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Southeast Asia

BIPOLARITY AND THE FUTURE OF  
THE SECURITY ORDER IN EAST ASIA

WILLIAM TOW

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
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# Trends in Southeast Asia

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# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# Bipolarity and the Future of the Security Order in East Asia

By William Tow

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ASEAN is in danger of becoming marginalized as East Asian security becomes increasingly shaped by such volatile flashpoints as a nuclear North Korea and a South China Sea increasingly dominated by quarrels over sovereignty and maritime security.
- Accordingly, the notion of “ASEAN centrality” is now being seriously challenged and is unlikely to prevail against the growing bipolar security environment shaped by China and the United States.
- ASEAN and other Asia-Pacific states could gravitate toward one of five alternative order-building scenarios:
  - (i) A Sino-American condominium that defines and accepts each other’s geopolitical sphere of influence;
  - (ii) The replacement or substantial revision of the United States’ bilateral alliance system with the expansion of multilateral norms and instrumentalities;
  - (iii) The gradual predominance of an “Asia for Asians” concept led by China but endorsed by a substantial number of Southeast Asian states;
  - (iv) Effective balancing and hedging by smaller states and “middle powers”, leading to eventual great power acceptance of a regional power equilibrium;
  - (v) An intensification of regional “community building” via an amorphous but wide-ranging series of economic, ideological and strategic compromises to make war unthinkable and to strengthen regional interdependence.
- However, none of these five scenarios is likely to predominate in a literal sense. Instead, the “realist” explanation for understanding

security in the region is the most accurate forecast for understanding an East Asian security environment that is becoming increasingly disorderly.

- ASEAN can still play a constructive — if not central — role in shaping East Asia's strategic environment by working with China and the United States to strengthen confidence-building in regional security politics and to encourage their respect for strategic constraint.

# Bipolarity and the Future of the Security Order in East Asia

By William Tow<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Not long after the Cold War, Aaron Friedberg, a prominent American representative of the realist outlook on international security, argued that a “new multipolar sub-system” was beginning to emerge in East Asia after the Cold War, making that region “ripe for rivalry”.<sup>2</sup> Among other impediments to regional stability, he argued that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was no more than a “loose collection of the region’s less powerful states” with no real legacy of cultural identity or institutional collaboration. Friedberg concluded that, unlike in Europe, the type of institutionalism ASEAN designed to mitigate Asian tensions comprised “a very thin gruel indeed”.<sup>3</sup> This relatively dour outlook was contested at the time, not only within ASEAN but also by those who credited that organization as representing a more promising trend in Asian stability and order-building.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) convened its inaugural meeting in July 1994 as an extension of the ten ASEAN members’ annual dialogue with ten external powers, including those pan-regional “great powers” nominally recognized as shaping Asia’s balance of power: the United States (U.S.), the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Japan, and India.

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<sup>2</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, “Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia”, *International Security* 18, no. 3 (1993–94).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

ASEAN's initiation of the ARF constituted an effort to diversify rather than completely negate the U.S. postwar bilateral alliance network. The latter had long dominated Asia-Pacific security politics but Washington was gradually realizing the value of supporting new multilateral security initiatives as an effective supplement to its bilateral alliances.<sup>4</sup> The ARF embodied, soon after it was created, an effort to impose a distinct 'Asia-Pacific Way' as the preferred avenue for pursuing overall regional-order building, as Amitav Acharya noted.<sup>5</sup> He further observed that Southeast Asia's cultivation of pan-Asian regionalist discourses in the 1950s — with their emphasis on sovereign inviolability and their rejection of formal NATO-like regional collective defence arrangements — was a uniquely Southeast Asian sub-regional pathway for shaping Asian security politics. Northeast Asia — constrained by great power geopolitics — could not replicate this approach.<sup>6</sup> Over time, and for their own diverse reasons, the region's great powers gradually came to accept the principle of "ASEAN centrality" for underpinning Southeast Asian security.

More than twenty years after the ARF's founding, the ASEAN centrality approach as the best means for pursuing regional order-building is being seriously questioned. Realist critics have reiterated Friedberg's original assertion that growing strategic competition emanating from an increasingly multipolar Asia-Pacific security environment and especially

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<sup>4</sup> See Winston Lord, "Confirmation Hearing", Assistant Secretary-designate for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, D.C., 31 March 1993, 1997–2001 <[state.gov/www/regions/eap/930331.html](http://state.gov/www/regions/eap/930331.html)>. Lord listed "(d)eveloping multilateral forums for security consultations while maintaining solid foundations of our alliances" as one of the top ten US foreign policy goals for the Asia-Pacific region.

<sup>5</sup> Amitav Acharya, "Ideas, Identity, and Institution-Building: From the 'ASEAN Way' to the Asia-Pacific Way?", *Pacific Review* 10, no. 3 (1997): 324.

<sup>6</sup> Amitav Acharya, "Regional Institutions and Asian Security Order: Norms, Power, and Prospects for Peaceful Change", in *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features*, edited by Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 216–17.

that intensifying between the United States and China, has overwhelmed ASEAN. They posit that in this environment ASEAN has little or no ability to delineate credible rules or norms of great power behaviour in East/Southeast Asia or to mitigate the roles of power and force in that part of the world.<sup>7</sup> They point to the ARF as doing nothing more than deliberating non-traditional security issues and defending a “toothless declaration” about the need to observe a code of conduct in the South China Sea at a time when China’s unprecedented strategic assertiveness is threatening to create a geopolitical *fait accompli* of Chinese dominance. ASEAN’s expansion in membership, its member-states’ growing preoccupation with their own internal politics and the noticeable lack of long-term relationships between many of ASEAN’s current national leaders, as compared to previous generations, further cripple efforts to breathe life into Southeast Asia’s community-building initiatives. In the words of one particularly harsh detractor, “ASEAN centrality ... look(s) distinctly faint”.<sup>8</sup>

The key policy deficiency resulting from this situation, according to two respected American observers, is that neither ASEAN nor any other regional actor has “offer(ed) a viable middle ground between the current U.S.-centric [alliance] architecture and [Chinese President] Xi Jinping’s call for a new [regional] security architecture of ‘Asia for Asians’”.<sup>9</sup> If this assessment is correct, the Asia-Pacific will indeed continue to evolve

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, David Martin Jones, Michael Lawrence, Rowan Smith, and Nicholas Khoo, *Asian Security and the Rise of China: International Relations in an Age of Volatility* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013); Evelyn Goh, “ASEAN-led Multilateralism and Regional Order: The Great Power Bargain Deficit”, *The Asian Forum* (Special Forum), 23 May 2014 <[www.theasianforum.org/asean-led-multilateralism-and-regional-order-the-great-power-bargain-deficit/](http://www.theasianforum.org/asean-led-multilateralism-and-regional-order-the-great-power-bargain-deficit/)>.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Vatikiotis, “ASEAN Deconstructs”, *New Mandela*, 11 March 2016 <[asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2016/03/11/asean-deconstructs/](http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2016/03/11/asean-deconstructs/)>.

<sup>9</sup> Robert A. Manning and Jim Pryzstup, “What Might a New Asian Order Look Like?”, *East Asia Forum*, 12 April 2016 <[www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/04/12/what-might-a-new-asian-order-look-like/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=newsletter2016-04-17](http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/04/12/what-might-a-new-asian-order-look-like/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter2016-04-17)>.

into a chaotic and largely bipolar environment dictated by Sino-American strategic competition. Those arguing that ASEAN centrality does remain germane to the contemporary Asian security environment insist that “punitive measures and an interventionist approach” cannot meet the aspirations and order-building requirements of Southeast Asian peoples. Consensus-based decision-making must prevail because there is no other credible alternative to regional rivalries and conflict escalation. Patience must be exercised for a new set of Southeast Asian leaders to define and shape their national agendas and priorities “via non-interference in domestic affairs and flexibility in implementing collective agreements as guiding principles”.<sup>10</sup> Even realists have maintained that, on the one side and given sufficient time, the U.S. bilateral regional alliance network can respond and adapt to fast-moving changes in the Asia-Pacific security environment, engaging in more order-building while still maintaining credible deterrence and projecting effective balancing strategies.<sup>11</sup> Why could not ASEAN recalibrate the ASEAN centrality idea along similarly flexible lines? After all, as Rizal Sukma has observed, ASEAN “has managed to place itself at the centre of multilateral security arrangements in East Asia, which links the two sub-regions of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia” — a development which arguably complements the U.S. regional alliance system as one of the ‘two pillars’ of regional security politics.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, however, ongoing structural change in the Asia-Pacific’s balance of power and the risk of Southeast Asia’s marginalization in an increasingly competitive strategic environment shaped predominantly by an intensifying Sino-American geopolitical rivalry will not allow

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<sup>10</sup> Ong Keng Yong and Kyaw San Wai, “ASEAN and the EU: Different Paths to Community-Building”, *Multilateralism Matters* 19, April 2016 <[www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Multilateral-Matters-Apr-2016.pdf](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Multilateral-Matters-Apr-2016.pdf)?utm\_source=getresponse&utm\_medium=email&utm\_campaign=rsis\_publications&utm\_content=Multilateral+Matters+April+2016+Issue>.

<sup>11</sup> Manning and Prystup, “What Might A New Asian Order Look Like?”.

<sup>12</sup> Sukma, “ASEAN and Regional Security in East Asia”, in *Security Politics in Asia and Europe* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2010), pp. 109–10.

ASEAN and those institutionalists who support multilateral approaches to Asia-Pacific security the luxury of time to cultivate the diplomacy and enduring norms required to overcome what is an increasingly bipolar and zero-sum regional security environment. A major impetus for ARF's creation was the imperative to keep the United States strategically involved in Southeast Asia in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War and in a context where the long-standing American basing presence in the Philippines was about to be discontinued. This had little to do with ARF's aspirations for or concrete application to Asian security challenges beyond ASEAN's own sub-region, and hardly circumvented the reality of intra-ASEAN divisions over what "regional security" actually meant or how to achieve it.<sup>13</sup> Over a decade later, prospects are increasingly remote that ASEAN or the ARF, in their current form, will have relevance in future Asian crises that would have region-wide consequences for all of East Asia.

The Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea have been acknowledged by those analysts whose work has been seminal in Asian order-building as the two conflicts with the most "systemic impacts on regional peace and security".<sup>14</sup> Five order-building alternatives will be briefly assessed in the succeeding subsections of this analysis. Succinctly put, these include: (1) a Sino-American dominated partition of regional spheres of influence emanating from a power sharing arrangement reached by Beijing and Washington but one that is nevertheless sensitive to ASEAN and other regional actors' concerns and prerogatives; (2) a revised U.S. bilateral security alliance network that gravitates away from its original 'hub and spokes' context and towards greater compatibility with multilateral security politics; (3) a gradual evolution towards an

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<sup>13</sup> For an earlier but still highly prescient analysis of these points, see Maria Consuelo C. Ortuoste, "Reviewing the ASEAN Regional Forum And Its Role In Southeast Asian Security", Center Occasional Paper, Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, February 2000 at <<http://apcss.org/Publications/Ocasional%20Papers/OPaseanForum.htm>>.

<sup>14</sup> Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 24.

“Asia for Asians” approach led by China that may be grudgingly accepted by Washington in the face of its other global security responsibilities over time; (4) a regional power balancing scenario in which ASEAN states and middle and small powers in the region increasingly “hedge” against any great power domination; or (5) a gradual process of regional community-building already formally endorsed by ASEAN as the “ASEAN Way” in its key policy pronouncements and gradually accepted by China and the United States as the best means to achieve war avoidance while preserving their own regional strategic interests.

None of these alternatives are likely to prevail as the dominant trend in the Asia-Pacific’s security environment over the near future. The region is instead heading towards a more anarchical situation in a predominantly bipolar setting inimical to regional order-building. This setting will be dominated by great power rivalry between China and the United States, presuming Washington’s policymakers continue to view a formidable U.S. strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific as a core national security interest. This Sino-American rivalry will, however, involve a broader, more multipolar setting than was the Soviet-American bipolar competition that highlighted the Cold War. An American–Indian–Japanese maritime coalition could face off against an increasingly powerful China, with Russia intermittently supporting selected Chinese positions. ASEAN states will find it increasingly difficult to hedge between these two entities as both sides offer inducements for affiliating with them on key issues, and raise the costs for declining such affiliation. Ad hoc coalitions that include normally rival powers forming to address specific and urgent security crises are even less likely to emerge.

If the realist scenario prevails, ASEAN’s role in shaping the long-term Asia-Pacific security environment will be limited. This outcome will hardly conform to the ASEAN centrality principle reaffirmed by the Sunnylands Declaration released during the February 2016 U.S.-ASEAN summit convened in Palm Springs, California.<sup>15</sup> If realism proves to be

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<sup>15</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, “Joint Statement of the ASEAN-US Special Leaders’ Summit: Sunnylands Declaration”, 17 February 2016 <[www.asean.org/joint-statement-of-the-asean-u-s-special-leaders-summit-sunnylands-declaration/](http://www.asean.org/joint-statement-of-the-asean-u-s-special-leaders-summit-sunnylands-declaration/)>.

accurate in looking at the future of Asian security politics, the Obama administration's rebalancing policy as it pertains to Southeast Asia may be most remembered as a laudable but ultimately unsuccessful effort to sustain ASEAN centrality at a time when the region's bipolar regional security environment is irrepressibly consolidating.

## **REGIONAL FLASHPOINTS: CONSEQUENCES FOR ASEAN CENTRALITY**

In March 2012, the ASEAN Regional Forum's Political and Security Community blueprint proclaimed that ASEAN centrality could be the "driving force in charting the future of regional architecture", insuring that ASEAN's fundamental interests would be promoted effectively throughout East Asia and in the broader international arena.<sup>16</sup> The subsequent history of ASEAN's and the ARF's overall impact on broader regional and global security, however, has been decidedly mixed.

In part, this is because of intra-ASEAN differences over whether ASEAN should be a "leader and driver" of Asian and international security politics or that individual ASEAN states should act as "levers and facilitators" in promoting their national security interests within the regional/international framework dominated by the great powers.<sup>17</sup> This debate links closely to the fundamental nature of ASEAN centrality and how it might be compared to two "concentric circles" or alternative levels of policy emphasis: (1) centrality *within* Southeast Asia and major power interactions within that sub-region; or, (2) centrality as it applies to *the wider East Asian or Asia-Pacific* regional architecture. As intimated at this paper's outset, this second level of ASEAN centrality may reflect

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<sup>16</sup> ASEAN Political and Security Community Blueprint, 9 March 2012, cited in Benjamin Ho, "ASEAN's Centrality in a Rising Asia", RSIS Working Paper No. 249, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Singapore, 13 September 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Ho, "ASEAN's Centrality", p. 4.

an overreach in institutional ambition; notwithstanding intermittent ASEAN and ARF attempts to play a role in the Korean peninsula as a prime example. Yet, at its extreme, ASEAN centrality not only claims that ASEAN should be in the “driver’s seat” in Southeast Asia (a relatively defensible position) but that it should also exercise that prerogative throughout East Asia or the Asia-Pacific, at the exclusion of other cars and other drivers.<sup>18</sup>

To an even greater extent, however, the ARF’s geopolitical constraints are attributable to the sheer geopolitical realities of two great powers intensifying their own strategic involvement — and rivalries within — the Asia-Pacific. The creation of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 was arguably designed to function as a buffer, preserving ASEAN’s original rationale for creation during the Vietnam War — to avoid Southeast Asia’s balkanization as the great powers competed for access to and influence within that sub-region’s critical littorals and growing markets. Unfortunately, the ASEAN centrality formula has had little impact on the resolution of what are currently the region’s two major flashpoints: the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea. ARF formulas for implementing “preventive diplomacy”, especially as they may pertain to North Korea, have not been effective or enduring. This is the case despite ASEAN focus on and consensus about the need to address and reverse North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme. Neither has the EAS been successful in drawing China into serious multilateral security discussions on the South China Sea’s territorial disputes. Indeed, China seems to be increasingly prone to applying “divide and rule” tactics. Such tactics are intended to preclude the need to bargain with a united ASEAN front as opposed to China’s preference to negotiate with each ASEAN state bilaterally.

### *The Korean Peninsula*

The Democratic Republic of North Korea’s (DPRK’s) unbending determination to develop and deploy a formidable nuclear deterrent,

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<sup>18</sup> This author is indebted to Malcolm Cook for underscoring this point more centrally in this paper than would otherwise be the case.

and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's tendency to apply strategies of brinkmanship, have sharpened the risks for strategic miscalculation in Northeast Asia. The ARF has promoted the Korean peninsula's denuclearization. There has, since 2010, been regular participation of North Korean diplomats at the ARF's annual summit. They have occasionally conducted informal sideline meetings with U.S. and South Korean counterparts. Relatively comprehensive statements focusing on North Korean nuclear issues, inter-Korean unification talks and other developments on the peninsula are usually included within the ARF Chairman's Statement disseminated at the conclusion of each annual summit.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, such patterns hardly represent a viable ASEAN centrality role in what may well be the gravest Asian regional security crisis of our time. Some Southeast Asian observers have recently argued that Pyongyang's interest in facilitating expanded bilateral trading ties with selected ASEAN countries (Thailand and Singapore, for example, are two of the DPRK's largest trading members) could generate a "soft landing" or gradual approach for opening up and developing the North Korean economy.<sup>20</sup> Yet the value of such ASEAN or ASEAN-

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Point 13 of "Our People, Our Community, Our Vision", Chairman's Statement of the 22nd ASEAN Regional Forum, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 6 August 2015 <[www.aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/library/ARF%20Chairman's%20Statements%20and%20Reports/The%20Twentysecond%20ASEAN%20Regional%20Forum,%202014-2015/01%20-%20Chairman's%20Statement%20-%2022nd%20ARF.%20Kuala%20Lumpur.pdf](http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/library/ARF%20Chairman's%20Statements%20and%20Reports/The%20Twentysecond%20ASEAN%20Regional%20Forum,%202014-2015/01%20-%20Chairman's%20Statement%20-%2022nd%20ARF.%20Kuala%20Lumpur.pdf)>. For further background on the "ASEAN-North Korean connection", consult J. Berkshire Miller, "Leveraging ASEAN's Role on North Korean Denuclearization", *Forbes*, 23 July 2012 <[www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanmiller/2013/07/23/leveraging-aseans-role-in-north-korean-denuclearization/#5070d369201d](http://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanmiller/2013/07/23/leveraging-aseans-role-in-north-korean-denuclearization/#5070d369201d)>; J. Berkshire Miller, "When North Korea Meets ASEAN", *The Diplomat*, 21 July 2011 <[thediplomat.com/2011/07/when-north-korea-meets-asean/](http://thediplomat.com/2011/07/when-north-korea-meets-asean/)>.

<sup>20</sup> Er-Win Tan, Geetha Govindasamy and Chang Kyoo Park, "The Potential Role of Southeast Asia in North Korea's Economic Reforms: The Cases of ASEAN, Vietnam and Singapore", *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (2015), doi: 10.1177/0021909615570952.

state contacts is questionable, in view of North Korea's continued bellicosity in its nuclear politics, including the testing of a hydrogen bomb in early January 2016. Nevertheless, two days after that incident an ASEAN foreign ministers' statement was issued in response to this development.<sup>21</sup> Sceptics of ASEAN's statement argued it was far too tentative and oblique to have any real effect. They further noted that Laos, as the 2016 ASEAN Chair, preferred to issue a relatively mild response to the test (the statement did not explicitly condemn or express concern about North Korea violating UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting North Korea from performing nuclear weapons tests) in the interest of preserving its own growing bilateral ties with Pyongyang.<sup>22</sup> Tellingly, there was no mention of the nuclear non-proliferation issue or of North Korea in the "Sunnylands Declaration" released at the U.S.-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit convened in California the following month.<sup>23</sup>

A common argument relating to the ARF's founding is that the organization was created by ASEAN policymakers to keep the United States strategically active in the region. However, the Korean nuclear crisis demonstrates that far from being a "leader and a driver" in applying preventive diplomacy to the region, the ARF has struggled to even be a viable facilitator for resolving what has evolved into

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<sup>21</sup> "ASEAN's Foreign Ministers' Statement On the Nuclear Test by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea", 8 January 2016 <[www.asean.org/storage/2016/01/8Jan/ASEAN\\_Foreign\\_Ministers\\_Statement%20on\\_the\\_Nuclear\\_Test\\_by\\_the\\_DPRK\\_8\\_Jan\\_2016.pdf](http://www.asean.org/storage/2016/01/8Jan/ASEAN_Foreign_Ministers_Statement%20on_the_Nuclear_Test_by_the_DPRK_8_Jan_2016.pdf)>.

<sup>22</sup> Kavi Chongkittavorn, "ASEAN's North Korea Response Shows Need for Strong Leadership in 2016", *Nikkei Asian Review*, 19 January 2016 <[asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Viewpoints/ASEAN-s-North-Korea-response-shows-need-for-strong-leadership-in-2016](http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Viewpoints/ASEAN-s-North-Korea-response-shows-need-for-strong-leadership-in-2016)>.

<sup>23</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Joint Statement of the US-ASEAN Special Leaders' Summit: Sunnylands Declaration", Sunnylands, California, 15–16 February 2016 <[www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/16/joint-statement-us-asean-special-leaders-summit-sunnylands-declaration](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/16/joint-statement-us-asean-special-leaders-summit-sunnylands-declaration)>.

one of the two primary regional security crises in Asia — apart from providing the informal venue at the ARF summits for communicating with DPRK diplomats. Some would deem this judgement to be overly harsh, given ASEAN’s geographic distance from the Korean peninsula. In comparison, the primary mechanism for denuclearizing the Korean peninsula — the Six Party Talks (SPTs) — failed to implement the terms of a September 2005 agreement for North Korea to dismantle its nuclear installations in return for receiving fuel oil from the United States. It failed to follow through with DPRK negotiations with the United States and Japan leading to the normalization of diplomatic relations.

If ASEAN centrality were to really have the impact level its proponents envision, a more concrete approach by the ASEAN states than merely allowing the United States and the two Koreas to reiterate their respective positions at successive ARF summits could have been derived and implemented. As “the only real, institutionalized meeting point for the region’s powerbrokers” to discuss denuclearization with the North Koreans after the Six Party Talks folded in 2009, the ARF could have pressed more aggressively for a sub-committee or sub-committees to build on SPT’s legacy of confidence-building and preventive diplomacy with a mandate to explore ways of resuscitating the SPT or a similar mechanism.<sup>24</sup> Or, ASEAN could have proposed it becoming a “quasi-third party” to the SPT process to implicitly pressure for the realization of the September 2005 agreement. This would have reinforced the notion of “ASEAN centrality” in East Asian multilateral security politics.<sup>25</sup> A key condition for either approach to be realized would have been a concerted ASEAN diplomatic effort to win both Chinese and American support for such approaches. A sustained and systematic dialogue on Korean nuclear problems could have enabled ASEAN an opportunity to resuscitate at least a partial resumption of negotiations and to function as an independent adjudicator on Korean denuclearization.

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<sup>24</sup> Miller, “Leveraging ASEAN’s Role”.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

## *The South China Sea*

Unfortunately, the same kind of opportunity seems to have eluded ASEAN regarding the South China Sea (SCS). China's unyielding nationalist postures directed towards its realizing and consolidating its unilateral territorial claims in that body of water has made it much harder for those ASEAN states contesting those claims and for their neighbours in Southeast Asia to deal with Beijing. It has also complicated ASEAN states' customary preference for reaping the benefits of China's unprecedented economic growth while simultaneously retaining a viable American regional security presence against an increasingly formidable and aggressive Chinese military. If various ASEAN states are ultimately forced by Chinese behaviour "to choose" between Beijing's and Washington's diverse visions of regional security order, a revival of a Cold War-style system of containment directed against the PRC may occur. Any such outcome, of course, would seriously test Chinese ambitions to exercise regional leadership in Southeast Asia. It would also seriously marginalize the ASEAN centrality agenda as a highly tense bipolar order in Southeast Asia prevails.

The basic tenets of ASEAN diplomacy aimed towards the SCS are well known and need only be touched upon here. In November 2002 China and ASEAN at the 8th ASEAN summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, issued a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). In compliance with the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the declaratory parties committed themselves to explore trust-building measures, to observe freedom of navigation in and overflight of the SCS, and to abstain from the use or threat of force in defence of their respective territorial claims in its waters.<sup>26</sup> Over the next few years, China projected a so-called "smile diplomacy" posture,

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<sup>26</sup> "2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea", Adopted by the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN and the People's Republic of China at the 8th ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 4 November 2002 <[cil.nus.edu.sg/rp/pdf/2002%20Declaration%20on%20the%20Conduct%20of%20Parties%20in%20the%20South%20China%20Sea-pdf.pdf](http://cil.nus.edu.sg/rp/pdf/2002%20Declaration%20on%20the%20Conduct%20of%20Parties%20in%20the%20South%20China%20Sea-pdf.pdf)>.

agreeing to shelve (but not relinquish) its territorial grievances in favour of pursuing joint development projects in the South China Sea's resource-rich waters.

However, a combination of factors encouraged China to adopt an increasingly hard line posture: a perceived move by the ASEAN claimant states to strengthen their offshore military capacities to enforce what they deemed to be their exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and efforts by many ASEAN countries to "internationalize" the territorial dispute by supporting, explicitly or tacitly, the Philippines' decision to submit its own case against China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague. China's own strong preference to negotiate bilaterally with individual ASEAN sharply tested its own nationalist positions on the South China Sea.<sup>27</sup> Beijing subsequently moved to promote and enforce a "nine-dash line" of territorial claims which crosses most of the claimants' territorial claims; deployed naval and coast guard units to contest ASEAN military operations (the April 2012 stand-off between Chinese and Philippines maritime units in the Scarborough Shoal claimed by both Beijing and Manila graphically exemplified this trend); protected Chinese fishing operations in the region; and dramatically accelerated land reclamation operations in the Spratly islands chain to enhance its strategic reach and to contest traditional US naval and air superiority in East Asia.

Prospects for the ASEAN centrality principle driving future SCS developments are weak. At least two major trends seem to preclude this from occurring. First, China is moving aggressively to apply "divide and rule" tactics towards ASEAN so as to divide that organization's approach towards SCS issues. This is exemplified by China's successful effort

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<sup>27</sup> Craig A. Snyder, "Security in the South China Sea", Corbett Paper No. 3, London: Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies, King's College London, University of London, March 2011, pp. 3–4. A very useful special issue providing comprehensive background of the South China Sea issue is *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011). See, in particular, Alice Ba, "Staking Claims and Making Waves in the South China Sea: How Troubled Are the Waters?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011); M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011).

to preclude the 2012 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting from disseminating a consensual statement on the issue by leveraging that summit's host, Cambodia. More recently, China announced it had reached a "four point consensus" with Brunei, Cambodia and Laos to accept China's preferred formula of negotiating territorial differences between China and ASEAN claimants bilaterally rather than with "ASEAN as a whole".<sup>28</sup> Second, several key ASEAN maritime states (the Philippines, Vietnam and, to some extent, Indonesia and Malaysia) are aligning to various degrees with the United States and its other maritime collaborators in the Asia-Pacific region — Australia, Japan and increasingly India — to implement the U.S. "rebalancing strategy" to counter Chinese strategic behaviour and increase Chinese offshore power projection in the South China Sea.<sup>29</sup> China has given every sign it will react strongly to such US coalition tactics, accusing the US of "reverting to a 'Cold War mentality'", and dispatching General Fan Changlang, vice-chairman of China's Central Military Commission, to the Spratly Islands in April 2016 to inspect the construction of Chinese facilities there.<sup>30</sup>

The Philippines' decision in January 2013 to submit its contested SCS claims with China to the United Nations' Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague for a ruling on the legality of the PRC's "nine-dash line" sovereign demarcation which covers most of the South China Sea is particularly instructive. Manila has intermittently rejected Chinese

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<sup>28</sup> Patrick Barta and Carlos Tejada, "Sea Dispute Upends Asian Summit", *Wall Street Journal*, 23 July 2012; Nirmal Ghosh, "South China Sea consensus 'shows up Asean fault lines'", *Straits Times*, 25 April 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Javad Heydarin, "Sunnyland's and America's Pivot to ASEAN", Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 12 February 2016 <[amti.csis.org/sunnylands-and-americas-pivot-to-asean/](http://amti.csis.org/sunnylands-and-americas-pivot-to-asean/)>; William T. Tow, "US Rebalancing: ASEAN and America's Maritime Allies", *ISEAS Perspective*, Issue 2016, No. 10, 9 March 2016 <[www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2016\\_10.pdf](http://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2016_10.pdf)>.

<sup>30</sup> Chris Buckley, "Chinese General Visits Disputed Spratly Islands in South China Sea", *New York Times*, 15 April 2016.

offers to “share” Chinese-built facilities in the contested area. It insisted that if the Philippines were to enter into bilateral discussions with China on this basis it would violate the spirit and letter of the 2002 Declaration of Conduct and undermine the ASEAN centrality principle.<sup>31</sup> In reality, however, ASEAN unity on SCS territorial claims could actually be damaged by an Arbitration Panel ruling favouring the Philippines. By invalidating China’s “historical rights” premise as a basis for sovereign control of SCS islands and littorals, similar SCS territorial claims advanced by Vietnam could also be jeopardized. This would make it harder for ASEAN to sustain a unified position on the Declaration of Conduct. Moreover, any such ruling could divide ASEAN between those states wishing to seize the opportunity of a Panel ruling adverse to China to pressure Beijing into committing to multilateral negotiations with ASEAN as a whole, and those inclined to avoid alienating a China who has already given notice it will not regard any adverse Panel ruling as legitimate.<sup>32</sup>

## **POTENTIAL ALTERNATIVES FOR REGIONAL ORDER**

At present, alternatives for East Asian institution-building or security community-building (more broadly) or ASEAN centrality (more specifically) would appear to hold little likelihood to effectively deal with East Asia’s most serious flashpoints. A most fundamental concern, however, is whether such crises, if not effectively addressed, will precipitate East Asian geopolitics into a new Cold War, featuring a sharply defined Sino-American bipolar confrontation. They could, perhaps less catastrophically, come to symbolize an increasingly unstable regional threat environment with Beijing and Washington unwilling or unable

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<sup>31</sup> See Joel M. Sy Egco, “PH Rejects China Sharing Offer”, *Manila Times*, 7 June 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Malcolm Cook, “Collateral Benefit and Damage”, *APPS Policy Forum*, 31 July 2015 <[www.policyforum.net/collateral-benefit-and-damage/](http://www.policyforum.net/collateral-benefit-and-damage/)>.

to control future regional tensions individually or jointly. Regional and international security analysts have advanced various order-building alternative scenarios that might contest or preclude such anarchy. Five of the most prominent ones will be briefly discussed below before the paper concludes by presenting what this author deems to be the most likely scenario and what its emergence would mean for ASEAN centrality's future relevance.

### *A Sino-American Condominium?*

Australian academic Hugh White is perhaps the best-known analyst advocating this Asian order-building scenario. In his seminal work, *The China Choice*, White argues that Asia's best chance for peace is for the United States and China to agree on limiting their competition in that region. He posits that China must realize that a powerful and influential U.S. presence in Asia is an enduring fact-of-life; Washington, in turn, must accept that it cannot indefinitely exercise hegemonic leadership in Asia. Differences between the two countries would need to be resolved by negotiation rather than through force. Bipolar strategic competition between China and the United States would be mitigated by a mutual acknowledgement of their equality and of respect for each other's political systems and national interests.<sup>33</sup> As others assessing White's arguments attest, realizing such an agenda is daunting given differences in Chinese and American social structures, political ideology and geopolitical objectives.<sup>34</sup> This combination of factors makes constraining Sino-American rivalries and shaping a Sino-American regional condominium a highly complex and quite possibly a futile enterprise.

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<sup>33</sup> Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power* (Carlton, VIC: Black Inc., 2013). A similar argument was advanced by Evelyn Goh, "The US-China Relationship and Asia-Pacific Security: Negotiating Change", *Asian Security* 1, no. 3 (2005).

<sup>34</sup> Evelyn Goh, "Power, Inertia and Choices: Advancing the Debate about China's Rise", *Security Challenges* 9, no. 1 (2013).

There is little evidence of a Sino-American condominium emerging. The United States is updating its postwar “hub and spokes” alliance network in the region by deriving new ways of cooperating with its regional allies and partners in bilateral, minilateral and multilateral contexts via its rebalancing strategy. China is contesting this development by pursuing an agenda to replace this US architecture with one featuring an “Asia for Asians” posture via its One Belt, One Road economic initiatives, attempting to marginalize the relevance of U.S. alliance politics in the region.<sup>35</sup> China’s assertive nationalism on territorial and economic issues is currently being met by a combination of an American pushback involving most traditional U.S. allies and by ASEAN hedging tactics of moving closer to Washington in response to Chinese pressure.

It may be that a Donald Trump presidency could lead to at least a partial American strategic retrenchment from the region. This outcome would not conform with the condominium scenario staked out by White and other advocates. Indeed, as one respected Australian observer has noted, if Trump were to be elected and attempt to pursue an isolationist “America First” policy in Asia incorporating U.S. strategic retrenchment, “he would face significant institutional resistance from Washington’s national security community. This resistance would likely prevent — or at the very least significantly modify — the implementation of his drastic vision”.<sup>36</sup> Significantly, Chinese policymakers and analysts are reportedly discounting much of Trump’s rhetoric about U.S. allies and partners in Asia paying more for retaining a U.S. presence and they resent his bombast about China “raping” the United States in trade relations.<sup>37</sup> If their reading of the U.S. domestic political climate is accurate, there seems little prospect that substantial enough change in the Asian region’s

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<sup>35</sup> Manning and Pryzstup, “What Might A New Asian Order Look Like?”.

<sup>36</sup> James Curran, “Trouble at Sea for the US and its Asian Allies”, *East Asia Forum*, 19 April 2016 <[www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/04/19/trouble-at-sea-for-the-us-and-its-asian-allies/](http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/04/19/trouble-at-sea-for-the-us-and-its-asian-allies/)>.

<sup>37</sup> See David Sanger and Jim Yardley, “In Donald Trump’s Rise, Allies See New American Approach”, *New York Times*, 5 May 2016.

geopolitical dynamics will occur, at least over the short-term, for a Sino-American deal to be cut dividing the region into a bipolar condominium. However, the absence of a China-U.S. *modus vivendi* would not necessarily facilitate prospects for ASEAN centrality as great power competition would pre-empt it. As Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi reminded his ASEAN counterparts at a 2010 ARF Ministerial Meeting in Hanoi, “China is big. You’re small. That’s a fact.”<sup>38</sup>

### *Greater Multilateralism Instead of Bilateral Alliance Politics*

In existence for half a century now, ASEAN is the Asia-Pacific’s most successful multi-state institution. For much of that time, the United States, China and other great powers have been publicly supportive of its missions and objectives. Although considering its own regional bilateral alliance system as the bedrock for underwriting regional security, U.S. policy-planners have sporadically investigated how that system could integrate more seamlessly with ASEAN’s multilateral security politics. President Bill Clinton’s first term in office (1993–96) and, more recently, Hillary Clinton’s tenure as U.S. Secretary of State (2009–13) were the highpoints for American experimentation in this regard. Bill Clinton’s U.S. Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Winston Lord, was instrumental in supporting the president’s initiative in 1993 to convene a leaders’ summit at the annual Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit. He simultaneously played a leading role in transforming the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (ASEAN PMC) into the ARF.<sup>39</sup> Secretary of State Clinton’s first trip abroad was to Asia and included a meeting with ASEAN’s Secretary-General. Soon thereafter, the United States signed on to ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and

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<sup>38</sup> John Pomfret, “US Takes Tougher Tone with China”, *Washington Post*, 30 July 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Brad Glosserman, “The United States and the ASEAN Regional Forum: A Delicate Balancing Act”, in *Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific: The ASEAN Regional Forum*, edited by Jurgen Haacke and Noel M. Morada (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010), especially pp. 38–41.

Cooperation (TAC) and became a member of the East Asia Summit. Thus multilateralism became a part of the U.S. rebalancing strategy in 2011.<sup>40</sup> China likewise projected a generally positive stance towards institutionalist approaches to regional security spearheaded by ASEAN, with its so-called “smile diplomacy” reflected in its signing of the DOC in 2002. An inaugural China-ASEAN informal defence ministers meeting convened in Beijing in October 2015; Chinese officials promoted their country’s ‘New Security Concept’ as a means for replacing the U.S. bilateral alliance system in the region.<sup>41</sup>

However, both Washington and Beijing still remained strongly wedded to bilateral security approaches. President Clinton reaffirmed U.S. support for the hub and spokes network by visiting all five capitals of the United States’ formal treaty allies in the Asia-Pacific during 1996 (with particular emphasis on upgrading U.S.-Japan and U.S.-South Korean security ties). The Obama administration has likewise sought ways to reaffirm and strengthen its alliance/partner network. China insists that the U.S. alliance system in the Asia-Pacific is archaic and detrimental to regional stability. Yet, Beijing insists that it will only negotiate its own territorial differences with ASEAN states bilaterally. China has also entered into a substantial number of low-key bilateral security agreements with various ASEAN states to coordinate defence sales, military exercises and other forms of security cooperation.

Bilateralism has prevailed in Washington and Beijing, in large part, because institutionalism in Asia has not proven to be strong enough to overcome the reality that individual states’ interests and behaviour — and especially that of large states — matter the most. Put differently, John Mearsheimer’s critique of institutionalism, originally proffered at about the time when the ARF was founded, has proven to be tragically

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<sup>40</sup> Catherine Putz and Shannon Tiezzi, “Did Hillary Clinton’s Pivot to Asia Work?”, *FiveThirtyEight*, 14 April 2016 <[fivethirtyeight.com/features/did-hillary-clintons-pivot-to-asia-work/](http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/did-hillary-clintons-pivot-to-asia-work/)>.

<sup>41</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, “China Reveals New Proposal to Boost Defense Ties with ASEAN”, *The Diplomat*, 17 October 2015 <[thediplomat.com/2015/10/china-reveals-new-proposal-to-boost-defense-ties-with-asean/](http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/china-reveals-new-proposal-to-boost-defense-ties-with-asean/)>.

accurate: “institutions have minimal influence on state behaviour, and thus hold little promise for promoting stability in the post-Cold War world.”<sup>42</sup> Regional multilateral institutions can supplement — and have supplemented — bilateral relations by identifying norms and objectives to which many of their affiliates could ascribe. The Six Party Talks convening between 2003 and 2009 directed towards realizing the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula exemplified such an effort. So too did the DOC in the South China Sea. However, the ASEAN states view a continued U.S. strategic presence in East Asia as a vital balancing component required to maintain an acceptable power equilibrium in the region at a time of rising Chinese power.<sup>43</sup> It is difficult to envision how East Asian multilateralism squares with this reality.

### *Asia for Asians*

If an American strategic presence in East Asia does indeed remain a critical pre-condition for acceptable levels of power equilibrium to be maintained there, it is unlikely that China’s ongoing efforts to marginalize American power there will appeal to most ASEAN and other Asian states.

The current Chinese campaign for “leaving Asian security to Asians” is not to be equated with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamed’s quest undertaken in the early 1990s to generate a distinctly Asian approach to regional order-building. Mahathir was concerned that Western liberalism, predicated on unfettered individual rights and the embodiment of pluralism, were often incompatible with Asian prioritization of consensus-based decision-making and of the role of trust versus adherence to contractual law. Mahathir’s support during the early 1990s for the creation of an East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC), in response to his concerns over the implications of ASEAN joining a Western-dominated APEC, was one of the first expressions of

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<sup>42</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions”, *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994/95): 7.

<sup>43</sup> Evelyn Goh, “Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia”, *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007/08), especially pp. 113–14.

a regionally exclusivist orientation. It contested the U.S. preference for “open regionalism” in developing trading relationships and institutional precedents in East Asia. The momentum of the EAEC was largely jettisoned by the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis. That event exposed the dangers of relying excessively on personal networks and disdaining transparency and rules in Asian commercial transactions.

China’s leadership, of course, has found various elements of the Asia for Asians alternative to be compelling as a justification for that country’s style of hierarchical leadership and as a rationale for the so-called “Beijing consensus” aiming to combine market-based economic policy with authoritarian rule. Chinese President Xi Jinping has significantly expanded the Asia for Asians concept to rationalize a highly nationalist approach to foreign policy that rests on the proposition that non-Asian states should not play any role in future Asian order-building. The latest manifestation of this expansion was his speech delivered to foreign ministers attending the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in late April 2016. Claiming China wanted to turn the South China Sea into a “sea of peace, friendship and cooperation”, Xi proposed creating a new, exclusivist, regional security architecture for dialogue and consultation on Asian security issues “that would promote the Asian way that has been formed over a long period”. Independent observers speculated that his speech was the latest effort to deflect the impact of an expected adverse ruling against China’s territorial claims by The Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague and to refute continuing American efforts to apply freedom of passage and other principles relating to the international law of the sea to territorial disputes.<sup>44</sup>

More than a decade ago, David Kang advanced his famous argument that Western analysts were “getting Asia wrong” and that most Asian states were prone to “bandwagon” with China rather than to balance

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<sup>44</sup> Kor Kian Beng, “Xi Jinping Calls for Security Structure that ‘Suits Asia’”, *Straits Times*, 29 April 2016.

against it.<sup>45</sup> Subsequent events appear to have rendered Kang's argument questionable, at best. While the lure of aligning with China's economic growth remains appealing, most ASEAN and other Asia-Pacific states have separated their economic agendas from their security postures. They have lined up in support of the U.S. rebalancing strategy while China's current and intensifying nationalism is contested in the SCS and elsewhere throughout the region. Prospects for the type of Chinese-led regional system envisioned by Kang appear to be dim and, with this, the "Asia for Asians" model seems destined to remain marginalized as a successful Asian order-building alternative.

### *Order-Building Through Hedging?*

A similar (but not identical) alternative is "hedging theory". It anticipates that smaller or weaker states will attempt to align with great powers intermittently and judiciously to maintain a preferred power equilibrium and thus to hedge against the vagaries and uncertainties of unpredictable events and behaviour in international relations.<sup>46</sup> A key question relating to hedging theory's validity is, what or who do states hedge against?<sup>47</sup> Proponents of the hedging alternative assert that ASEAN and other middle/small powers in the Asia-Pacific must hedge between China and the United States.

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<sup>45</sup> David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks", *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003).

<sup>46</sup> Chien-peng Chung, "Southeast Asia-China relations: Relations: Dialectics of 'Hedging' and 'Counter-Hedging'", *Southeast Asian Affairs 2004* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2004); Evelyn Goh, "Meeting the China Challenge: The US in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies", *Policy Studies* 16, Washington, D.C.: East-West Center Washington, 2005; Van Jackson, "Power, Trust and Network Complexity: Three Logics of Hedging in Asian Security", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 14, no. 3 (2014).

<sup>47</sup> Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Malaysia between the United States and China: What do Weaker States Hedge Against?" *Asian Politics & Policy* 8, no. 1 (2016): 156.

The validity of this alternative was a possibility prior to China's shunning at the beginning of this decade of its "smile diplomacy" foreign policy. That was true notwithstanding continuing ASEAN and Asian concerns about the ability of the United States to sustain a powerful and influential strategic presence in their region at a time when Washington's attention-span and resources were preoccupied with the Iraq War and the global war on terror. However, the U.S. Pacific Command proved still able to deploy and sustain militarily superior offshore forces throughout Asia's littorals. This afforded ASEAN SCS claimant states, for example, to bide their time renegotiating with China under DOC auspices.

By 2016, however, opting for "selective deference" to growing Chinese power and wealth appears to be much less viable. This may be the case even for such states as Malaysia who would normally prefer adhering to a "light hedging" strategy to compensate for the inherent structural ambiguities in the regional and international security environments (as opposed to the Philippines under President Benigno Aquino adopting a clear balancing strategy by aligning firmly with the United States against China on the SCS issue and Vietnam opting for a "heavy hedging" strategy — checking China without formally allying with the United States).<sup>48</sup>

In March 2016, approximately 100 Chinese-registered fishing vessels and trawlers entered waters near the Luconia Shoals claimed by Malaysia, precipitating a strong response from the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, which was monitoring their positions. A nearly simultaneous incident occurred between an Indonesian patrol boat and a Chinese coast guard vessel.<sup>49</sup> As the ASEAN member states in "peninsular Southeast Asia" have become increasingly sensitive to what they have viewed as more aggressive Chinese behaviour, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and perhaps Brunei appear to be 'hedging' in the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>49</sup> ABC News (Australia), "South China Sea: 100 Chinese Boats Encroach Malaysian Waters, Minister Says", 25 March 2016 <[www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-25/100-chinese-boats-encroach-malaysian-waters-minister/7277232](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-25/100-chinese-boats-encroach-malaysian-waters-minister/7277232)>.

other direction — greater accommodation towards Beijing. The Thai military junta may well view its closer ties with Beijing as a logical and justifiable Thai response to human rights pressures directed against Thailand by its traditional ally, the United States. The economies of Laos and Cambodia are now highly dependent on Chinese aid and investment while Brunei has also enjoyed a recent surge in trading and commercial ties with the PRC.<sup>50</sup> Over the longer term, ASEAN would do better to avoid embracing an Asia for Asians scenario that would inevitably limit its economic and diplomatic “hedging” manoeuvrability. Sustaining its own economic growth agendas for Southeast Asia by pursuing a viable ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) will enhance Southeast Asia’s overall wealth and facilitate hedging postures.

### *Regional Community-Building Variants*

Critics of the realist paradigm’s relevance to Asia’s order-building destiny cite the growth of market liberalism and economic interdependence at the expense of economic nationalism, bilateral security politics and political authoritarianism in that region. Accordingly, while a future Asian war has not been rendered “unthinkable” (the basic characteristic of a “security community”), these changes “have [according to community-building optimists] the potential to constrain power-maximizing behaviour on the part of China on one hand, and extreme balancing/containment postures on the part of the United States and its allies, on the other”.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Liu Zhen, “China Woos Rival Claimant Brunei as it Seeks Allies Ahead of Tribunal Ruling on Territorial Disputes in South China Sea”, *South China Morning Post*, 10 May 2016. For a more comprehensive overview on the hedging dimension as it relates to China and geographically differentiated ASEAN states, see Joanna Dobkowska, “Hedging China? The Meaning of the ASEAN States’ Interests in Forging their Policies towards China”, Paper presented to 9th Lodz East Asian Meetings, 6 June 2013 <dspace.uni.lodz.pl:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11089/11271/16.237\_254\_dobkowska.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>51</sup> Amitav Acharya, “Power Shift or Paradigm Shift? China’s Rise and Asia’s Emerging Security Order”, *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2014): 158.

ASEAN's aspirations to realize the formal establishment of an ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) at the end of 2015, however, were not realized. ASEAN is credited with spearheading a sub-regional security environment which has spawned a "long peace" in Southeast Asia (no major wars have commenced there since the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality or ZOPFAN was declared in 1971). With ASEAN creating and applying various mechanisms such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), and incorporating the ASEAN Way to mitigate conflict escalation in Southeast Asia, it could be argued that this institution's "culture of consultation and dialogue" has indeed spilled over to mitigate conflict escalation in other parts of East Asia.<sup>52</sup> That said, the core attribute of a security community — a collective identity that makes war unthinkable — remains absent in the greater region.

Recent efforts to espouse the community-building alternative have reflected greater levels of conceptual and policy pragmatism by those traditionally touting the interdependence line. Amitav Acharya has presciently anticipated at least two variants of the security community alternative that warrant consideration: (1) a "consociational security order"; and (2) "security pluralism". Acharya defines a consociational security order, or CSO, as a "relationship of mutual accommodation among unequal and culturally diverse groups that preserves each group's relative autonomy and *prevents the hegemony of any particular group/s*".<sup>53</sup> "Security pluralism" — a slightly different variant — "*requires multiple conditions and approaches, rather than any single one, and maintaining a positive relationship among them*". The major conditions of security pluralism are economic interdependence, stability

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<sup>52</sup> Timo Kivimäki, "The Long Peace of ASEAN", *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 5 (2001); Mark Beeson, "Is the 'Long Peace' in East Asia Exceptional", *International Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2015); Jun Yan Chang, "Essence of Security Communities: Explaining ASEAN", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 16, no. 1 (2016), especially pp. 13–16. It should be noted that Chang is actually a critic of various security community models that have been advanced to explain what regional integration has thus far taken place in Asia.

<sup>53</sup> Acharya, "Power Shift or Paradigm Shift?", p. 159. Emphasis is mine.

in the balance of power, multilateral institutions, and ideological tolerance and accommodation”.<sup>54</sup>

Neither of these variants render war unthinkable and both require co-existence and, preferably, accommodation by all key parties. Empirically, therefore, both variants denigrate the realist emphasis on zero-sum competition — the CSO by diminishing the importance of hegemonic authority in any security order and security pluralism by emphasizing the need for great powers to exercise sensitivity and constraint towards weaker actors. The need for ASEAN centrality is evident in both models. “Shared leadership” in managing issues as they arise in East Asia’s regional institutions such as the ARF or EAS would hopefully mitigate prospects for hegemonic leadership to dominate the security order-building process.<sup>55</sup> Yet such leadership constitutes a delicate process because “ASEAN centrality should not preclude giving non-ASEAN members more voice — and hence a greater stake — in setting the agenda of the ASEAN Regional Forum and the EAS and increasing their contribution to regional equilibrium”.<sup>56</sup>

In many ways these two variant alternatives constitute perhaps the most sophisticated effort yet made to anticipate the future course of Asian order-building. Unfortunately, ongoing events in the region appear not to accommodate their basic premises. As noted previously, ASEAN has demonstrated no real willingness or capacity to address the North Korean crisis but has left this task to Beijing and Washington. Fundamentally, shaping a more stable security environment by relying on opposing Chinese and American objectives in Southeast Asia to voluntarily co-exist absent a clear mutual advantage for doing so is unrealistic. What appears to be occurring instead is the hardening of a classical security dilemma underwritten by contending Sino-American strategic interests in the South China Sea. Such a condition is hardly conducive to realizing

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<sup>54</sup> Acharya, “Building Asian Security”, *East Asia Forum*, 24 January 2016 <[www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/01/24/building-asian-security/](http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/01/24/building-asian-security/)>. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>55</sup> Acharya, “Power shift or Paradigm Shift?” pp. 167–68.

<sup>56</sup> Acharya, “Building Asian Security”.

or sustaining an ASEAN centrality in which robust institutionalism and growing interdependence are inherent preconditions.

## **CONCLUSION: LIVING WITH ANARCHY?**

The dynamics of structural change now occurring in Asia may well be signalling the end of what has been known as the “post-Cold War era”. This precipitates greater difficulty for ASEAN in its understandable effort to accrue greater economic and strategic influence in Asia’s “New Geopolitics” which may instead more resemble pre-1914 Europe but with a more bipolar framework driving its dynamics. Formal U.S. security alliances will likely still be operative but will certainly be increasingly fluid. Both China and the United States will seek out middle and small power support (or at least acquiescence) on specific territorial, strategic and trade questions, but contending Sino-American interests will ultimately predominate in the absence of an overarching architecture commanding the allegiance of all regional actors.

Under such circumstances, ASEAN will survive as an institution, functioning competently on those issues where consensus among its members can be derived in the absence of or despite contending national interests and great power intervention. In this manner, at least, it will do better than claimed by its harshest critics. ASEAN will be more than just a ‘heterogeneous group of weak postcolonial states’ maintaining stability and order amongst themselves in the face of great power competition and crises.<sup>57</sup> It will continue to be a constructive actor in promoting dialogue and negotiations through such instrumentalities as the ARF and EAS. What ASEAN will not be able to do is to apply the decisive material capacity required to effect decisive crisis management in its region. Nor can it command regional Chinese and/or American adherence to its policies if Beijing’s and Washington’s security interests and postures

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<sup>57</sup> David Martin Jones and Martin L.R. Smith, “Making Process, Not Progress: ASEAN and the Evolving East Asian Regional Order”, *International Security* 32, no. 1 (2007): 149.

fluctuate from those that ASEAN's elites or bureaucracies may favour. Lamentably, even achieving intra-ASEAN unity on the most sensitive regional security issues is an increasingly elusive prospect.

What we are left with is a region where anarchy and power will probably be shaped more by classic instruments of statecraft — diplomacy, wealth and power — and less by any deepening tides of interdependence envisioned by those who support ASEAN centrality. The predominance of power balancing over institutionalism is not necessarily a tragic outcome if both ASEAN and policy managers in China and the United States exercise leadership that acknowledges the need to recognize the value of strategic patience and restraint and are sensitive to the dangers of pursuing myopic short-term gains. Infusing designs for such restraint into the region's policy agenda does not inevitably require an institutional setting or network. Implementing such an initiative, however, provides at least an outside prospect for realizing greater transparency, strategic reassurance and mutual respect in Southeast Asia. A positive outcome of any such initiative would represent a victory for those who would shape the East Asian order-building process through negotiation and within reasonable geopolitical parameters.

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