

The Evolving Regional Architecture for the Asia-Pacific: Toward an Indo-Pacific Idea

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Abstract

Asia-Pacific security and consequent regional architecture have always posed a complicated question to security analysts and policy makers given the region's vast economic and political diversity. The rising dichotomy between growing regional economic integration and inter-dependence on the one hand, and rising tensions between the major powers and countries in the region on the other, once again raises the issue of how to manage the strategic transformations to ensure peace and stability conducive to economic development and prosperity. It appears that the ASEAN-centred and ASEAN-led mechanisms that have evolved over time can be developed to cope with "new shared interests" and "perception of shared challenges". The growing linkages between the major sea lines — the Indian and Pacific oceans — and enhanced connectivity among India, ASEAN and China are also influencing strategic transformations. Despite its limitations, the East Asia Summit may be best positioned to develop the Indo-Pacific idea.

Keywords: *dichotomy, regional architecture, strategic transformations, ASEAN, East Asia Summit*

1. Introduction

"What type of regional architecture do we mean and what type of regional architecture do we seek for the Asia-Pacific?"

This question has been on the minds of policy-makers and academia in ASEAN since the first efforts to generate a region-wide forum for dialogue on regional security issues resulted in the launching of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Bangkok in 1994. One may recall that U.S. President John F. Kennedy raised a similar question, but he focused principally on peace. He posed the question, "What type of peace do I mean and what type of a peace do we seek?" (Kennedy, 1963) at the American University in Washington, D.C., in 1963 at the height of the Cold War.

The question regarding the regional architecture for the Asia-Pacific is more complicated because it involves more than just peace. It goes beyond Kennedy's famous question on the nature of peace in the global order because this question involves addressing multiple challenges. These include promoting order and stability, managing the peace dividend and increasing the insurance against outbreak of conflict. Ultimately, regional architecture is about creating the optimal regional conditions for economies to prosper, societies to progress and human security to flourish.

This paper will attempt to examine the evolving regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific and emerging ideas on such architecture, including an "Indo-Pacific idea". It will first attempt to define regional architecture and answer the question, "What type of regional architecture do we mean?" The paper will then lay out some theoretical frameworks to analyze the region's evolving regional architecture. Next it will examine the conditions surrounding the current regional architecture and the ways forward, including the emergence of an Indo-Pacific idea. In so doing, the paper will try to respond to the question of regional architecture. Finally, within the context of an emerging Indo-Pacific idea, the paper will examine how India fits into the regional architecture of the Asia-Pacific.

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2. Evolving Regional Architecture in the Asia-Pacific

What do we mean by regional architecture, especially the regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific? In Alan K. Henrikson’s seminal work, *Negotiating Global Order: The Architecture and Artisanry of Global Diplomacy*, (Henrikson, 1996) a product of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy’s Negotiating World Order project, a significant distinction is made between the architecture and artisans of diplomacy.

“Architecture” refers to the various institutional frameworks and nature of the global system that influences the direction of global diplomacy. “Artisans”, on the other hand, refers to the practical diplomatists who influence the development and implementation of global diplomacy. The implication seems to be that the architecture of the global order and the role of the artisans of diplomacy interact with one another, influencing the course of diplomacy and, ultimately, history.

It would seem that a similar analysis could be made at the regional level. Diplomacy within the region, and the regional developments that such diplomacy generates, will depend significantly on the regional architecture as well as the policy-makers working through states that shape events through their actions. In this context, regional architecture is defined as a combination of frameworks of cooperation and dialogue, institutional arrangements, and agreements and interactive processes among states in a region that help manage relations in that region. As such, the regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific, a region traditionally defined to include Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia and Oceania would include several frameworks that are ASEAN-centered or initiated, for example, ASEAN Plus One, ASEAN Plus Three, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus and the East Asia Summit (ARF, 2007).

Other frameworks involve some or all ASEAN Member States but are not necessarily ASEAN-driven, for example, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation or APEC, Asia Cooperation Dialogue or ACD, and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building in Asia (CICA). Still other frameworks of cooperation do not involve ASEAN Member States but nevertheless play an important role in promoting regional order and stability, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or SCO.

All of the above frameworks touch either directly and indirectly on security and security-related matters. Other components of regional architecture include bilateral and multilateral security and/or defense agreements among countries inside and outside the region. The Five Powers Defense Arrangement that involves Malaysia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand is one example. Bilateral security arrangements between the United States and some ASEAN Member States are another.

Looking at these components of the regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific, one can see that the existing regional architecture has unique features. First is its immense internal diversity as depicted in Figure 1.

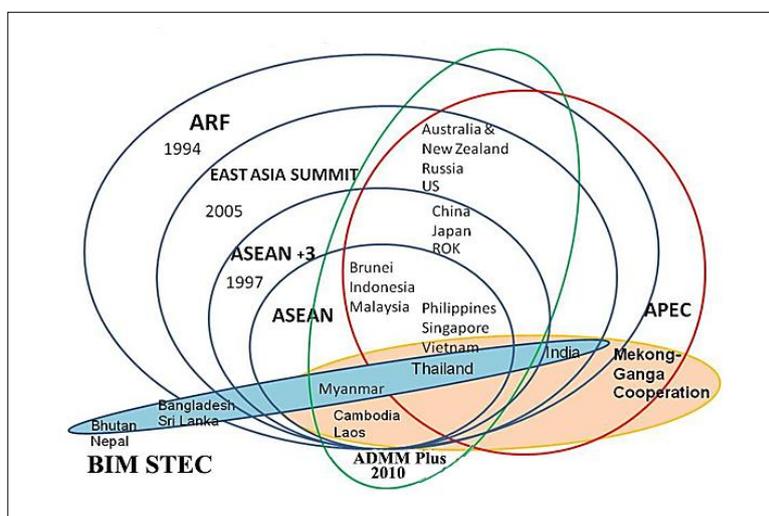


Figure 1 ASEAN-India Regional Architecture in Asia-Pacific

Components of the regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific comprise multilateral and bilateral treaties and agreements to institutionalized frameworks, looser arrangements for cooperation and dialogue fora. These multiple institutions and fora, overlapping membership and agendas, and possibly clashing interests have caused much confusion. Furthermore, supplementing this regional architecture are sub-regional cooperation frameworks with their own interests. These include the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). Generally, they seek to promote economic and development cooperation, drawing on available resources and expertise, but not excluding support from non-members.

Second is that the regional architecture has no overarching body, much less an organizational or institutional superstructure. It is a jigsaw of overlapping frameworks for cooperation based on shared interests and some shared understanding of similar norms of behavior. In some cases, albeit limited, there are codes of conduct. All these frameworks evolved over time, in response to differing circumstances and situations, rather than by design with well-laid-out blueprints. For example, the ARF and the ADMM Plus grew out of different needs: the former from the need for a platform to encourage constructive engagement of key powers outside the region with ASEAN and perhaps with each other, the latter from the need to have more concrete defense cooperation to address growing challenges such as piracy and natural disasters. Likewise, the operating environment and geopolitical circumstances that gave birth to the EAS, and subsequently the expanded EAS and the SCO, respectively, were vastly different.

Third, the regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific is not comprehensively and fundamentally rules-based, at least not at present. Granted, there are important shared norms in the region and many of these have been codified. These include critical principles such as non-use of force and peaceful settlement of disputes, which are reflected in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, or TAC, that comprises 32 High Contracting Parties from within and outside the Asia-Pacific. But TAC's scope is limited to disputes only within Southeast Asia, and since TAC was signed in 1976, there has been no activation of its dispute settlement mechanism. Other important framework documents such as the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, or DOC, which involves ASEAN and China, are not legally binding. (Nevertheless, consultations are under way between ASEAN and China, with Thailand serving as the ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations Country Coordinator, to develop a Code of Conduct, or COC, for the South China Sea that is generally envisaged to be legally binding.)

In essence, this unstructured, diverse and loose arrangement of multiple frameworks that characterises the regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific mirrors the Asia-Pacific's nature itself. The region comprises states of different sizes, levels of development, political cultures, historical experiences and visions of what they wish to see emerging in the region. Compared with the Asia-Pacific, the Europe that forms the European Union has great homogeneity. Anchored by Judeo-Christian values, a common understanding of history — one that almost universally regards the Battle of Marathon as one of its critical civilizational moments — and economic thinking based on different variants of capitalism, the EU's Europe is homogeneous indeed.

The same cannot be said of the Asia-Pacific.

In addition to the great diversity of the member states that make up the region, there are legacies of history, from colonial to pre-colonial times, with which a number of states have been unable to come to terms and which continue to plague inter-state relations in the region. Aside from China, Japan and Thailand, which retained independence during European colonization at great cost, the rest of the Asia-Pacific was under one form of colonial rule or another, with implications for the future development of perceptions of regional order. Asia-Pacific's great diversity played a key role in developing the unstructured, diverse and loose nature of the regional architecture that is evolving today.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

Given the unique nature of the Asia-Pacific's regional architecture, emanating from an environment of great diversity among the region's countries, it is not easy to devise a theoretical framework that could be used to analyze such an architecture. That is not to say important and useful efforts have not been made. One such effort was undertaken recently by Amitav Acharya in his ground-breaking article,

“Power Shift or Paradigm Shift: China’s Rise and Asia’s Emerging Security Order” (Acharya, 2014). In this article, the idea of a consociational security order is offered whereby some sharing of responsibilities and leadership between a rising power in the form of China and other states in the region exists to help shape a regional order, based not so much on rules but more on common interests.

In analyzing the development of Asia-Pacific’s regional architecture, one must bear in mind the unique characteristics of such an architecture and the region as outlined above. In this light, an “order-centric approach” that seeks to manage relations in the region primarily through rules-based frameworks and institutions may not work, especially at this time. As explained earlier, a common perception of what laws and rules to use in governing inter-state relations has not reached a sufficient critical mass in the region to become the main driver of relations. At most, there is general acceptance on shared norms, principles and even some values, but no collective effort to enforce decisions based on shared legal principles.

At the same time, a “threat-centric approach” whereby the regional architecture will evolve based on shifting threat perceptions and changing balances of power may be inappropriate for analyzing the region. The threat-centric approach has countries managing their relations based primarily on changing threat perceptions and relying on bilateral and multilateral security arrangements to project deterrence and defense. It also involves countries shifting alignments in response to changing threat perceptions to maintain the best possible balance of power in the region. Such an approach was tried in Southeast Asia during the Cold War years and the so-called containment policy has been found wanting. At the end of the day, the threat-centric approach to building regional architecture does not appear to be sustainable in the long-run, although it might have some value in the short-run, especially when distrust and lack of confidence amongst states run high. Furthermore, the threat-centric approach implies a fast-shifting realignment of powers to meet changing challenges, something difficult to replicate in the Asia-Pacific context (Tow, 2014).

A third approach can be called a “shared interest-centric approach”. It posits that a regional architecture built on the development of shared interests among states in the region, and sustained through cooperative frameworks that seek win-win solutions, is likely to be more sustainable in the long-run. The viability of such an approach, however, depends on several factors. One is a high level or growing trend of interdependence and integration in the region. This is because such trends or conditions are more likely to result in the development of shared interests in a larger number of areas. Such conditions could be said to exist currently in the region because its healthy economic growth rates make it one of the key engines for global growth.

When viewing the above three approaches, it seems the best approach in analyzing the regional architecture is the shared interests-centric approach. As stated above, an order-centric approach would seem to be an approach for the future rather than for the present, given the weakness of the rules-based system in the Asia-Pacific at the present time. The threat-centric approach appears to have credence during times of high levels of mistrust and perceptions of great political instability in the region, but it is also premised on a high flexibility in shifting alignments quickly. This condition appears absent in the region at present. This approach will be employed to examine the regional strategic situation and the most appropriate regional architecture for the Asia-Pacific.

4. Current Strategic Transformations in the Asia-Pacific: Implications for the Regional Architecture and the Indo-Pacific Idea

There appears to be a general consensus that the current strategic situation of the Asia-Pacific is one of great flux, whereby important longer-term transformations are being played out. Some have termed the situation as a paradox of a growing dichotomy between the region’s rising geo-economics on the one hand, as reflected in growing integration and interdependence, and greater and sustained dynamic growth, and the region’s deteriorating geo-politics on the other, as reflected in growing tensions between and among the major powers and various countries in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). At the same time, other observers note that such a seemingly dichotomous situation should not come as a surprise: a situation of growing economic potentials such as in the Asia-Pacific naturally attract competing powers that bring competing interests, values and perceptions of how to best manage the growing economic potentials of a

region. The deteriorating geo-politics are in part a result of growing tensions and rivalries among the major powers, especially between China and the United States, and between China and Japan. A rising China in the economic, political and social spheres carries both enormous expectations and uncertainties. Many feel that a rising China can help serve as an important pillar for stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific, but this rise must be translated into constructive engagement with the region on the basis of mutual benefit. For its part, China has proposed initiatives to ASEAN and to the Asia-Pacific commensurate with its rising status in the region. For ASEAN, China proposed an ASEAN-China Treaty of Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation to help provide a secure framework for the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership. Then there is the Maritime Silk Route initiative to enhance maritime connectivity in the region, and the proposed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank with initial capital of USD 50 billion and an expected target of USD 100 billion. For some, these initiatives represent efforts to engage constructively with the region and build a secure foundation for growth. Others see them as a continuing move to shift further the strategic balance in the region in China's favour.

The new rebalancing strategy of the United States in the region, at first sight seems to put heavier emphasis on the military dimension, even though many important U.S. initiatives launched during the first Obama Administration had a strong non-military focus. These include the Lower Mekong Initiative, which sought to help close development gaps in the five Southeast Asian countries of the Mekong Sub-region. There is also stronger U.S. support for ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN-led regional architecture. One thus sees the U.S. signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) and the elevation of ASEAN-U.S. Dialogue Relations to one of strategic partnership. Active U.S. engagement is generally welcome because the U.S. presence has served as a stabilizing force for the region for much of the post-World War II era, providing a secure foundation for the economic growth and dynamism that the region experiences today. Nevertheless, when these U.S. initiatives are juxtaposed against China's rise, questions are inevitably raised as to whether this represents a new strategy of containment.

Japan's new National Security Strategy and foreign policy reflect its renewed sense of confidence and a perceived need to restore a strategic balance in the Asia-Pacific. From assisting some ASEAN member states in strengthening their coast guard fleets to promoting rule of law in maritime areas as announced at this year's Shangri-la Dialogue to strengthening relations with Australia, India and like-minded states, these policy initiatives from Japan reflect an effort to assert itself more proactively on the regional and global stage. This has elicited supportive and cautious reactions within the region. Some feel that this "normalization" of Japan's security policy is long overdue, given Japan's economic weight in the world. Others feel that a more active Japan engagement on regional and global security issues may generate historical comparisons and therefore it needs to be anchored on the U.S.-Japan alliance and on the multilateral collective security system of the United Nations. Indeed, when these initiatives are viewed against the backdrop of rising tensions from overlapping maritime claims in the East China Sea, questions are raised of whether this renewed activism from Japan is part of an overall regional containment effort.

There are other important developments as well with implications for the evolving regional architecture. One is the rising role of India and Russia, two countries that have a strong presence and impact in the Asia-Pacific, but that have not been a proactive part of the region. Another is the rising role of ASEAN as a regional power whose ongoing community-building efforts may give it added clout in helping set the strategic direction for the region. These important strategic transformations impinge on one another, creating friction that has translated into growing strategic trust deficit in the region. The reality is that much more is at stake for Asia-Pacific's future, which has encouraged a zero-sum game mentality on the part of the major powers when they approach the region.

Combining the unique characteristics of the Asia-Pacific as discussed above leads to important implications on the evolving regional architecture. First, because of the current high level of strategic mistrust among the major powers, especially between China and the U.S. and between China and Japan, it would be difficult for these countries to propose initiatives for a regional architecture that would not be greeted with suspicion. In this connection, among the three countries mentioned above, only China has proposed an initiative with some bearing on the regional architecture, in the form of a new treaty of friendship and cooperation between ASEAN and China.

Second, related to the first point but important in and of itself, is the unique role of ASEAN. This organization of 10 Southeast Asian countries is acknowledged by all in the region as being in the best possible position to provide a neutral platform for countries large and small to help develop a regional architecture. In this context, ASEAN's key strength is its non-threatening character: an enemy to none and a friend to all. Because of this, ASEAN has what is generally acknowledged to be important "convening powers" (ARF, 1994) — the power to convene meetings and develop cooperative arrangements that larger powers are willing to gravitate to without feeling threatened or disadvantaged.

Taking all of the above into account, it would be most appropriate that the evolving regional architecture to help manage the existing dichotomy and strategic transformations in the Asia-Pacific be developed from ASEAN-centered and ASEAN-led arrangements. Such arrangements have been flexible and not rigidly rules-based in the past and this would seem to be necessary today in a diverse, rapidly transforming region. In this context, the East Asia Summit (EAS) (Originally comprised the 10 ASEAN member states and six Dialogue partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand) and subsequently accepted the Russian Federation and the United States into its ranks.), comprising all key countries in the region and the only framework that is leader-led, would be the most appropriate framework on which to further develop the regional architecture. The EAS also has a clear mandate to promote dialogue and cooperation on critical strategic issues that affect the region.

In addition, other ASEAN-led arrangements can be pursued. Such arrangements, whether the ARF or ADMM Plus, will continue to have important niche roles to fill. But the EAS, with its unique composition and level of representation, is best positioned to drive the regional architecture building process from the top. Indeed, the EAS is an important manifestation of a "shared interest-centric approach", one that can adapt quickly to new shared interests and perceptions of shared challenges, and not constrained by rigid rules and regulations inherent in an order-centric approach, or shifting continuously as would be expected in a threat-centric approach.

5. Emerging Indo-Pacific Idea

Using the EAS as a building bloc for developing the regional architecture is also appropriate because this forum is the only one at the leadership level that seeks to link the Pacific with the Indian Ocean region: two regions becoming increasingly inter-linked in terms of economics, security and geo-strategic thinking. That is why an Indo-Pacific idea has been discussed extensively in policy-making and academic circles in recent years. Indeed, the idea of an Indo-Pacific Treaty has been proposed by Indonesia in ASEAN circles, reflecting perhaps a more "order-centric" approach based on norms and rules. (Although elaborated by Indonesia in a number of ASEAN meetings and in academic conferences, the Indo-Pacific Treaty idea has yet to receive full ASEAN consensus as an official ASEAN strategy to be pursued in ASEAN-led arrangements, as of mid 2014.) Indonesia's Foreign Minister, Dr. Marty Natalegawa, is the idea's chief proponent, which he elaborated on in a speech at the Indonesia Conference in Washington, D.C., in 2013 and in various ASEAN meetings. Essentially, the idea was that such a treaty, embracing norms for relations in the Indo-Pacific area, would help enhance peace and stability in the region, achieving an optimal situation of what he called "dynamic equilibrium".

Perhaps because of such a "order-centric" approach, questions linger as to how the new Indo-Pacific Treaty would build on (or perhaps replace?) the existing Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. There are queries as to the new treaty's geographical scope of application and mandate. After all, TAC's geographical scope is limited to Southeast Asia. Is it the aim of the Indo-Pacific Treaty to develop rules that would govern the entire geographical region of the Pacific and Indian oceans? (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014).

It is critical for ASEAN, in exercising its convening powers and in reaffirming its centrality, to lead development of the EAS so it can more effectively serve as the centre point of a regional architecture that can respond flexibly but effectively to strategic transformations in the region. The EAS need not find a solution to all the challenges facing the region; it is not in a position to do so. But it can offer itself as a legitimate and acceptable platform for major and regional powers to engage in strategic dialogues on the critical geo-political issues of our times. The goal is to help lay the groundwork for some solutions or at least help prevent crises from escalating.

The EAS seems to be the most appropriate modality to advance the idea of enhanced cooperation in the wider Indo-Pacific region, whose exact geographical scope will need to be defined. In view of the great diversity in such a region, a process of developing a habit of dialogue and consultation, meaningful cooperation on win-win strategic issues, and perhaps even a code of conduct governing inter-state relations in the Indo-Pacific, will need to be advanced step-by-step. ASEAN, as the neutral convener, should drive the process at a pace comfortable to all.

6. Role of India in the Emerging Regional Architecture

What role can India, as a rising power and strategic partner of ASEAN, play in this evolving regional architecture? Historically, it was not considered part of the Asia-Pacific regional architecture despite its long-standing cultural ties with Southeast Asia and links with the broader region. APEC does not include India, and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) did not include India in its early years. But India's growing economic importance over the past two decades, coupled with growing ties between India and ASEAN and enhanced engagement of India in the ASEAN-led regional architecture (ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership, ARF, ADMM Plus and EAS), have made India an increasingly integral part of the extended Asia-Pacific region. Connectivity between India and ASEAN — manifested in the Trilateral Highway project linking India, Myanmar and Thailand — and the complementarity between India's Look East policies and ASEAN's Look West policies, have helped integrate India into the Asia-Pacific.

Moreover, the growing links between the Pacific and Indian oceans, in terms of opportunities (maritime trade and commerce) and challenges (piracy, safe and secure sea lines of communication, and other cross-border issues), reflect the reality of growing interdependence between the two oceans and their respective areas. Climate change, for example, is fueling natural disasters that have affected both oceans and their rims. This has encouraged the development of early warning systems that cut across the Indo-Pacific. From a maritime security standpoint, growing blue ocean naval capabilities are making it increasingly difficult to distinguish the two oceans as separate and distinct theaters of operations. India will have an important role to play in this emerging reality of a Pacific Ocean-Indian Ocean continuum.

On land, India can continue to enhance its connectivity with mainland Southeast Asia and ultimately link with Northeast Asia. At sea, it can help promote enhanced maritime connectivity. Overall, India can work in partnership with the rest of South Asia to help enhance trust and confidence in the wider Indo-Pacific region. In so doing, it can make full use of its participation in the existing ASEAN-led regional architecture and help make the evolving regional architecture more effective and resilient. There is every indication that the newly elected Indian government will continue to "Look East". It is hoped that India's continued constructive engagement with the Asia-Pacific will also emanate from enhanced interaction with ASEAN and the ASEAN-led regional architecture.

7. Conclusion

The story of the evolving regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific is still being written, in part by the artisans of diplomacy working through the various states that are proposing new ideas on how to manage strategic transformations in the Asia-Pacific. However, Asia-Pacific's unique nature and the unique character of the region's architecture based on a shared interest-centric approach may limit the options as to what would be the most appropriate vehicle to drive the regional architecture. At present, the evolving regional architecture must be developed from existing ASEAN-led regional processes because a regional architecture driven by other powers may not gain traction given current levels of distrust among some of the major powers. ASEAN's convening power thus appears to award a premium to ASEAN-led processes and arrangements.

In this regard, the existing EAS, even with all its limitations, appears to be the best vehicle to further develop this regional architecture. The EAS is also the only leader-led forum that already promotes an inherent link between the Pacific and Indian oceans, which makes it even better positioned to develop further the Indo-Pacific idea. If this is the best way forward, it would be important for India, as the key link between the Asia-Pacific architecture and the Indian Ocean area, to play a constructive role through its partnership with ASEAN and its active engagement in the ASEAN-centered regional processes and arrangements.

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