

Asia-Pacific Security: Community, Concert or What?

by Amitav Acharya

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A new Asia Pacific regional grouping is being debated as a direct consequence of developments in Asia-Pacific diplomacy around the Australian proposal for an Asia Pacific community (APc) and the emergence of the G20 global forum.

Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's idea of an Asia Pacific Community, first proposed in June 2008 but revised and made more flexible since, proposes the creation of an overarching, new institution that will include all the principal countries of the region, and deal with all the key challenges – economic, security, ecological, etc. “We can no longer afford to have the interests of the region dealt with in separate silos,” he said in his opening address to a meeting of government officials and experts convened by Australia in Sydney in December to discuss the idea.

Almost parallel to the Rudd initiative, the world has witnessed the emergence of the G20, propelled by the global economic crisis since mid-2008. Depending on which region one is talking about, either eight or 10 members of the G20 are from Asia Pacific. (The number is nine if one counts “natural” Asia-Pacific countries such as Australia, Canada, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United States. The number is 10 if Mexico, a member of APEC, is included.)

At the Sydney conference, one particularly controversial idea, originally mooted by Australia and reiterated by Michael Wesley, the Australian co-chair of the conference, was that of an Asia-Pacific “concert of powers.” This would presumably bring together eight of the biggest powers of the Asia-Pacific – the US, China, India, Japan, South Korea, Russia, Indonesia, and Australia, all of which are members of G20.

According to the official Australian draft summary of the Conference, Wesley (some suggest that he was using a draft prepared by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs

and Trade) “saw the most compelling current challenge facing the Asia-Pacific as the rapid realignment of the region’s great powers. [Emphasis in original] The realignment and intersecting interests of the five great powers was potentially a combustible mix and all regional countries had an interest in its management.” To address this development, he “was attracted to the idea of a concert of powers, including smaller states as well as the great powers.”

This idea ran into particularly vocal opposition from Singapore, which felt smaller Southeast Asian countries such as itself would be marginalized in such a system. According to Singaporean diplomat Tommy Koh, “The idea to replace ASEAN with a G8 of the Asia Pacific is both impractical and a violation of the Pacific ethos of equality and consensus.” Koh argued that there was nothing wrong with the region’s current multi-layered or “multiplex” system, which also existed in Europe. (Koh’s speech was drafted even before Wesley made his sympathy for an Asia-Pacific “concert of powers” known at the end of the conference. His Singaporean colleague, Simon Tay, who used the term “directorship” to describe the concert, joined in: “there is, in my view, a strong case against – not for – a non-inclusive fora among the major powers to seek to direct events in all fields.”

The idea of a concert is not new. US scholar and former State Department official Susan Shirk in an essay in 1997, and this writer in an article in *Survival* in 1999, examined the idea of an Asia-Pacific and an Asian Concert respectively. I argued, and still hold, that while a concert recognizes the de facto inequality of nations and is useful in regulating relations among the great powers themselves, it is likely to fail if it tries to manage the region as a whole as a great power club. The only exception was, and remains, management of Korean Peninsula security (as through the four- and six- party talks featuring the US, Russia, China, North and South Korea, and Japan). Matters have changed since then. We now have India and perhaps even Indonesia joining the club of Asian rising powers. And existing Asian institutions have not progressed as well as expected. Still my skepticism about the then or the recent idea of a concert of powers in Asia (or Asia-Pacific) reflects three concerns:

First, concerts usually come about after a great power has been defeated in a major war, as the defeat of Napoleon triggered the European Concert at the Congress of Vienna in 1814. The P-5 framework for the UN Security Council in 1945, like the League of Nations' permanent council, both of which can be regarded as examples of a Concert system, came about after world wars. No such war has (mercifully) taken place in the Asia-Pacific. Instead, the challenge today is to avert such a conflict.

Second, while Wesley envisages an Asia-Pacific concert that includes the region's "smaller states as well as the great powers," concerts by definition either exclude smaller nations or reduce them to the status of objects, rather than subjects, of a regional diplomatic system. This runs contrary to the trajectory of Asia-Pacific security cooperation, in which ASEAN countries have acted as a normative and institutional hub. Against this backdrop, Singapore's complaint against the Asian concert idea is hardly surprising.

Third, a concert in Asia may be impractical because it requires policy and ideological agreement among the major Asian powers. While some such agreement may exist among Asian great powers over economic issues, it is absent over key security issues (recent China-Indian tensions over border issues and US-China tensions over Taiwan arms sales are useful reminders). The European Concert of Powers weakened and eventually collapsed over ideological differences between Russia and Britain. This has its parallel in the current ideological divide between China and the US (and many other Asia-Pacific nations) over human rights and democracy as well as "Asian values."

The Sydney conference registered a 'widely-expressed view that it was necessary to define the meaning of "community"' [emphasis in original]. It is hard to find another concept subject to such gross misunderstanding, manipulation, and abuse, yet which is so commonplace in Asia-Pacific security proposals. The true approximation of a community, based on tight economic integration, renunciation and inadmissibility of armed force to settle disputes, a sense of collective identity, and similar domestic political systems, is an unrealistic goal for Asia, at least for the foreseeable future. But if one has

to have an organizing idea to replace the term community or concert, then I would propose the term “consociation,” (admittedly, this is more unwieldy than community or concert). This term can be defined as the political order of a culturally diverse region that rests on respect and representation for all member states, big or small, political and economic interdependence, institutional arrangements, and the cooperative attitudes of elites/leaders reconciling their parochial national thinking with the regional common purpose.

A consociation does not require ideological convergence or collective identity, the prerequisite of a community. Unlike a concert, it calls for power sharing, as opposed to power balancing. In a consociation, the stronger members/groups of a society – domestic or international – show tolerance for the interests and wishes of weaker groups. In consociational political orders, examples of which can be found in the domestic political systems of Switzerland, Austria, Canada, India, and Malaysia, weaker groups are not ignored or marginalized but respected and represented in the councils of decision-making.

While a measure of understanding among the great powers in Asia is necessary and indispensable to the region’s stability, it is not clear whether such an understanding would come about through a concert system, in the absence of the neutral and moderating influence of existing institutions that are good examples of Asia’s evolving consociational regional order. It is perhaps better to strengthen than displace them.

Amitav Acharya is a Visiting Senior Fellow at Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. This piece appeared in the Pacific Forum CSIS PacNet on 12 March 2010.