The Role of Regional Organizations: Are Views Changing?

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In the past few years, regional institutions in the Asia Pacific region seem to have engaged in an exercise in redefining their missions and adjusting to new circumstances and challenges. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have adopted the concept of a “security community”. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is shifting its focus from inter-state conflicts to transnational issues. The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation is quietly but steadily (APEC) taking on a security role. Last but not the least, a new regional experiment, the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), has emerged as a framework for economic and political cooperation in East Asia. What are the implications of these developments for Asian security order?

On the face of it, they look like a fresh start for Asian regionalism. Reviewing these developments, however, this paper finds that the new developments do not represent fundamental changes to the workings of Asian regional organizations. But they do suggest the need to rethink the framework used to evaluate their record beyond the confines of realism and institutionalism. Realists dismiss the role of regional organizations and institutionalists judge them largely in terms if expected utility. Yet, the very fact that most states in the region have turned to regional organizations as one (if not the only way) of the ways of responding to new challenges suggests a number of factors at work, not the least strategic uncertainty, behind the continued relevance of regionalism, in spite of constraints imposed by lack of resources, persistent rivalries, and limited or uncertain political will.

The ASEAN Security Community Concept

The proposal by Indonesia in 2003 to create an ASEAN security community (ASC) was motivated by two factors. The first was the need to rejuvenate ASEAN after the setback it had suffered in the wake of the Asian economic crisis in 1997. A second motive was Jakarta’s desire, as it assumed the chairmanship of the ASEAN Standing Committee, to reaffirm its commitment to ASEAN, which had been subject to doubt by its neighbours since the downfall of Suharto.

The ASEAN Summit in Bali in 2003 endorsed the concept as part of what is officially known as the Bali Concord II. Several observations about the language of the Bali
Concord II are noteworthy. First, this is a very conservative document, in the sense that there is no significant movement beyond existing norms and approaches. The framework for security cooperation is firmly embedded in ASEAN’s existing norms. Thus, the document stresses peaceful settlement of intra-regional differences (“members shall rely exclusively on peaceful processes in the settlement of intra-regional differences”); confirms the salience of non-interference: (“Member Countries shall exercise their rights to lead their national existence free from outside interference in their internal affairs”); affirms ASEAN’s traditional reluctance to develop multilateral military cooperation: (“recognizing the sovereign right of the member countries to pursue their individual foreign policies and defense arrangements”); and restates ASEAN’s fundamental principles: (“The ASEAN Security Community shall abide by the UN Charter and other principles of international law and uphold ASEAN’s principles of non-interference, consensus-based decision-making, national and regional resilience, respect for national sovereignty, the renunciation of the threat or the use of force, and peaceful settlement of differences and disputes”). It also endorses “existing ASEAN political instruments such as the Declaration on ZOPFAN, the TAC, and the SEANWFZ Treaty shall continue to play a pivotal role in the area of confidence building measures, preventive diplomacy and the approaches to conflict resolution.”

The document does identify some new areas of cooperation, especially terrorism and maritime security. “Maritime issues and concerns are transboundary in nature, and therefore shall be addressed regionally in holistic, integrated and comprehensive manner. Maritime cooperation between and among ASEAN member countries shall contribute to the evolution of the ASEAN Security Community.” As regards terrorism, it calls for “strengthening national and regional capacities to counter terrorism, drug trafficking, trafficking in persons and other transnational crimes; and shall work to ensure that the Southeast Asian Region remains free of all weapons of mass destruction.” It calls on ASEAN members to “explore innovative ways to increase its security and establish modalities for the ASEAN Security Community, which include, inter alia, the following elements: norms-setting, conflict prevention, approaches to conflict resolution, and post-conflict peace building.”

The ASC is a truncated version of the original Indonesia proposal, which had urged AESAN to develop a variety of new institutions to promote security and defence cooperation. In the words of a paper submitted by the Indonesian Foreign Ministry to the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Cambodia in 2003, (The DEPLU paper), “explore innovative way into conflict resolution, for sharpening ASEAN cooperation in human security and defence cooperation, for building national and regional capacity in dealing with internal conflicts, and for building a more integrated security and defence institution which include among others ASEAN Police and “Defence Minister Meeting” (APDMM) and ASEAN Centre for Cooperation on Non-Conventional Issues, “ASEAN Center for

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1 This and other extracts are taken from Association of Southeast Asian Nations, “Declaration of ASEAN Concord II” (also known as Bali Concord II), http://www.aseansec.org/15159.htm
Combating Terrorism”, ASEAN Center for Peace Keeping Training.” Most of these proposals drew upon a concept paper by Indonesian scholar Rizal Sukma, who, in addition to the above proposals, had also called for an ASEAN Maritime Surveillance Centre.

While ASEAN’s adherence to non-interference might be the main reason why the Indonesian proposals did not find full acceptance in the Bali Concord II, another less obvious reason is that they rekindled suspicions as to Jakarta’s intentions, by reminding fellow ASEAN members such as Singapore of Jakarta’s aborted attempt to push for defence cooperation before the first Bali summit in 1976. In this sense, the ghost of Bali I haunted progress at Bali II. Then, Jakarta has proposed a package of measures, including intelligence-sharing, joint military exercises. In the end, The Declaration of ASEAN Concord issued at Bali left security cooperation outside the ASEAN framework.

The ASEAN Regional Forum: From “Regional Matters to Global Issues”

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the principal multilateral security organization in the Asia Pacific region, is now a decade old. With a membership that comprises all the major powers of the contemporary international system, the ARF is neither a collective security forum in the sense of the UN; nor is it a collective defence grouping in the manner of NATO. Instead, the ARF is founded on the principle of cooperative security, with its primary role being confidence building through dialogue and socialization. Its agenda was defined at the 1995 meeting in Brunei, which called for a 3 step approach: confidence-building, preventive diplomacy and “elaboration of approaches to conflicts.” Since then, the ARF has moved slowly and cautiously in pursuing this agenda. Its confidence-building measures consist primarily of non-legalistic, non-intrusive, and non-binding measures, such as voluntary statements on national defence postures, meetings among heads of national defence institutions, and exchanges of personnel in key security areas. Its preventive diplomacy agenda has been marked by debate over sovereignty and non-interference. As a result, the ARF’s preventive diplomacy role excludes intra-state conflicts, and it is yet to develop a role in dispute-settlement and conflict resolution.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks led the ARF to shift its focused form conventional inter-state confidence-building issues to cooperation against transnational issues. At its annual ministerial meeting on 30th July, 2002 the ARF adopted a series of measures targeting terrorist financing. These measures included: freezing terrorist assets; implementation of international standards; international cooperation on the exchange of information and outreach; technical assistance; and compliance and reporting. The ARF also formed an

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Inter-Sessional Group ISG on counter-Terrorism and Translational Crime (co-chaired by Malaysia and US). ARF meeting in Cambodia held on 17 June 2003 added another transnational challenge: maritime security. Reflecting this new focus, Singapore Foreign Minister Jayakumar urged the ARF to “go beyond regional matters to global issues.” “Previously, the ARF was mostly preoccupied with country or region-specific issues such as territorial disputes in the South China Sea...[now it has to handle] issues which are less country-specific and more global and transnational in nature.”

In Cambodia, the ARF adopted several measures in the area of maritime security, including: increased contacts among personnel, information sharing, anti-piracy exercises, and regional training in anti-piracy. It also adopted new measures that would enable members to control movement of extremists across borders through improved capacity to detect forged passports, tighten immigration procedures and share immigration data with each other. But as before, none of these steps call for retreat from the principle of non-interference, which remains the bedrock of the ARF’s approach to security cooperation.

The ARF has played no significant role in handling the crisis in the Korean Peninsula since North Korea had been admitted to the grouping. This remains unchanged even after North Korea disclosed its nuclear weapons development programme. At the Cambodia meeting, US Secretary of State Colin Powell “bumped into” the North Korean representative (who happened to be an ambassador-at-large, as Pyongyang would not send its Foreign Minister) and held a 3 or 5 minute (reports of the duration are conflicting) conversation, the first meeting between Powell and a North Korean official since the nuclear crisis in the Korean peninsula unfolded in 2003. Powell urged North Korea to accept multilateral discussions. In so far as proliferation of weapons of mass destruction was concerned, said Powell, “no issue is of greater urgency to us than North Korea’s nuclear weapon’s program.”\footnote{Agence France Press, 19 June 2003, (LexisNexis™ Academic).} The ARF Chairman’s statement which called for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, for Pyongyang to reverse its decision to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and endorsed both inter-Korean dialogues as well as multilateral talks involving the US and China provoked a bitter denunciation from North Korea, which said that the statement on North Korea resulted was adopted “forcibly” due to American “unilateral pressure” and “constitutes a denial of the principles of the ARF activities such as the respect for sovereignty, non-interference, impartiality and consensus, the principles of which have been maintained for the last 10 years.”\footnote{Agence France Press, 19 June 2003, (LexisNexis™ Academic).}

Moreover, the issue of Burma is continuing to be a controversial point for the ARF. Indicative of this was the fact that the criticism of Burma by Colin Powell at the 2003 ARF meeting was not shared by ASEAN, even though ASEAN itself had issued an unprecedented call to “Myanmar to resume its efforts of national reconciliation and dialogue among all parties concerned leading to a peaceful transition to democracy” \footnote{The Straits Times, 19 June 2003 (LexisNexis™ Academic).} and
taken note of “assurances” given by Burma that for an “early lifting of restrictions placed on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD members.”

Despite being criticized for its weak and informal institutional structure, the ARF has not undertaken any significant new institutionalization. At the Cambodia meeting, the Chair acknowledged that the ARF had remained a “consultative and cooperative forum and was moving only at a pace “comfortable to all.” Additionally, the issue of membership expansion is proving to be controversial. In Cambodia, India blocked a consensus move by ASEAN to induct Pakistan into the grouping.

Two new ideas may influence the ARF’s future security role. One is a Chinese proposal for the ARF to hold a “Security Policy Conference…to be attended mainly by military personnel.” The timing of the conference is unclear at this point, and this move by China could be a response to the annual Shangri-la Dialogue, a conclave of defence ministers organized by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, which China has refused to send its own defence minister because of the participation by Taiwanese delegates. A second idea is for an ARF summit to be held back-to-back with the annual APEC Summit. The proposal was supposed to have come from ASEAN, but is yet to be seriously pursued.

A Security Role for APEC?

Like ASEAN itself, APEC, created in 1989, was also severely weakened by the 1997 crisis. It has seen its trade liberalization agenda overshadowed by the proliferation of bilateral trade deals. The continuing exclusion of India is another limitation of APEC, given India’s economic potential and its growing commercial and strategic links with the Asian Pacific region. APEC has sensibly turned its attention to promoting a human security agenda and fighting terrorism on the economic front. APEC is the only Asia Pacific organization to provide for a heads of government summit. Over the past years, this has proven to be a timely and important venue for consultations to address urgent regional security issues, such as East Timor (in 1999) and terrorism (in 2001, and 2003).

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that some policy-makers and analysts have suggested a move by APEC to discuss security issues and develop a role in the management of regional order. This builds on earlier suggestions, especially by U.S. Defence Secretary William Perry at the 1995 APEC Osaka Leaders’ Meeting that the grouping might usefully discuss regional security issues. In October 2003, the U.S. National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice argued: “Just eight years ago, the U.S. tentatively proposed that APEC some day take on more of a security role and was roundly criticized for trying to move the forum beyond its traditional economic focus. Today, there is a clear consensus that prosperity requires security, and behind that

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7 Joint Communique of the 36th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Phnom Penh, 16-17 June 2003.
8 The Straits Times, 19 June 2003 (LexisNexis™ Academic).

Indeed, the 9/11 tragedy has already pushed APEC in that direction. At the APEC Leader’s Meeting in Shanghai held on 21st October, 2001, the leaders agreed on several measures, including cooperation in enhancing security at customs, limiting the fallout from terrorist attacks; enhance ports, aircraft and aircraft security; strengthening Apec activities in the area of critical sector protection, including telecommunications, transportation, health and energy. At the Leaders Meeting in Los Cabos, Mexico, in October 2002, they endorsed the Energy Security Initiative, declared support for an APEC Action Plan on Combating and Financing Terrorism, and an APEC Cybersecurity Strategy and measures to protect tourism. The meeting also issued a “Statement on North Korea” which urged Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons programs. In Bangkok at the 2003 Leaders’ Meeting, APEC recognized the danger posed by “terrorists’ acquisition and use of Man-Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS) against international aviation” and thus to take measures such as domestic export controls on MANPADS, secure stockpiles, take domestic action to regulate production, transfer, and brokering, ban transfers to non-state end-users, and exchange information in support of these efforts.

Other recent APEC initiatives that have security implications include the creation of an Energy Working Group as part of the APEC Energy Security Initiative, participation by APEC Working Groups in sealane security measures such as Sea Lane Disruption Simulation Exercise, the Secure Trade in the APEC Region (STAR) initiative which addresses issues relating to maritime security, aviation security, passenger processing, technology for security enhancement, capacity building, project planning and financing, and supply chain security. Most importantly, APEC has created a Counter-Terrorism Task Force to oversee the implementation of the various initiatives from the Leaders’ Meeting such as The Statement on Fighting Terrorism and Promoting Growth.

But a full-fledged role for APEC in regional security issues faces several constraints. In the past, especially before 9/11, critics of APEC’s security role such as Noordin Sopiee have argued that such a role would lack support among members, would be constrained by the lack of participation of non-members such as Russia (and India); and would engage members such as Chile, Mexico and Peru who are really not relevant to East Asian security. Other arguments against APEC’s security role have included concerns that it might undermine the ARF; overwhelm APEC’s already crowded agenda, and divert APEC from its core concerns such as sectoral trade liberalization. A security role would confirm misgivings about APEC’s real purpose (strategic), invite opposition from China given Taiwan’s involvement in APEC. While 1997 crisis already led APEC to lose focus on economic issues and 9/11 introduced new urgency to security issues, some of the old obstacles, such as Chinese objection, conflict with the ARF’s role, non-participation of India, an APEC non-member, remain.

Finally, the idea that adding security issues to APEC’s agenda would make China and the United States uncomfortable and was contrary to the wishes of most APEC members.
would be undermined when, post September 11, leading players within APEC perceived that they could use the institution to pursue their new security agendas.

The ASEAN Plus Three framework is a new concept that emerged partly in response to the Asia economic crisis of 1997 and the failure of existing regional organizations to respond effectively to this crisis. The APT’s membership is limited to the 10 ASEAN members and three Northeast Asian countries, Japan, China and South Korea. As such, it challenges the neo-liberal and largely utilitarian view of regionalism represented by APEC. As an East Asian framework, it is more attuned to its members’ sense of regional identity than either APEC or the ARF.

In a recent paper, John Ravenhill has discounted many of these objections. Referring to the objections above, he argues that the presence of central and South American countries is no impediment, since APEC’s Bogor principle allows it to pursue a policy goal without the support or involvement of all the members. He also contends that China’s objections about Taiwanese involvement in APEC though important has to be seen in the context that China also does not allow discuss of Taiwan in the ARF, where Taiwan is not a member. Finally, Ravenhill argues that the ARF is equally heterogeneous; and that having a high profile security issue will reenergize APEC and make it more effective.

**ASEAN Plus Three: Does Regional Identity Matter?**

The ASEAN Plus Three framework emerged partly in response to the Asia economic crisis of 1997 and the failure of existing regional organizations to respond effectively to this crisis. In an important sense, however, its origins lie in the Malaysian proposal for an East Asian Economic Grouping/Caucus mooted in 1990 by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed. The APT’s membership is limited to the 10 ASEAN members and three Northeast Asian countries, Japan, China and South Korea.

As such, the APT challenges the neo-liberal and largely utilitarian view of regionalism represented by APEC. As an East Asian framework, it is more attuned to its members’ sense of regional identity than either APEC or the ARF. Hence, Simon Tay of Singapore sees the rationale of APT as being based on “function”, “identity” and “geopolitical weight”. As he sees it, the APT reflects “a rising sense of East Asian identity”. Richard Stubbs finds the sources of APT to lie in the region’s shared historical experiences, common cultural traits, “a distinctive set of institutions and a particular approach to economic developments” and a “distinctive form of capitalism” rooted in business networks.

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9 John Ravenhill, “Mission Creep or Mission Impossible? APEC and Security”


The APT is also of considerable symbolic and practical importance. It gave ASEAN a fresh start, proving to the world that the grouping has not lost all sense of purpose and relevance stemming from its perceived failure to offer an effective response to the crisis. Moreover, the APT framework enables the pursuit of more concrete forms of East Asian regional financial cooperation, including the proposal for an Asian Monetary Fund mooted by Japan in 1997, which had been shot down because of strong US opposition. Furthermore, the framework could be an useful way to engage both China and Japan in managing the region’s economic and security problems without having to submit to the political demands of the West (such as those concerning human rights, democracy and good governance) and the supposedly “alien” modalities of multilateral cooperation being pushed by the Western members of ARF and APEC. Another potential benefit of the APT could be to lay the foundations for a Northeast Asian subregional grouping, thereby complementing ASEAN.

But the further success would require overcoming Sino-Japanese competition for influence in East Asia, and its ability to provide concrete solutions to regional problems that have eluded the other regional groups. APT is no more likely to overcome the barrier of noninterference. Moreover, some East Asian nations doubt the wisdom of a regional economic and security grouping that excludes the United States, and other Asia-Pacific players such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. But, as Ali Alatas, the former foreign minister of Indonesia points out, a significant security role for the APT is unlikely to emerge in the near future. This, and the idea of an East Asian Community “built on the basis of common values, is still a distant vision.”12 The leadership of APT remains weak and uncertain and its geographic scope contested. Japan, despite seeking the leadership of an east Asian monetary system, remains reluctant to develop mechanisms that work independently of IMF and therefore the US. “Japan wants to lead the region, but it is only able to provide hollow leadership”, is how the Far Eastern Economic Review described Japan’s refusal to allow countries to draw more than 10% of a regional credit facility with its central bank without the IMF’s approval.13 China’s is a potential leader of APT, especially on economic matters, although this is constrained by continued regional suspicions over its security role. Japan has openly called for the inclusion of Australia and New Zealand. But Malaysia pointedly and successfully opposed a bid by Australian to secure an invitation to a summit with ASEAN; and while India’s participation was endorsed by ASEAN, India remains formally outside of the APT framework. Identity politics, the bane of APEC and ASEAN itself, has not spared the emerging East Asian regionalism.

The APT is a potentially significant development in Asia’s security architecture, because of the key role of China. Through the APT, China has an unprecedented opportunity to shape the agenda of East Asian security cooperation, perhaps supplanting a weakened ASEAN that is at the same time increasingly dependent on China’s markets. China’s growing involvement in multilateralism is a welcome development, and vindicates the

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strategy of China’s neighbours and policy advocates who saw engaging China through multilateral institutions as a superior approach to regional order than containing China. China has been able to use multilateralism as a means to dampen the talk about a “China threat” and discredit containment. In return, ASEAN has gained Chinese pledge not to use force in the Spratlys and its accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

But worries remains whether China will turn its engagement in regional institutions into a lever for regional dominance. But history is not in favor of the emergence of China as a regional hegemon manipulating the agenda of a regional framework to the exclusion of rival powers. Any temptation, which may be natural for a rising power, to use the APT to isolate the US in regional security affairs and dominate ASEAN will undo China’s diplomatic gains, spur ASEAN’s opposition and Japanese counter-balancing, and doom the APT. As the fate of Japan’s pre-war efforts for a Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, the American sponsored SEATO, and the Soviet Union’s Doctrine of Collective Security in the 1970s, demonstrate, Asia has traditionally rejected any putative multilateral security structure which is dominated, or seen to be dominated, by any single power. China’s dominance of a broad regional security architecture remains subject to countervailing roles by the US, India, Japan and ASEAN. China can hardly exercise such dominance without undermining the legitimacy of its own protestations against US interference in its internal affairs, whether its “peaceful evolution” or Taiwan.

Outlook for Regional Organizations

The foregoing shows quite clearly that purpose and role of key Asian and Asia Pacific regional organizations are changing. Existing regional organizations, such as ASEAN, as well as newer ones such as APEC and ARF, are taking on new tasks and roles (APEC). And totally new institutions are emerging. But the key question is: do these changes warrant a shift in the prevailing understanding of regional organizations and their role in promoting security?

The momentum and enthusiasm for regionalism evident during the early 1990s have given way to pessimism and even cynicism. A common basis of these criticisms, whether exaggerated or not, is weak leadership (especially by ASEAN), weak institutionalization, and the continued or increased reliance of regional actors on alternative approaches, such as balance of power mechanisms or bilateral alliances and trading arrangements. Regionalism is seen at best as an adjunct to bilateralism and power politics, at worst as a dysfunctional mode of interaction that impedes progress towards a genuine regional community based on post-Westphalian principles and approaches to transnational problem solving. Indeed, the resilience of America’s post-war bilateral collective defence arrangements may be contrasted with the weakness of the region’s fledgling multilateral cooperative security experiments.

Going by conventional realist and institutionalist yardsticks, the shifts in the role of regional institutions may not be the cause for much optimism. Institutionals would judge the new roles and initiatives in terms of their utility or expected utility. This calls for pessimism; the new initiatives undertaken by Asian groups in addressing the security
challenges of the post-1997 and post-9/11 era are limited. Utility calculations linked to domestic interests (such as those favoring liberalization) are of course a key factor in the case of economic regionalism, such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (now re-envisioned as an ASEAN Economic Community). But they are less salient when it comes to security regionalism, although one cannot rigidly separate economic considerations from the desire for security regionalism.

Realists would be even more dismissive of regional organizations; for them, they are little more than adjuncts to power politics. Yet, if regional organizations are so flawed, and their benefits so limited, why do so many states in the region seek membership in them and do not withdraw when the expected benefits of membership are not forthcoming. This cannot be simply a matter of membership having little or no cost; for small states like Cambodia and Laos, membership in ASEAN and attendance in its 300 plus annual meetings is costly. Moreover, there is no sovereign state in Asia which has deliberately stayed away from or boycotted these regional organizations, not even North Korea or Burma.

So what motivates states to accept regionalism despite its limitations? One key factor is the pull of the “habit of cooperation” developed around ASEAN, which continues to exert an appeal which cannot be explained if one was looking simply at the material benefits of cooperation. Second, from the perspective of some Asian states, regional organizations do help preserve core international norms at the regional level at a time when they are becoming unfashionable at the global level. One good example of this would be the non-interference norm, which continues to be the bedrock of Asian regional groups even when it has become increasingly discredited at the international level. Without this norm, it would be hard to explain China’s turn to regionalism. Third, membership in regional organizations offer a certain degree of legitimacy and respectability to states and regimes which have been at the receiving end of criticism and pressure from the international community for their unsavory domestic practices. Burma falls squarely into this category. Fourth, regional organizations offer an avenue for states to pursue distinctive foreign policy goals which may reflect their political and ideological orientations. Witness for example Malaysia’s dogged pursuit of the EAEC concept, which reflected the ideological underpinnings of Mahathirism.

Most importantly, the desire to participate in regional groupings is driven not so much by their expected utility, but by the fear of the unexpected. Asian regionalism today, as in the past, is an insurance against strategic uncertainty. A good example is the turn to regionalism in the 1990s which was driven by concerns about a possible US military withdrawal from the region. While this is no longer an issue, concerns about China’s rising power and role remains a powerful source of strategic uncertainty which drives

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14 This point is akin to the argument by Keohane and Martin that if international institutions are so inconsequential, who do so many nations devote so much attention and resources to them? Keohane, Robert O., and Lisa Martin, “The Promise of Institutionalist Theory”, *International Security*, vol.20, no.1 (Summer 1995), pp.39-51
regionalism today. Moreover, terrorism, infectious disease and sudden economic downturns have introduced other elements of uncertainty in the regional security outlook.

Such uncertainty about existing and dominant security structures also remains a crucial determinant of regionalism. While in the early 1990s, the emergence of a variety of multilateral security dialogues and institutions offered the promise to dilute, if not altogether supplant, the centrality of America’s bilateral security arrangements, the Asian economic crisis that begun in mid-1997 put paid to that expectation. On face of it, bilateral security arrangements in Asia seem to have done a better job in adapting to the post-Cold War and post-September 11 challenges than the region’s multilateral security institutions. The US-Japan alliance has been revitalized against the rise of China and then readjusted to meet the requirements of the war on terror. This and the US-Australia alliance have been used to support America’s interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The US has enhanced its bilateral security cooperation with Singapore, securing greater access to military facilities there. Thailand and the Philippines have been accorded major non-NATO ally status by the Bush administration.

But it will be a mistake to write off regionalism completely or regard it as a spent force. Multilateralism does offer important benefits, including, as noted, the engagement of China. The fact that the US favors multilateral approaches when such approaches suit its strategic objectives is not an indictment of multilateralism, because such situations are hardly exceptional in international politics. Despite the limitations of multilateralism, however, a security order relying primarily on balancing mechanisms need not be East Asia’s destiny. The long-term outlook for America’s bilateral alliances remains uncertain. There are serious uncertainties over the future of the US-South Korean alliance, much of it due to growing domestic opposition in South Korea to Washington’s hardline stance towards North Korea. Similarly, the revival of the US-Philippines defence relationship is a move that may not necessarily survive the current preoccupation of both governments with terrorism in the south. Domestic opinion in the Philippines remains predisposed against too close a security nexus between Washington and Philippine security agencies. The US-Australia alliance remains robust, but Howard’s desired role as something of a local American “deputy sheriff” has not endeared him to the region and has alienated segments of domestic Australian public opinion which may now back a Labor alternative.

It is also important to note that America’s bilateral alliances have thrived by being adaptive. One aspect of this adaptation is their willingness to become more inclusive, and thereby narrow the political gap between bilateralism and multilateralism. For example, bilateral exercises involving the US and formal treaty allies such as Thailand (Cobra Gold) now routinely include third country participation and observation. Bilateral structures operating under multilateral norms of transparency and inclusiveness may be one of the more important developments in the emerging Asian security order.