



U.S. and Thai officers planning amphibious operations.

Asian Multilateralism: Dialogue on Two Tracks

By RALPH A. COSSA

It was not that long ago that most U.S. policymakers and their Asian counterparts viewed multilateralism with suspicion. When the Japanese foreign minister suggested establishing a forum to discuss regional security issues at the 1991 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC) his motion was not well received. The United States, for one, was cool to such a proposal. Over the last few years, however, there have been decided shifts in American and regional attitudes toward, as well as support for, multilateral security initiatives. On the U.S. side, the first clear signal came in 1993 during Senate confirmation hearings for the post of Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs when the nominee, Winston Lord, identified an enhanced multilateral security dialogue as one of ten administration priorities for Asia.

Previously support had arisen in ASEAN, and particularly on the part of the Philippines, for introducing security issues into PMC deliberations. The way was eventually cleared at the 1992 PMC in Manila when a joint statement was issued on the peaceful settlement of territorial disputes involving the Spratly Islands which are claimed in their entirety by both China and Taiwan and partially by Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

Regional nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), many of which have close government affiliations, were also calling for greater multilateral security dialogue at official and NGO levels. Moreover, in 1991–92, a consortium of institutes that focus on security and international affairs in the ASEAN region collaborated with similar organizations in the United States, Japan, and Korea to promote official and nongovernmental security dialogue which set the stage for

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both the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

Given this groundswell of support, the Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa called for a meeting similar to that proposed in 1991 when he visited Bangkok two years later. President Bill Clinton iced the cake when he embraced the idea of multilateral security dialogue in Asia, referring to it as a pillar of his vision for a new Pacific community

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during a trip to Japan and South Korea. This change in attitude was solidified at the 1993 PMC when participants met informally with the

representatives of China, Russia, Vietnam, and other PMC observers. The group decided that they would reconvene the following year in the precedent-setting ARF.

It is important to note that the President, among others, has stressed that Asian multilateral security initiatives must build on, and remain compatible with, the enduring bilateral relationships that continue to serve Asian peace and stability. There seems to be a clear consensus not only in Washington but among officials across Asia that to be effective multilateral initiatives should build on and not seek to replace existing relationships. Nonetheless, there is growing sentiment that the time is right to seize the opportunities that complementary, multilateral security initiatives hold.

Military/Security Initiatives

This is not to imply that multilateral security arrangements are totally new to Asia. Many have been attempted, a significant number under American sponsorship. Some, like the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), could not stand the test of time. The failure of these pacts may have heightened skepticism of multilateral security alliances in South and Southeast Asia. The backing of Asian multilateral initiatives by the Kremlin during the Cold War—seen as thinly-veiled attempts to weaken American influence and gain Soviet footholds in

Asia—also added to earlier cautious approaches to multilateral security initiatives both in Washington and in the capitals of the region.

On a positive note, however, other less ambitious multinational efforts have been silently making headway for decades. The Five Power Defense Arrangement (FPDA), for instance, which links Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United Kingdom, has been in effect for more than twenty years and helps promote understanding, trust, and complementarity among Asian and Western nations. In addition, it offers indirect linkages, via the Australian connection, between the United States and the ASEAN members of FPDA.

Regional militaries have often taken the lead in multinational efforts thanks to the success of programs promoted by our Armed Forces. The Pacific Armies Senior Officer Logistics Seminar (PASOLS), for instance, created by the U.S. Army in 1971, annually brings together officers from more than twenty countries to discuss common logistics matters as well as combined operations and training. Similarly, the Pacific Armies Management Seminar (PAMS), begun in 1978, is a forum for senior officers from more than thirty nations to discuss military management problems. Recent agendas of PASOLS and PAMS meetings have focused on international peacekeeping and disaster relief, operational areas apropos to multinational efforts.

These initiatives have also provided a comfortable venue for officers from China, Russia, Japan, and India, among others, to interact with counterparts from other countries that they would find it politically difficult, if not impossible, to meet on a bilateral basis. Such confidence-building measures have also enabled proposals emanating from the ASEAN PMC, ARF, and several NGOs for a more structured multilateral forum for talks among defense officials and military officers.

Political/Economic Activities

Multilateral mechanisms can serve as building blocks for more ambitious Asian multilateral initiatives. While security-oriented endeavors have proliferated since 1991, they are complemented by a wide range of multilateral economic activities that also continue to flourish in the region.

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U.S. Navy

Japanese destroyer *Sawakaze* underway in Pearl Harbor.

the most successful practical examples of Asian multilateral cooperation. Through its various mechanisms and close affiliation with think tanks in the region, ASEAN has helped lay the basis for several of the most promising emerging multilateral activities.

Emerging Security Mechanisms

At the official level ARF convened its inaugural meeting in Bangkok in July 1994 which brought together ministers from all six ASEAN members (namely, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) with their dialogue partners (Australia, Canada, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, the United States, and European Union) and other regional players (China, Russia, and Vietnam, plus Papua New Guinea and Laos). The meeting issued a final communiqué that underscored a commitment "to foster the habit of constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern" in order to make "significant efforts toward confidence building and security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region." Ministers agreed to convene annually with the next meeting scheduled for this coming summer in Brunei.

ARF is particularly suited to serve as the consolidating and validating instrument behind the many security initiatives proposed by governmental and NGO sessions in recent years. Its support of ideas such as an arms register, exchanges of unclassified military information, maritime security cooperation, preventive diplomacy, and other confidence-building measures should generate more support for both official and nongovernmental efforts to develop innovative measures for dealing with sensitive security issues.

The most promising mechanism at the NGO level is CSCAP, which links regional security-oriented institutes and, through them, broad-based committees comprised of academics, security specialists, and former and current foreign and defense ministry officials. Committees have been formed in Australia, Canada, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and the United States as well as the European Union. North Korea, India, Russia, and Vietnam, among

Of particular importance is the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum that links 18 regional economies. While aimed at managing the ramifications of growing interdependence, it also has significant political and security consequences. While few support adding security topics to the APEC agenda, the fact that the 1993 and 1994 APEC meetings were conducted by heads-of-state gave a political-security dimension to the organization. The most important outcome of these meetings, like other dialogues, may be the process itself since exchanges promote understanding that often results in reducing the risk of conflict.

Another multinational organization with economic foundations has also assumed important political and security dimensions. ASEAN, formed in 1967, is one of

others, have expressed interest in joining. Given CSCAP's inclusivity—its bylaws encourage membership by any country or territory that supports multilateral dialogue and confidence-building—attempts are being made to bring both China and Taiwan into the organization.

CSCAP, which predates ARF, is now focusing on providing direct support while pursuing other “track-two” diplomatic efforts. Several CSCAP issue-oriented working groups are dedicated to topics found in the ARF communiqué. Of particular note is a multinational working group—led by member committees from the United States, Singapore, and Korea—that is addressing security and confidence-building measures in Asia.

Efforts aimed at dealing directly with Northeast Asia security concerns are also underway. Most are attempts to bring officials from the major Asian powers (viz., the United States, Russia, China, and Japan), together with representatives from North and South Korea, to discuss regional security issues. A few efforts, including one sponsored by CSCAP, include Canada as a central player. NGO sponsorship is seen as key to bringing officials from these countries together since it permits them to participate in a private, as opposed to official, capacity.

The Balance Sheet

Multilateral security dialogue holds promise but has limitations. While multilateralism may better handle nontraditional problems such as refugees, pollution, and the like, bilateralism and ad hoc groups appear better suited for traditional threats. A NATO-style alliance aimed at defeating or containing a specific threat, to the extent that it is relevant, simply does not apply to a post-Cold

War Asia. Broad-based forums like ARF and CSCAP are useful for discussing problems. They are ill-equipped (and not eager) to resolve crises once they have occurred. Institutional forums are particularly valuable as confidence-building measures for avoiding, not reacting to, crises. Ad hoc coalitions as well as focused issue- or problem-oriented groupings appear more useful in solving problems or dealing with Asian crises (as has been the case elsewhere, witness the

coalition assembled to deal with Iraqi aggression during Desert Storm).

Yet despite such limitations, emerging multilateral security mechanisms can be important as vehicles for promoting long-term peace and stability in Asia. Among their applications, they could:

- ▼ assist Japan in becoming a more “normal” nation
- ▼ facilitate greater Chinese integration
- ▼ allow Russia to play a constructive security role
- ▼ help ensure continued U.S. engagement
- ▼ assure that other regional voices are heard
- ▼ provide governments with venues to test new ideas
- ▼ promote regional identity and greater cooperation.

Japan. Multilateral security forums offer a particularly effective means for Japan to become involved in regional security in a way that is nonthreatening to its neighbors. It is unfortunate that a number of countries in the region are uncomfortable about Japan playing an expanded security role. Nonetheless, as Japan strives for normalization, many voices at home and elsewhere call for (and, in some cases, demand) it to become more active internationally. Participation in ARF and similar forums offers Japan a means to exert greater leadership in international security affairs.

This is not to suggest that Japan should remilitarize or chart a course independent from its closest security ally, the United States. Japanese security efforts, to remain nonthreatening to neighbors, must be accomplished within the framework of the U.S.-Japan security alliance. U.N. peace operations provide another useful forum for greater Japanese participation in security affairs.

China. Multilateral mechanisms are also useful vehicles for interaction between China and its neighbors. Beijing is gradually overcoming its reluctance to engage in multilateral dialogue, as demonstrated by its participation in ARF and APEC. China's involvement in a range of security-oriented forums can promote transparency in its capabilities and intentions in ways that contribute to regional stability. Should Beijing be excluded or exempt itself from such fo-

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rum there would be a tendency to perceive China as part of the problem, that is, as an adversary to be contained, which would be counterproductive. Care should be taken not to make either China or any other nation the reason for multilateral security arrangements. On the other hand, China must demonstrate a desire to cooperate with its neighbors.

Russia. Multilateral forums offer Russia similar opportunities for regional integration. The Kremlin has signaled a desire to become more directly involved in multilateral security dialogue in Asia. For example, during the U.N. Security Council debate over sanctions against North Korea, Russia proposed an international conference of

major Asian states to help defuse the crisis (thereby giving Moscow a seat at the table). Russia's involvement in the Asian security dialogue pro-

motes a degree of familiarity and respectability that also bolsters those in the Kremlin most committed to reform and international cooperation. The Russian foreign ministry has also helped form a broad-based member committee necessary to support the country's entry to CSCAP.

The United States. Organizations such as ARF also provide a framework for continued U.S. involvement in Asian security affairs. It should be noted that America's policy conversion in support of multilateralism has raised concerns among Asian skeptics over Washington's long-term commitment to the region. Even traditional Asian proponents of multilateralism, although pleased with the U.S. change of attitude, express anxiety that multilateral security dialogue and cooperation not be used as a rationale for a reduced military commitment. They are worried that Americans (particularly in Congress) will see multilateral security arrangements as a substitute for a continued military presence by the United States in Asia.

Policymakers in Washington seem to be aware of this concern and stress that support for increased regionalism is built on the premise that multilateral efforts complement, and should not be viewed as a substitute for, enduring bilateral relationships.

President Clinton has indicated that forward military presence in Asia serves as the bedrock for his vision of a new Pacific community. Nonetheless, given lingering regional apprehensions, it remains incumbent on the United States to demonstrate that its multilateral involvement is aimed at providing additional means of engagement and will not serve as a subterfuge or excuse for reduced military presence in Asia.

Multilateral forums also provide avenues for other regional actors to raise security issues of mutual concern. The capability of ASEAN to amplify the voices of its individual members further demonstrates the utility of multinational mechanisms for smaller nations. Track-two organizations such as CSCAP can also provide "benign cover" for governments to vet policies and strategies in an academic setting prior to adopting formal proposals at the official level. Moreover, NGOs can serve as advocates for the interests of nations, territories, and regional groups that may be excluded from official gatherings. In addition, nations that find it politically unacceptable or uncomfortable to engage in bilateral dialogue can interact at the multinational level, particularly in NGO forums. Asian multinational gatherings also contribute to a sense of regional identity and greater cooperation. This will no doubt spill over into the political and economic spheres, just as growing political and economic cooperation has helped advance expanded security dialogue.

The time is opportune for the United States to become more actively involved in emerging multilateral security mechanisms provided they support bilateral relationships. Efforts that build on existing bilateral relationships and multilateral economic, political, and low-key security initiatives in Asia are particularly valuable. ARF at the governmental level and CSCAP at the NGO or track-two level are especially relevant steps. Subregional groupings focused on Northeast Asia could also make a significant contribution.

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