refuses to

participate fully for fear of provoking North Korea (Ramstad 2006). Indeed, a majority of Asia-Pacific countries – and most notably China and India – have been reluctant to openly associate themselves with the PSI (Richardson 2006). Regional antipathy towards the proposed RMSI has been even more apparent. Both Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, for instance, voiced their strong opposition to ‘internationalising’ the management of the Malacca Straits and labelled the RMSI as a ‘heavy-handed and insensitive’ initiative (Bateman 2006). In cooperation with Singapore, they subsequently initiated their own coordinated naval patrols of the Malacca Straits which have since been expanded to include aerial patrols as part of the ‘Eyes in the Sky’ initiative.

So what explains this regional reticence towards the Bush’s administration’s multilateral activism in the Asia-Pacific? At least four contributory factors can be identified. The first relates to the issue of the clashing, in many ways incompatible diplomatic styles of the US and many Asia-Pacific countries. The Bush administration, in particular, appears to have given greater emphasis to the *outcomes* of multilateralism and – whether implicitly or explicitly – the role that hard power instruments can play in shaping and influencing these outcomes. Washington’s relatively hardline approach in the Six Party Talks – where it has staunchly insisted upon the Complete, Verifiable and Irreversible Dismantlement (CVID) of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program as a precondition for providing the Kim Jong-Il regime with any diplomatic, economic and energy rewards of substance—is indicative of this tendency. By so doing, the Bush administration has often found itself working at cross purposes with other key members of this process – namely China, South Korea and Russia – who have urged a more flexible and moderate approach to resolving the crisis (Park 2005). Indeed, for many if not most regional players, multilateralism is conceived of as a *process* through which confidence is built, consensus reached and common regional understandings or ‘norms’ arrived at (Cossa 2007: 7).

Second, the fact that the Bush administration’s multilateral initiatives have tended to privilege issues of a predominantly *global* nature – such as the ‘War on Terror’ and WMD proliferation – has somewhat limited their appeal to most Asia-Pacific countries, who remain focused upon threats much closer to home. The region’s lack of enthusiasm for the PSI and the RMSI could certainly be interpreted in this light. So too could the general reluctance to inject a greater security focus into the APEC process. Interestingly, however, this does not appear to have deterred American efforts in this direction, particularly if we are to believe reports that initial drafts of President Bush’s recent address to the APEC Business Advisory Council summit meeting ‘had a single narrative and that single narrative was all about terrorism’ (Sheridan 2007: 23).

Domestic political considerations themselves provide a third explanation for the region’s less than welcoming attitude toward Bush’s multilateral activism. This is particularly so in a number of Southeast Asian countries (typically those with significant Muslim populations) where governments have remained wary of aligning themselves too closely to the US due to the increased public hostility

toward America which has become a feature of the 'War on Terror' period (The Stanley Foundation 2006: 7). Domestic political considerations certainly go some way toward explaining Indonesian and Malaysian opposition to the RMSI and can also be seen to account for the region's rather lukewarm response to the PSI. In each of these cases, however, the continuing regional importance attached to the norms of sovereignty and non-interference, particularly in Southeast Asia, should also not be discounted (Caballero-Anthony 2005: 22–23).

Last, but certainly not least, regional sensitivities to Chinese perceptions also need to be taken into account. Beijing, of course, is itself using multilateralism as a vehicle for increasing its influence and status in the Asia-Pacific – often at the expense of the US (Shambaugh 2005). Indeed, this is one reason why Washington continues to find itself excluded from multilateral forums, such as the SCO and the EAS. While a majority of Asia-Pacific countries strongly oppose any outright regional exclusion of the US—precisely because of continuing regional uncertainties regarding the potential dangers attending China's rise—most would rather avoid having to choose between these two regional heavyweights, preferring instead to cultivate a middle position between them. This current propensity of many Asia-Pacific countries toward 'hedging' strategies (Goh 2005), however, further accounts for their reluctance to publicly support or endorse a number of American multilateral initiatives.

What becomes of the broken hearted?

The foregoing analysis challenges the conventional wisdom regarding America's Asia-Pacific engagement during the Bush administration. It calls into question the widely held perception that the US has 'taken its eye off the ball' in this part of the world as a result of all-consuming strategic preoccupations in the Middle East. It also casts doubt upon the popular assumption that this administration has exhibited a strong aversion towards multilateral approaches. Indeed, a primary contention of this article is that the Bush administration—via its active participation in regional forums such as APEC, the Six Party Talks and the Shangri-La Dialogue, as well as through the entrepreneurial role it has played in pioneering a raft of multilateral mechanisms such as the 'Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate', the PSI and a new US-ASEAN partnership—has actually been a more active and stimulatory advocate of multilateral approaches than it has thus far been given credit. That the Bush administration is now officially giving serious consideration to signing the TAC (as a prerequisite for EAS membership) serves only to further reinforce this line of argumentation.

These findings also offer a fresh perspective on the prevailing view that American disinterest and multilateral disengagement could ultimately result in its regional exclusion. With the possible exception of the EAS (where there are now even signs of a softening in the initial Chinese preference for a more

exclusivist grouping) there is actually very little evidence of any genuine desire for American exclusion. What this article also highlights, however, is the surprising degree of regional reticence which has been displayed in response to Bush's multilateral activism. The outright rejection by Indonesia and Malaysia of the RMSI provides the starkest example, but this reticence has also been evident in the lack of regional support for the PSI, as well as in the clear marginalization of US influence in forums such as APEC and the Six Party Talks. Should such trends continue—and should Washington feel as a consequence that multilateral mechanisms offer an increasingly less viable means through which to advance its Asia-Pacific policy objectives—it is not entirely inconceivable that the US may opt to substantially diminish its own relatively longstanding commitment to many of these endeavors. In other words, the US may take the initiative of substantially downgrading its own involvement in multilateral processes, rather than being excluded from them. Might President Bush's recent postponement of the proposed US-ASEAN Summit and Secretary Rice's absence from two out of the last three ARF meetings conceivably signal the beginning of this trend? It is still, of course, far too early to tell.

The implications for regional order of an America that were to develop any genuine and deep-seated multilateral aversion, however, should not be taken lightly. As Allan Gyngell presciently observes in a recent paper identifying 'design faults' in the emerging Asia-Pacific security architecture:

The large systemic stresses that will face East Asia and the Pacific as China and India emerge to take their place with other great powers, and as Japan adjusts to its new regional environment are already apparent. And although there is no reason to believe that this process cannot be managed well, it will certainly be easier and smoother if the broad environment into which China and India emerge is one in which all regional voices have an opportunity to be heard. Regional forums provide an obvious and effective way of facilitating this (Gyngell 2007: 7).

America's deep economic engagement in the region, coupled with its status as what (Kurlantzick 2007: 74) has recently termed 'the premier hard power in Asia', is such that its 'voice' will continue to be heard, whether or not it belongs to such regional forums. Precisely because of its considerable economic and strategic weight in the Asia-Pacific, however, the US will continue to shape the emerging regional architecture in profound and important ways, even if it ultimately were to opt out of many of these mechanisms. This influence could be exerted in at least three ways. First, if the US were to revert at the regional level to the same unilateral approaches which have proven so unpopular at the global level, but which have still had such a deleterious impact on the credibility of such global institutions as the United Nations. Second, if America is cornered into further reinforcing its traditionally heavy reliance upon bilateral approaches to Asia-Pacific security, thereby complicating the task of regional

order-building by fuelling the competitive mindset toward institution building which is currently becoming so prevalent in this part of the world. And third, by adding to an already over-crowded regional architecture even more US-led mechanisms characterized by a heightened degree of expediency and informality. In the final analysis, the net effect of any or all of these outcomes would almost certainly be an increase in the number of 'design faults' of the kind to which Gyngell refers.

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