U.S. Domestic Politics and Multilateral Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia

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Introduction

This paper will explore U.S. public and elite views of Northeast Asian security cooperation as a subcomponent of views toward Asian regionalism and East Asian community-building efforts. Public and elite attention to U.S. policy on Asian regionalism has thus far been marginal. Since the existing alliance structure has satisfactorily served U.S. needs, U.S. policies to date have been shaped primarily by bureaucratic considerations, occasionally punctuated by specific, short-term, high-level political imperatives driven by individual cabinet-level officials or the U.S. president. On the one hand, the lack of specificity in U.S. policies toward Asian regionalism facilitates the ad hoc nature of East Asian regionalism. On the other hand, there is not a detailed set of guiding principles that influence U.S. policy beyond the long-standing U.S. interest in nondiscriminatory trade access.

U.S. Public Attitudes Toward Asian Regionalism

Asian regional architecture has not garnered much public or media attention in the United States. But specialists among U.S. elites have followed these developments with some measure of interest and have developed views on these issues. There are four main explanations for U.S. disinterest and/or ignorance regarding the development of Asian regionalism.

First, rhetoric from the 2008 political campaign suggests that America’s most in-depth experiment with regionalism, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), is poorly understood and still contested within the United States. Over fifteen years after NAFTA was ratified, the United States and Mexico have still not worked out reciprocal arrangements that would allow Mexican trucks to haul goods on U.S. highways. According to a Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA) poll in 2004, U.S. attitudes toward NAFTA are mixed. Most Americans see NAFTA as “good” for the Mexican economy and U.S. companies, consumers, and living standards, while a clear majority of Americans see NAFTA as “bad” for job creation, security, and the environment in the United States.

Because of NAFTA, many Americans associate North American regionalism with globalization, which they in turn associate with outsourcing and the violation of sovereignty. Thus, regionalism’s association with globalization may inhibit U.S. support for regionalism, both in the context of North America and more broadly.

But NAFTA does not have a security dimension and so sheds little light on security multilateralism. The United States is a member of the Organization of American States (OAS), the premier inter-American political grouping, but there have been few opportunities for the U.S. public to see the OAS in action. On those occasions where the OAS has taken a leading role in facilitating conflict management, it has helped take those conflicts out of the daily newspapers, further obscuring OAS successes (while OAS failures mean that Latin American conflicts remain in the media spotlight). Public opinion has had a limited role in U.S.-Latin American policymaking due to a lack of U.S. public awareness of (and interest in) the region.

Americans do not spend much time thinking about regionalism in Europe either, though they have been generally comfortable with the development of regional European institutions. In recent years, Americans have shown more positive attitudes toward the European Union, with favorable views rising from 42 percent to 53 percent between 2006 and 2007. But such ratings remain low compared to the worldwide trend. The United States is a member of the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), but this grouping and its functions are quite obscure to the U.S. public because its many small successes in conflict prevention are overshadowed by areas beset by chronic troubles, such as Bosnia, Chechnya, and Kosovo.

Americans have also been comfortable with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a multilateral security institution in which the United States plays an active role. Engagement with
Europe through NATO is important (but perhaps underappreciated by the U.S. public, judging by the fact that the sixtieth anniversary of NATO’s founding recently passed with little attention from the U.S. media). Public opinion polling sponsored by the German Marshall Fund shows that NATO still has strong support from the U.S. public, with 60 percent of Americans categorizing NATO as essential to U.S. security as of 2007.6

The CCGA, which has conducted the most extensive public opinion polling on U.S. attitudes toward Asia, takes up regionalism only indirectly in its regular surveys, and primarily through the lens of economic regionalism. The idea of an East Asian community has not stimulated much public debate or even a public reaction in the United States. Kishore Mahbubani’s *The New Asian Hemisphere* provokes East Asia specialists in the United States, but has hardly captured the attention of the U.S. public.7 Debates over Asian regionalism and U.S. policy toward it have engaged a relatively narrow subsection of the Asia policy community. This issue has only sporadically drawn the interest of U.S. strategic thinkers across the range of foreign policy areas.

Second, the lack of U.S. attention to Asian regionalism may be explained by the fact that the majority of Americans still do not identify themselves as part of Asia. Most Americans still identify more closely with Europe than Asia by a wide margin and therefore do not feel much of a stake in the development of Asian regionalism (other than the desire to ensure that such regionalism does not exclude the United States). When asked to what extent the United States shares similar values and a way of life with specific Asian countries, 58 percent of Americans chose to a little extent or to no extent with China, 38 percent with Japan, and 61 percent with South Korea.8 These answers did not explicitly mention Asian regionalism, but they did indirectly show that Asian regionalism has not been a high priority for the U.S. public.

Third, the existing hub-and-spokes alliance in Asia has served U.S. interests well to date. The original plan in the Cold War was to have a collective-security mechanism in Asia, but circumstances at the time and the relative weakness of Asian partners prevented the establishment of such a mechanism. Since then, little has gone wrong in Asia that would appear to require institutional restructuring, and the U.S. public has not given much thought to Asian regional architecture. One way to characterize the primary attitude of most Americans toward a new Asian security systems is, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Not many people wonder why the United States has a hub-and-spokes alliance in Asia and a collective-security structure in Europe.

A fourth reason U.S. support for regionalism is low is U.S. distrust of China’s intentions. In the minds of many Americans, bilateral alliances constitute an effective hedge against an uncertain future. Seventy percent of Americans are concerned that China could become a future military threat, suggesting that there are limits to the effectiveness and desirability of a cooperative-security approach in Asia. A CCGA poll revealed that respondents from most countries thought China would be the leader of Asia in ten years, but respondents from each country were uncomfortable with the idea of China assuming such a leadership role.9

**U.S. Elite Attitudes toward Asian Regionalism**

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) conducted a rare survey of Asian and U.S. security analysts in 2008. The survey revealed that U.S. elites showed the least enthusiasm for the idea of an East Asian community, although they did offer some support for the idea.10 Compared to their Asian colleagues, U.S. elites were primarily interested in the promotion of defense cooperation in Asia. In terms of national priorities, U.S. respondents attached the most importance to preventing conflict, promoting human rights, and strengthening domestic political institutions, and showed the least interest in prioritizing regional identity and developing common diplomatic priorities.

This survey showed that U.S. elites tend to perceive national and global tools (versus regional or
multilateral tools) as best suited to address specific needs. The United States views its own military capacity as the critical factor in preventing a direct attack in the next decade. Notably, the Six Party Talks were rated highly as the most effective mechanism for dealing with nonproliferation issues on the Korean peninsula, but most other regional groupings did not fare well in the estimation of this limited sample of elites.

U.S. elites in the CSIS poll want to promote democracy and human rights more than elites in other Asian countries, while elites from Asian developing countries (such as India and Indonesia) are interested in regionalism as a tool for promoting good governance. Elites across Asia see regionalism as a vehicle for confidence-building, but not for the promotion of regional integration on the European model. CCGA polling shows that U.S.-led democracy promotion in Asia also receives a positive assessment from the broader U.S. public, with over 68 percent rating U.S. efforts as very or somewhat positive.

The CSIS analysis provides a picture of the vacuum that any regional institution must fill to be considered effective. Moreover, the poll results suggest that it will be some time before cooperative-security options decisively replace alliances as the cornerstone for regional security in Northeast Asia. However, the survey also confirms the Asian desire to work on community-building, and suggests that this is an effort that Americans are willing to accept but unlikely to lead. Moreover, the poll reveals that Asians perceive the United States as an important and necessary partner in Asia. But it is hard to say from the survey results whether desires for the United States to be involved are due to an Asian belief that the United States is an essential part of the fabric of an East Asian community or whether they are due to lingering anxieties about the implications of an Asia in which China is the potentially dominant actor.

U.S. Bureaucratic/Political Interests and Policies Toward Asian Regionalism

U.S. attitudes are relatively passive toward Asian regionalism, so America’s Asia policy is shaped by bureaucratic forces within the U.S. government. These bureaucratic approaches are occasionally framed by individual initiatives from senior political officials.

The tendency among U.S. government officials is to think from the perspective of a superpower about how regional forums can be used to support global objectives. There is relatively little incentive to think about specific regions in and of themselves. Regional bureaus within the U.S. State Department are one prism through which U.S. policy initiatives are shaped, but a panoply of functional interests weaken the role of regional bureaus, and there is no high-level political interest in Asian regionalism built into the structure of the U.S. government. Even the respective definitions of East Asia that have been used to constitute those regions differ from department to department.

As a result, U.S. performance in Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings over the past two decades has been primarily ad hoc, utilitarian, or instrumental. After President William Clinton hosted APEC in the United States in 1993, the United States saw APEC primarily as a way-station in building support for its own global objects. The Bogor Declaration suggested that APEC could be used to press a liberal trade agenda, and since then, APEC has been a useful stepping stone in trade negotiations. When necessary, APEC has also been a forum to address regional instability (for instance, in East Timor in 1998) or to address global terrorism (i.e., in Shanghai in 2002).

But the Clinton administration did not invest in APEC to any significant degree as an end in and of itself. And this is despite the fact that APEC has generated sufficient institutional momentum to create an ambassador-level position within the State Department. Any expectations Asians may have had that the United States would pursue APEC or the development of an East Asian community as an end rather than as a means were inevitably disappointed. APEC has not mobilized U.S. officials in its own right.
After the Doha round stalled, the United States had more trouble using APEC to promote its liberal trade objectives. As APEC’s momentum flagged and the U.S. became preoccupied with Iraq, some analysts saw efforts to create new Asian forums—like the EAS and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Plus Three—as potential vehicles for China to gain influence at the expense of the United States. But competition between China and Japan over the structure of the EAS and sharpening divisions within ASEAN have limited the capacity of any regional group to gain traction as the venue for coherent collective action. APEC has been an efficient mechanism for bringing Asian leaders together to discuss issues of concern in bilateral side meetings, but the liberal trade objectives that originally drove the organization no longer provide fuel.12

In January 2005, a high-level dialogue sponsored by CSIS explored the contours of Asian regionalism, concluding that there is no mutually acceptable candidate for leadership among Asian nations, and “none would accept any of the others as regional leader or honest broker, helping the United States to retain that role.” The discussion suggested that (1) competition might be used to winnow the field and determine which institutions are able to survive; (2) multiple institutions addressing specific issues might be layered with no need for a coordinating mechanism; or (3) ad hoc multilateralism might be the most likely driver for an Asian regional security architecture.

A senior U.S. official stated clearly at the dialogue that the United States should be regarded as a Pacific power and that to be effective, dialogues must have specific objectives, as well as the means and will to implement those objectives. The CSIS discussion, and particularly the remarks by the senior U.S. official, appeared designed to send the message that the EAS needed to accomplish something to be relevant and was unlikely to accomplish anything without the participation, or at least the blessing, of the United States. But the United States offered no alternative vision or action plan for the expression of East Asian regionalism.13

The question of security architecture drew attention from then secretary of state Condoleezza Rice regarding whether the Six Party Talks might serve as the precursor to a permanent multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia. The fact that Northeast Asia is under-institutionalized is well known. Although Secretary Rice had in mind the establishment of a permanent institution designed to address major peace-and-security issues in Northeast Asia, North Korea simultaneously aided and thwarted the immediate prospect of the Six Party Talks evolving into such a role. On the one hand, North Korea had become the focal point of combined cooperation to address the intractable issues of confrontation and denuclearization in Northeast Asia. On the other hand, the other parties found that they could not meet without North Korea for fear that such a meeting would (perhaps justifiably) be perceived as a rump-session where all the parties would voice criticisms about the absent party.

At Secretary Rice’s behest, the Six Party Talks established a working group to promote a permanent peace-and-security mechanism in Northeast Asia. This working group would presumably outlive the Six Party Talks, but absent concrete progress on denuclearization, disablement, and normalization, the agenda for the working group was abstract. There were a series of discussions about the possibility of adopting a charter for Northeast Asia, but little progress was made in obtaining consensus for such a charter.

In lieu of a charter, the Six Party Talks themselves served as the venue for negotiation of the September 2005 Joint Statement which represents the lowest-common-denominator consensus among all the parties concerned. The paradox of the Six Party Talks as a foundation for a regional security architecture continues to be that without North Korea, there is no compelling agenda that will bring the concerned parties of Northeast Asia around the negotiating table—but when North Korea is present at the talks, it is not possible to have a multiparty discussion on any issue but North Korea.14

Another new trend worth watching is the impact of Japan-China-South Korea trilateral
discussion on debates regarding East Asian regionalism. This “core” dialogue complicates East Asian regionalism, while also possibly catalyzing cooperation in Northeast Asia independent of East Asia. The regularization of Northeast Asia Summits might trigger a China-Japan-South Korea free trade agreement. Or, ongoing efforts by the “five parties” to deal with North Korea might serve as the seed of a Northeast Asian security architecture. From an ASEAN perspective, this development is worrisome for two reasons. First, it splits the discussion and organizational energy of Northeast Asian countries into two channels. Second, it creates for the first time a regional initiative that is not tied to or led directly by ASEAN. Thus far, the United States has responded calmly to the development of a China-Japan-South Korea dialogue because the United States has its own active bilateral and trilateral engagements in the region.15

How will the Obama administration make its mark on the development of regional security architecture in Northeast Asia? Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg has already outlined three elements of an Obama administration strategy to manage a “post–Cold war transition characterized by rising powers and emerging transnational threats.” The strategy emphasizes sustaining bilateral ties with traditional allies; building new, cooperative ties with emerging Asian powers; and building “new structures of cooperation, both in the region and across the world which link Asia to the global order.”16 The strategy prioritizes bilateral alliances but clearly anticipates reaching out to rising powers and utilizing regional cooperation structures to buttress the goals of effective alliance management and new forms of engagement.

But it is not yet clear where the Obama administration will direct its energies in practical terms as it relates to Asian regionalism, since there are a variety of initiatives vying to capture the attention and effort of the administration. Early discussions about the possibility of establishing a U.S.-Japan-China trilateral dialogue appear to have foundered on Chinese concerns regarding North Korea’s views of the talks and on South Korea’s continued opposition to such a forum. Even director-general-level policy talks could not be initiated in the spring of 2009 as a result of China’s surprising hesitancy, especially since China had formally proposed a trilateral dialogue with Japan and the United States the previous year.

President Obama was the first U.S. president to meet with senior ASEAN leaders in conjunction with his planned November trip to APEC. Planning for the president’s participation in APEC itself may have stimulated further developments in the administration’s thinking regarding Asian regionalism.

Scenarios that Could Induce Greater U.S. Interest in Asian Regionalism
Clearly, the United States is relatively uninterested in Northeast Asian security architecture, but if circumstances change, the United States might contribute more actively to the development and promotion of a regional security architecture in Asia. Possible scenarios in which the United States might become more active would include the following:

a) **U.S. inability to act as sole provider of public goods could increase desirability of partnerships and coalitions that are initially alliance-focused.**

One impact of the latest financial crisis is likely to be increasing pressure to cut government spending on international public goods that do not provide tangible returns. Given the size of its stimulus and the amount of government debt, the United States will look for areas in which budget cuts will not produce immediate pain to U.S. citizens.

This trend will likely mean that the United States will not continue as the sole provider of international public goods in the Asia-Pacific region, creating greater pressures for America’s Asian
allies to help shoulder the burdens of humanitarian, security, and environmental needs. An approach that relies on a regional institutional framework would spread the cost and responsibilities for the provision of international public goods more widely, but it will also strain relations with allies who are also coping with budget cuts in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. Under circumstances that allow the United States to reduce costs and responsibilities by sharing them with like-minded partners, there may be considerably greater openness to promoting a regional structure through which contributions to stability in specific areas might be regularized.

b) Evidence of exclusionary tendencies among Asian groupings might stir backlash by the United States in a competitive Asia-focused regional network.

Another scenario might be one in which the United States perceives that countries or regional groupings in Asia in which the United States does not participate are promoting exclusionary trade policies or causing other types of problems. In this case, one countermeasure that the United States might pursue could be to take a more proactive role in promoting regional cooperation among like-minded countries to counteract efforts to exclude the United States from access to Asia on economic or political grounds. The polling data regarding Asian views of the United States suggests that this possibility is unlikely under current circumstances, but one cannot completely rule out the possibility that protectionist efforts to create trade blocs in Asia might stimulate a competitive reaction from the United States.

c) Current military alliances and security arrangements (i.e., the Six Party Talks) might become insufficient to meet pressing security needs.

The United States may promote regionalism more actively if it finds that an intractable conflict—such as the one with North Korea—cannot be resolved satisfactorily using only deterrence and bilateral talks. This raises the question of how one would supplement alliances, not necessarily search for a wholesale alternative.

Essentially, the emergence of the Six Party Talks is a manifestation of such a scenario. They were based on the idea that any solution to the North Korean nuclear issue will require the collective involvement of all the parties neighboring North Korea if such a deal is going to stick. However, current developments suggest that the Six Party mechanism is a tool to be used in conjunction with alliance cooperation, not supplanting it. For most U.S. analysts, the idea of multilateral dialogue as a supplement to the alliances is quite reasonable, but the continued existence of conflicting strategic aims among relevant parties in the region suggests that any idea of abandoning the alliances in favor of a multilateral security mechanism is implausible.

d) Systemic changes and the development of common values in China might enable the United States to embrace collective security in Asia.

One of the main obstacles to the development of a multilateral security architecture is connected to regime differences between China and North Korea, on the one hand, and Japan, South Korea, and the United States on the other. If China’s political system were to liberalize and democratize, there would at least be the basis for greater “like-mindedness” in approach that might justify deeper exploration of cooperative security arrangements.

For many observers, change in China’s political system would be a necessary condition for more active promotion of a security community in Northeast Asia, but it may or may not be sufficient,
depending on the posture and intentions of a Chinese leadership that quite possibly could find itself at the mercy of a more vibrantly nationalist and expressive Chinese populace. One might feel that one has already had a glimpse at this set of possibilities in watching the Chinese government managing expressions of Chinese nationalism in conjunction with the international Olympic torch run in the run-up to the Beijing Olympic games. China’s adoption of a liberalized and competitive democratic system is a potential game-changer that might possibly open a wider range of possibilities for Asian regional security architecture.

e) Changes in the global economic structure could lead the United States to embrace multilateral cooperation in Asia.

A final possibility that might lead to greater U.S. interest in Asian multilateral architecture, at least on the economic side, might involve a shift in the international center of economic power from the United States to China. Recent developments related to a prospective International Monetary Fund (IMF) reserve currency suggest that such discussions are premature, but the fact that a Chinese central bank governor raised the idea suggests a useful thought exercise: If Beijing is the holder of financial power (or the market of last resort) and the U.S. dollar no longer serves as a de facto global reserve currency, what would the implications be for U.S. attitudes toward regional cooperation and economic interdependence in East Asia? Would the United States be more eager to assure its place at the table in a Northeast Asian–based economic cooperation framework? If China were to hold such economic power as leverage over the United States, what sorts of new pressures might it be possible for China to apply to America’s Asian security alliances?

Generally speaking, economic dependency has not led to enhanced political or security leverage on specific economic issues, but China’s assumption of a central role in the global economy—if it were to occur—might well be sufficiently transformational that there could be follow-on ramifications in the political and security sphere that would not only affect U.S. alliances but also make active U.S. participation in a new Asian multilateral structure necessary.

Conclusion

The United States maintains an ambivalent and detached attitude toward efforts to build multilateralism in Northeast Asia. Public opinion in the United States on issues related to Asian regionalism is unformed, and elite opinion is essentially satisfied with the status quo. Thus, there is little motivation on the part of the United States to seek alternative security structures in Northeast Asia. The idea of East Asian community is acceptable to the United States, but there is little appetite in the United States to lead such a project. At the same time, a mutually acceptable alternative leadership capable of shepherding such a project has not yet emerged. Moreover, there is little incentive on the part of the United States to pursue an alternative that would compete with or diminish the current alliance structure. But it is becoming clear that alliances alone are insufficient (albeit necessary) to address critical Asian security issues effectively. Multilateral cooperation is proceeding in various forms that are neither challenging to U.S. interests nor a U.S. priority.
Endnotes


5. Terrance Hopmann, Testimony before the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Helsinki Commission Hearing on “U.S. Policy toward the OSCE,” November 16, 2001, http://www.csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewWitness&amp;ContentRecord_id=216&amp;ContentType=D&amp;ContentRecordType=D&amp;ParentType=H&amp;CFID=18849146&amp;CFTOKEN=53.


