Abstract

Realist scholars have long claimed, not incorrectly, that a US-led balance of power is fundamental to the security and prosperity of Southeast Asia. Yet the Southeast Asian experience has also been one where multilateral security dialogue and regional community formation figure prominently. In contrast to views which exaggerate the importance of US preponderance in Southeast Asia whilst dismissing regional multilateral efforts, we offer seven arguments against any undue overstatement of the US contribution to regional peace and stability. If anything, a historically ambivalent US presence contributed to ASEAN’s emergence as a mechanism of regional diplomacy. Such ambivalence is no longer feasible since 9/11. However, Washington’s current engagement in Southeast Asia should focus on revitalizing regional multilateralism. Our claim is not that the region’s security is due to ASEAN regionalism rather than US strategic dominance. We argue instead that absent the region’s fluency with ‘soft’ multilateralism, Southeast Asia’s security would probably have been far worse.

Southeast Asians are more acutely aware of the uncertainties of U.S. policies than other regions of the world. They remember the American retrenchment in the 1970s followed by a decade of self-doubt. Hence ASEAN countries drew towards each other to seek greater strength in self-reliance. They found that together in ASEAN, they could better
overcome their problems; but they still need the United States to balance the strength of the Soviet ships and aircraft. The renewal of self-confidence in America has reassured us that America will help maintain the peace and stability of the region. It is this balance of power which has enabled the free market economies to thrive.

– Lee Kuan Yew

The aim of this paper is to contest a familiar and influential argument about the role of the United States in the security of Southeast Asia. For some time, scholars such as Michael Leifer, Paul Dibb, and Gerald Segal, among others – like most US administrations and their Southeast Asian allies and partners – have assumed that a US-led balance of power has been the chief provider of the security and prosperity of Southeast Asia. For instance, Leifer (1996a, p. 58) has unequivocally averred that the balance of power in Asia ‘has been left primarily to the United States to uphold’. For his part, Dibb (2000a, p. 13) has argued that ‘U.S. political power and military presence is the key to maintaining a peaceful balance of power in Asia’ and that, as a result, the basic US alliance structure in Asia would remain ‘very much intact’ (Dibb, 2000b, p. 7). America has long been viewed by regional governments as the region’s preponderant stabilizer and ‘honest broker’ in striking a balance against China, Japan, and other regional states. It is unlikely that this perceived value might change in the foreseeable future, particularly in the light of an ascending China. On the basis of this assumption, various analysts hold that the maintenance of a balance of power framework centred upon US bilateral alliances in the region is the most effective guarantee for security and prosperity in Southeast Asia. An alternative to this, such as the emergence of a security order based on multilateral cooperation and regional community, would be not only weak but also harmful. One of the fallouts, they argue, would be to play into the hands of China, which is showing a growing diplomatic assertiveness in the region.

We find such arguments to be problematic in both the historical and contemporary contexts. But, as the statement by Lee Kuan Yew in the epigraph to this paper suggests, the reality projected by Leifer and other realists is neither that simple nor straightforward. We are not implying that US bilateral alliances have had no positive impact whatsoever on regional order in Southeast Asia. Rather, what concerns us are propositions that exaggerate the influence of the United States in contributing to the stability of that region, particularly at the expense of prescriptions regarding the importance of multilateral security dialogue and regional community formation. Although US strategic

1 Lee Kuan Yew, former Singapore prime minister and current ‘minister mentor’. The quotation is from a speech the then prime minister Lee delivered at the Heritage Foundation on 22 April 1986.
dominance and security alliances have undeniably functioned as collective public goods in Northeast Asia, whether the same can be said of Southeast Asia is somewhat less certain. If anything, the polarizing impact that the US approach to the war on terrorism has had on Southeast Asian regional audiences since the 9/11 terror attacks has served to reinforce this uncertainty.

Historically, we offer three arguments against the US-led balance of power narrative. First, the place of Southeast Asia in America’s overall grand strategy has not been particularly salient relative to the place of Northeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and, of course, Europe. Second, the US strategic presence in Southeast Asia has not shielded Washington’s allies and partners in the region from low-intensity and internal conflicts; in some instances, it may even have contributed to such issues. Third, contrary to the conventional understanding of great powers as the principal if not sole public goods providers in establishing and maintaining international order, the Southeast Asian experience has proved much more ambiguous, namely, one involving weaker regional states and institutions which function equally as providers of security for the region, and whose problematic and partial provisions have in fact benefited the United States.

Contemporarily, we offer four arguments. First, a US-led balance of power approach is unsuitable for dealing with the problem of terrorism in Southeast Asia, particularly in the light of regional reservations regarding the way Washington has been conducting its war on terror. Second, on its own the balance of power approach may be equally suspect for dealing with a rising China, despite claims to the contrary by advocates of balancing strategies. Those twin concerns lead to a third point: the increasing rationale for why the United States ought to support and help further regional efforts at multilateral security collaboration.\(^2\) Fourth, recent experiments at both national and regional levels in liberalization and legalization highlight Southeast Asia as a region in transition. As a result of these changes, it may no longer be possible, in due course, for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the great powers to adopt a ‘business as usual’ approach (i.e. balance of power politics) to the security of the region.

Together, the foregoing points argue against any undue exaggeration of the US contribution to Southeast Asia’s peace and stability. If anything, American involvement in the region can be characterized as ambivalent, even erratic. By the same token, an ambivalent US presence has indirectly contributed to the rise of ASEAN as a regional mechanism for intramural conflict management. Importantly, we do not claim that the security of the

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\(^2\) Arguably, the Americans have in fact been doing this, if recent initiatives by the US Pacific Command in defence cooperation with Southeast Asian partners are any indication (Simon, 2003).
region is better attributed to the existence of an inclusive and cooperative multilateral order centred upon ASEAN than to a regional balance of power centred upon US strategic dominance. Nevertheless, absent the region’s incipient yet increasing fluency with ‘soft’ multilateral practices and processes, the security of Southeast Asia would probably have been far worse than it was and is. A recent study has concluded that ‘for years to come the Asia-Pacific will be a region that will exist somewhere between a balance of power and a community-based security order’ (Ikenberry and Tsuchiyama, 2002, p. 69). We suspect a not dissimilar fate will probably befall the Southeast Asian region, where balancing mechanics and regional community dynamics will coexist (as is already happening), at times comfortably and other times not.  

1 The balancing argument revisited

Quite possibly the most glaring thing about Southeast Asian international relations is the absence of any clear sense of grand strategic coherence or orderliness in the ways in which Southeast Asians and extra-regional powers manage the security of the region. The security order of Southeast Asia is anything but tidy, consisting of a loose, complex collage of multifarious arrangements that reflect realist approaches to regional security, on one hand, and that are augmented by institutional features and processes that are arguably idealist in orientation, on the other (Ball, 2000; Tow, 2001). In a recent essay we made the following observation:

Southeast Asia has supplemented Cold War power balancing with a post-Cold War architecture based upon comprehensive security. A third and newer form of security multilateralism, cooperative security, also has had limited application in the region, with the Association of Southeast Asians (ASEAN) espousing strict adherence to state sovereignty and providing a framework of conflict management on a sub-regional basis. (Acharya and Tan, 2004, p. xi)

Even so, not many are convinced that regional attempts at ‘soft’ security multilateralism would amount to anything much.  

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3 Other scholarly traditions of international relations, notably the English School, interpret the balance of power with a great deal more latitude and nuance than, say, most American-trained scholars of neo-realist international relations (Little, 2000). The work of Robert Jervis (1982) on security regimes is an important exception. For instance, the concept of ‘communal’ and/or ‘cooperative’ balancing is allowed for within specific communities of nations, such as the European Concert. Among recent scholarship on Asia-Pacific and Southeast Asian security studies, works that read balance of power more heterogeneously include Emmers (2003) and Tan with Cossa (2001).

4 This view cannot be attributed solely and simplistically to realists, since some analysts of a more liberal or idealist persuasion – John Ruggie (1993) comes to mind – have equally not been
hyperrealist caveats concerning post-Cold War Asia becoming the future ‘cockpit of great power conflict’ (Friedberg, 1993/94, p. 7), it is little wonder few if any analysts would actually hold that balances of power no longer matter in the Southeast Asian region. Accordingly, the only viable conclusion is that ‘a reasonably stable [US-led] balance is the best that one can hope to achieve’ in the region (Ruggie, 1993, p. 4).

The proposition concerning US primacy in Southeast Asia has long enjoyed the firm backing of prominent students of the region’s security (Leifer, 1986, 1989, 1996a; Segal, 1990; Dibb, 1995, 2000a,b). The so-called San Francisco system or the ‘hub and spokes’ model, which grew out of the East–West ideological rivalry of the Cold War, featured a series of bilateral arrangements linking the United States to various allies. Key among these arrangements was that signed with Japan in 1951. More bilateral security treaties with other Asian allies followed that culminated with the formation of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1955. Although SEATO was formally disbanded in 1977, two signatories to the 1954 Manila Pact, the Philippines and Thailand, remain more or less firm US allies today. Many observers have noted the contrasting US-led security architectures of Asia and Europe, respectively, during the Cold War: bilateral alliances, on one hand, and multilateral collective defence arrangements, on the other (Emmers, 2004).

Not surprisingly, the bilateralism motif has proved equally robust in intra-ASEAN relations, and it is not uncommon even today to hear commentators make the same observation about contemporary relations among ASEAN members. It bears reminding ourselves that ASEAN was created in 1967 with the intent of providing its members – four out of the original five founding nations being recently formed states – with a mechanism for the peaceful mediation of conflicts that largely took the form of territorial and other intramural disputes (Leifer, 1989). Although the Nixon Doctrine of 1971, which emphasized US-assisted military build-ups among the ASEAN member nations, encouraged the formation of an indigenous regional defence arrangement in Southeast Asia, the proposition was rejected by the association for fear of compromising its credibility and programme for regional reconciliation (Simon, 1982; Acharya, 1991). Having said that, by 1984 bilateral security ties between ASEAN members had evolved to the point where those linkages could no longer be dismissed as ‘not [being] functionally part of the ASEAN political community’ (Weatherbee, 1984, p. 266).

Nevertheless, with the folding of the Cold War and the diplomatic success garnered by the association on the Cambodian problem, ensuing efforts to convinced either of the vigor or durability of existing expressions of ‘soft’ security multilateralism in Asia, or whether the region’s dynamics can be considered multilateral to begin with.
redefine security beyond Cold War conventions led to an upsurge of interest in ‘Track 2’ multilateral diplomacy and new security concepts and practices befitting an emerging multilateral security order (Wiseman, 1992; Dewitt, 1994; Dickens, 1997; Ball, 2000). Constructivist analysts have been focusing on questions of identity, norms, the ‘ASEAN Way’, and the construction of the region as an imagined security community (Busse, 1999; Acharya, 2000, 2001; Peou, 2002; Haacke, 2003; Katsumata, 2004; Narine, 2002). Be that as it may, the burdens of ASEAN membership expansion, the financial crisis that rocked the region in 1997, and the consequent reorientation by member nations to self-help strategies have elicited criticisms against the presumed fallacy regarding ASEAN as a regional community (Tan, 2000; Jones and Smith, 2002). Moreover, ASEAN’s moment of weakness also rendered the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) an ineffective tool for settling or even managing regional disputes.

Against this evolving backdrop, balancing proponents have incessantly insisted that the maintenance of a balance of power framework centred upon US bilateral alliances in the region remains the most effective guarantee for security and prosperity in Southeast Asia. That this logic has had and continues to have a profound impact on the policy preferences of various ASEAN nations is incontrovertible. Singapore, for example, has long acknowledged the centrality of the US strategic presence in Southeast Asia, which it regards as ‘vital to the stability and peace of the region’. Only ‘the United States has the strategic weight, economic strength and political clout to exercise leadership in the Asia-Pacific region’, as the Singaporean deputy premier S. Jayakumar has it (Chin, 2004). Likewise, Jayakumar’s Malaysian counterpart, Najib, noted in 1989 that Singapore purportedly continues to view Malaysia ‘as a threat to [its] existence’, and, as such, Singapore’s offer of military facilities to the United States could be construed as evidence that Singapore is seeking to strategically deter Malaysia.5

Beyond more immediate, intra-regional concerns looms the prospect of a rising China, whose growing diplomatic assertiveness and ‘charm offensive’ towards the Southeast Asian region has been the subject of growing interest (Chang, 1996; Swaine and Tellis, 2000; Ang, 2000; Ba, 2003). Aside from the usual assortment of incendiary claims that exemplify the more extreme versions of the ‘China threat’ hypothesis (see e.g. Gertz, 2000), some respected practitioners and analysts in the Washington Beltway have sought to provide justification for America’s right to promote and protect its strategic interests in the region. In her much-cited essay in Foreign Affairs, Condoleezza Rice noted that ‘China is not a “status quo” power [because it] resents the role

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5 The Sunday Times (Singapore), 10 August 1991.
of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region’ (Rice, 2000, p. 56). In a similar vein, the influential policy analyst Robert Kagan had this to say: ‘Beijing has a history of testing U.S. presidents early to see what they’re made of’ (Kagan, 2001, p. 11).

Such views underpin the current Bush administration’s strategy to strengthen its Asian alliances and to balance against its ‘strategic competitor’, China – a ‘grand strategy’ that the war on terror and the US campaign in Iraq in all likelihood have not supplanted but merely recalibrated (Gaddis, 2005). Indeed, such a conclusion is unavoidable when framed within the context of the purported centrality of the United States to the security of the region. As Paul Dibb has expressed it:

Only America has the power, credibility, and distance from the region to maintain the regional balance of power. Other contenders for this role would not be acceptable to the regional powers. China is feared as a potential dominant – and perhaps expansionist – power. Great suspicion still surrounds any ambitions for regional leadership that Japan might have. (Dibb, 2000a, p. 13)

Within such a framework, the only reasonable policy proposition in response, say, to Chinese ‘territorial hegemony’ in the South China Sea would consist of ‘regular demonstrations’ of the naval superiority of US forces and those of its regional allies as a reminder to China that ‘its proper course of action is a negotiated one with the countries of Southeast Asia’ (Dibb, 2000a, pp. 11, 12).6

2 Balancing as condition and/or policy

The proponents of the realist view have ignored the extent to which the Southeast Asians distinguish between two conceptions of balance of power: as a condition and as policy. A useful point of reference here is Inis Claude’s distinction between balance of power ‘as a situation of equilibrium and as a system of states engaged in competitive manipulation of power relationships among themselves’ (Claude, 1989, p. 77).7 ASEAN has historically viewed

6 In this respect, the Clinton administration’s decision to dispatch two aircraft carriers to patrol the waters off Taiwan in 1995, while promoting a policy of ‘constructive engagement’ towards China, is a clear indication of just how salient is the belief that a US-led balance of power matters in Northeast Asia to US administrations that espouse ‘liberal’ foreign policies.

7 Ernst Haas (1969, p. 386) similarly distinguished between balance of power as ‘a mere factual description of the distribution of political power in the international scene’ from balance of power as ‘a theoretical principle acting as a guide to foreign policy-making . . . so that the preponderance of any one state may be avoided’. Similarly, two of the four meanings of the term balance of power mentioned by Morgenthau (1960, p. 167) are (1) ‘as a policy aimed at a certain state of affairs’ and (2) ‘as an actual state of affairs’.
balance of power more in the former sense than the latter.\footnote{Ali Alatas, former foreign minister of Indonesia, once noted that regional security requires an ‘equilibrium among them [the major powers] and between them and Southeast Asia’; from an interview in ‘Live and Let Live’, Far Eastern Economic Review, 11 July 1991, p. 13.} Whereas neorealists see the balance of power as a function primarily of national military capability and economic strength (Levy, 1995, p. 70), the condition of equilibrium, from ASEAN’s perspective, is achieved not just through balancing strategies defined in terms of national military self-help (which, in the case of the ASEAN states, cannot be adequate to deal with threats posed by major powers such as China) and alliances (which, for ASEAN, means getting involved in unequal alliances with outside powers). Instead, equilibrium requires collective diplomatic pressure directed at major external powers with a view to preventing any single power from acquiring preponderant influence. This act of ‘balancing by other means’ involves imposing institutional checks and ‘multilateral pressure’ against outside powers (Huisken, 2002).

In the former sense, balance of power as a condition refers to a stable distribution of power in which no single power assumes preponderance. In the latter sense, balance of power implies a policy approach, including military build-up, alliance making, and so forth, which contribute to the security dilemma. Southeast Asian states recognize the importance of an equilibrium of power, but this does not necessarily mean they advocate or accept arms racing or collective defence arrangements to achieve this goal. Rather, the preference has been for achieving balance through diplomatic, political, and economic engagement of all the major powers in regional security affairs or, during an earlier period, through their equal exclusion (as under ZOPFAN).

The two conceptions of balance of power identified by balance of power theorists such as Inis Claude – and, ironically, recognized by scholars such as Leifer (1996a) – point to differing types of security behaviour and dependence on US military power. Southeast Asia’s acceptance of the balance of power does not mean participation in collective defence arrangements with any of the great powers, nor does it imply uncritical acceptance of US hegemony against rising challenges. Instead, Southeast Asia – indeed Asia in general – has since the 1955 Bandung Conference consistently rejected collective defence arrangements that serve the ‘particular interest of any of the great powers’. ASEAN itself has refused to develop multilateral security cooperation that might be perceived as collective defence (SEATO) by proxy. Moreover, it has refused any US proposal for the containment of China, perceiving that as a form of extreme balancing behaviour. In other words, although Southeast Asians have recognized that the distribution of power does matter in regional stability, they have not advocated military balancing postures as the best way to ensure regional stability. Hence the realist claim that a US-led balance of power is
what has preserved regional stability in Asia goes against the demonstrated
normative ethos and cooperative regional security approaches that have
gained ground in Southeast Asia.

Is the preservation of a balance of power framework centred upon US
bilateral alliances in the region the most effective guarantee for security and
prosperity in Southeast Asia? Do the historical and contemporary records of
US engagement in the region substantiate that received wisdom? Or do they
reveal such received wisdom to be largely normative or prescriptive in both
logic and practice? It is to these concerns that we now turn.

3 Historical US role in Southeast Asia

In his essay on the US role in Asia, Philip Zelikow (2000) takes critical aim at
five ‘myths’ that form the core of the (in his view) flawed standard narrative of
US involvement in Asia during the twentieth century. American attitude and
actions in Europe, he argues, should not be confused with those in Asia.
Simply because Washington exercised a self-imposed isolationism towards
Europe during the inter-war period did not mean that it acted likewise
towards Asia. In contrast to the systematic and strategic way in which the
United States constructed the liberal international order in post-war Europe,
the US approach to post-war Asia and Southeast Asia has been decidedly
more ambivalent. Indeed, it was with the enunciation of the Nixon Doctrine
and the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam in the early to mid-1970s
that the non-communist countries of Southeast Asia, setting aside the failed
experiments in an indigenous regionalism of the 1960s (ASA,
MAPHILINDO) and seeking to invigorate an ASEAN that had been
largely moribund since its founding in 1967, began focusing in earnest on
the goal of regional reconciliation (Indorf, 1975; Shee, 1977; Fifield, 1979;

Against this backdrop, we make three arguments. First, the place of
Southeast Asia in the overall US grand strategy has largely been secondary
to that of Northeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, or, for that matter,
South Asia. This has meant that unlike Europe, the Middle East, and
Northeast Asia, the US strategic presence in Southeast Asia has been subject
to major fluctuations and retrenchments. Moreover, the United States has
not been above acting in ambivalent or even ‘erratic’ ways at critical junctures
in the Southeast Asian historical experience when decisive US leadership
over the region would have been entirely appropriate. As one commentator
has put it:

U.S. reactions have been even more erratic in areas . . . such as Southeast
Asia. The U.S. ambivalence in 1999 during the East Timor crisis was
obvious. Less obvious was the U.S. hesitation about adopting any active policy, other than economic remedies put together by the [US] Treasury Department, in order to address the political unrest set off by the cascading economic crisis of 1997. (Zelikow, 2000, p. 28)

That no analyst has probably ever disputed the idea that Southeast Asia has at times been irrelevant to US strategic interests also raises questions about the empirical veracity of the US-led balance of power as central to the security of the region. It is in this respect that much effort had in fact been expended by ASEAN – particularly by Singapore and Thailand, both firm adherents of power balancing strategies – throughout its diplomatic confrontation with Vietnam to maintain international attention on and, importantly, US involvement in the region (Simon, 1982; Leifer, 1989). Moreover, it is not without reason that the formation of the ARF has often been associated with the need not only to institutionalize and regularize security dialogue among the great powers but more specifically to ‘lock the United States to the region’, as it were (Khong, 1997).  

With the end of the Cold War, we cannot assume that the Western powers will continue to woo ASEAN. ASEAN must reassess itself. If ASEAN is inward looking, then our strategic importance to our traditional dialogue partners, including the United States, Japan and the European Community, may very well diminish. We need to transform the substance of both ASEAN and our relations with the major economic and political powers.  

All of this has weakened the credibility of US security guarantees in the region, even though the US position in Southeast Asia has been that of a preponderant power (Goldstein, 2003, p. 172).

Second, and closely related to the above, the US strategic presence in Southeast Asia has offered little protection to its allies against low-level and internal conflicts in the region. This is partly due to the American disinclination to get involved in such conflicts following the Vietnam debacle. It is also due to the shared concern among regional countries that seeking US assistance against such threats, which are more serious challenges to their security and stability than outright aggression, would have negative and destabilizing consequences. Although some may give credit to the United States as a sort

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9 Dibb, for example, concedes that ‘Southeast Asia is not as important strategically to the United States as either Northeast Asia or South Asia’ and then proceeds in a prescriptive or normative vein: ‘The stability of Southeast Asia should have more salience in Washington than it seems now to have’ (Dibb, 2000a, p. 11).

of ‘behind-the-scenes’ sponsor of ASEAN, the record suggests that the association emerged in the face of an intra-regional reconciliation at a time of growing doubts among key SEATO allies of America, Thailand and the Philippines, about the wisdom of relying on the United States for their security against internal or even neighbouring threats.\(^\text{11}\) In one respect, the provision of a multilateral framework for the settlement of intramural differences among ASEAN members stemmed from the hope that fractious bilateral ties caused by events such as the Confrontation\(^\text{12}\) and the longstanding Sabah dispute, among others, could be assuaged via multilateral mechanisms for building confidence and trust among member nations (Jorgensen-Dahl, 1982; Leifer, 1989).

Furthermore, the very credibility of ASEAN as an institution that properly represented the interests of the region (at least its non-communist part) could well have been jeopardized because of its perceived close ties with the United States. It bears reminding ourselves, for example, that Vietnam found ASEAN’s prescriptions for regional order, such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, to be unacceptable and clearly regarded the association with a suspicion and mistrust befitting what Vietnam considered to be a US-sponsored organization; for instance, the former Vietnamese premier Pham Van Dong referred to ASEAN in 1977 as a ‘military bloc’.\(^\text{13}\) That China eventually overcame its initial circumspection about joining the ARF is due in no small part to its realization that the forum, with ASEAN in the driver’s seat, is not quite the puppet institution of the United States that China had assumed it to be (Ba, 2003).

Third, contrary to the postulates of balance of power theory that only institutions sponsored by great powers matter in international relations, or that international order usually requires and involves great powers providing security as a public good to the weaker states, the Southeast Asian experience demonstrates how great powers can benefit from the security approaches undertaken independently as a public good by the weaker states. As George Liska (1968) noted over thirty years ago, arrangements which involve small and/or weak states clustered around great powers do not benefit only small states but also great powers, which stand to ‘profit from having dependable allies within their strategic area’ (quoted in Acharya, 1992, pp. 7–8). Instead

\(^\text{11}\) For example, Thailand’s appeal for SEATO to intervene militarily in Laos during the crisis of 1961–62 was rejected by the Western SEATO members (including the United States), which caused Bangkok to doubt not only the viability of multilateral collective defence but also Washington’s security guarantee (Chinwanno, 2004, p. 194; also see Morrison and Suhrke, 1978). For an account of the troubles besetting the Philippine–US security relationship, see Castro (2003).

\(^\text{12}\) As articulated by President Sukarno of Indonesia, the purpose of Confrontation or Konfrontasi was to ‘crush’ (ganjngang) the newly formed Federation of Malaysia, which he regarded as a Western-inspired conspiracy to maintain control of the region (Gordon, 1966; Leifer, 1980).

of being the chief provider of security to the region, the United States has benefited considerably from the framework of regional socialization and cooperation in Southeast Asia since its withdrawal from Indochina in 1975.

To be sure, the popular criticism of ASEAN as a successful ‘single issue organization’ with little to show for in concrete intra-regional economic cooperation is in a sense well deserved (Stubbs, 1988). Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the association not only has eschewed ‘free riding’ in its security relationship with the United States, but for the most part has served as an indispensable partner of the latter throughout the Cold War years. The evolution of ASEAN received a substantive boost when the succession of communist victories in Indochina compelled the association’s member states to respond to their fast-changing regional context with ‘an unusual determination and cohesion in purpose’ (Indorf, 1975, p. 21). As a group of anti-communist regimes at its origin, ASEAN has generally maintained a pro-US attitude and pursued policies that have served US strategic interests well, chiefly by serving as a bulwark against the communist tide (Ang, 2001). Working in tandem with its post-Ministerial Conference dialogue partners (including the United States), the association helped to resolve the Cambodian crisis during the 1980s (Ikenberry and Tsuchiyama, 2002). In 1988, the ASEAN states arranged a mini-Marshall Plan, so-called, of up to ten billion US dollars in funds to bolster the then ailing Philippine economy (Frost, 1990, p. 26) – a fact easily missed in the light of the more recent 1997–98 financial crisis, when regional states seemed more ready to fend for themselves than help each other.

These and other historical instances of ASEAN playing a direct role in the region’s concerns – and, importantly, in ways that generally benefited US interests – highlights America’s reliance upon the association in ‘managing’ the region’s security. Indeed, whatever reservations Washington may have harboured over ASEAN’s original proposal for a multilateral security dialogue could have been partly allayed as a result of Washington’s recognition of the association as primus inter pares in not only post-Cold War Southeast Asia but the Asia-Pacific as well.

4 Contemporary US role in Southeast Asia

What are the implications for recent developments in Southeast Asia’s strategic environment for the US interests and role in the region? The resolute unilateralism that marked George W. Bush’s first term in office had increasingly rendered the United States odious in the eyes of many nations (including its allies), so much so that America is perceived as ‘the rogue superpower [and] the single greatest threat to their societies’ (Huntington, 1999, p. 42). This has understandably raised concerns among regional audiences in Southeast Asia,
with some appealing to Washington for a generous measure of restraint (Kwa and Tan, 2001). Although Sino-US ties have improved since 9/11 (which is good for the region), the way in which America has been conducting its war on terror has rendered it and its regional partners as lightning rods for anti-Western sentiments among the region’s Muslim populations (which is bad for the region). Whether the balance of power strategy pursued by the United States – which focuses heavily on its ‘hub and spoke’ system of bilateral ties, and (especially with the strong ‘neo-conservative’ element in the Bush administration) without any serious engagement through multilateral institutions, the six-party talks notwithstanding – will be of value to both the United States and Southeast Asian countries in dealing with the problem of terrorism and the perceived growth of Chinese influence in the region is a significant question. Furthermore, certain institutional developments that either have taken place or are taking place in the region also raise doubts about whether a US-based balancing strategy should continued to be proffered as the centrepiece of Southeast Asian security.

Against this backdrop, we offer four arguments. The first has to do with America’s post-9/11 policy towards the region. US policymakers regard Southeast Asia as the ‘second front’ in the global war on terror (Gershman, 2002; Rabasa, 2003). America’s main response to this problem has been to enhance security cooperation with ASEAN, including joint training operations with Philippines armed forces and an agreement providing for intelligence sharing and other measures with ASEAN as a whole (Tan and Ramakrishna, 2004). The United States has also stepped up logistics support cooperation for its naval forces with Singapore. But the gains made by such cooperation risk being undermined from several sources. Among these is the American war on Iraq, which alienated Malaysia and Indonesia. (On the other hand, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore supported the United States.) Southeast Asian governments generally view the Iraq war as a distraction from the fight against terrorism in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the resulting anti-American feelings at the popular level have increased the political risks for the Southeast Asian governments from cooperating too closely with the United States in the war on terror. Regional populist anger is partly rooted in

14 John J. Mearsheimer has painstakingly sought to differentiate between the realist and neo-conservative perspectives. Among other things, realists hold that multilateral institutions are generally instruments wielded by powerful states to serve their interests; as such, in themselves they are largely powerless (Mearsheimer, 1994/95). ‘Neo-cons’, on the other hand, hold that multilateral institutions can be rather powerful in restraining the freedom of individual states, even powerful ones. It is for this reason, according to Mearsheimer, that the neo-cons in the Bush administration regard multilateral institutions such as the United Nations negatively because they can and will restrict the freedom of the United States to exercise its prerogatives in foreign policy. This point was made in a series of talks in Singapore during August 2004 which Mearsheimer gave in his capacity as S. Rajaratnam Chair in Strategic Studies at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.
virulently negative perceptions of America that the Bush administration, in concrete terms at least, has done little to dissuade. According to Betts (2002, p. 26), ‘U.S. leaders can say they are not waging a war on Islam until they are blue in the face, but this will not convince Muslims who already distrust the United States.’ Nevertheless, despite efforts to the contrary, the manner in which Washington has thus far prosecuted its war on terror has, at least for one prominent scholar, simply ‘made an already terrible situation worse’ (Johnson, 2002, p. xvi). As another analyst writing about the United States in another context has put it, ‘relationships with allies deserve as much attention as relationships with enemies. They can go wrong among the best of friends, and sometimes especially among friends’ (Zelikow, 2000, p. 30). But neither are Southeast Asian governments free from blame. According to one analyst, the proclivity of regional governments – with Singapore perhaps as the sole exception – to engage in ‘the politics of scapegoating’ has unfairly rendered the United States an alternative target of distrust and hostility (Wright-Neville, 2003, p. 6).

Moreover, the United States has clashed with Malaysia and Indonesia over the issue of security in the Malacca Straits, with the latter opposing initial US plans (since changed) to provide unilateral interdiction of suspected vessels in the straits (Nesadurai, 2004). Thailand has refused to host a maritime pre-positioning facility for the United States, despite having provided access to its military bases for US counter-terrorism operations in the Middle East and South Asia, including interrogation of suspected Al-Qaeda operatives captured in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The revived US–Philippine strategic relationship is also not free from problems, with Washington not totally in line with Manila’s desire to extend the renewed commitment to the protection of its territorial claims in the South China Sea vis-à-vis China.

Second, on the question of dealing with China, the United States also faces important choices. Although 9/11 induced a greater moderation and pragmatism in Sino-US relations, American distraction with Iraq has given China an opportunity to extend its ‘charm offensive’ into Southeast Asia. Although China had started its cultivation of Southeast Asia before 9/11, the post-9/11 period has seen an intensification of such efforts, which cannot be entirely a coincidence. China’s growing visibility, in both economic and diplomatic arenas, has led some analysts to raise the possibility of the region being part of either a Chinese ‘sphere of influence’ or part of a more ‘benevolent’ neo-Confucian tributary system (Kang, 2004). Some analysts have even postulated that Washington may choose one day to leave Southeast Asia to China, in return for a Chinese pledge not to interfere in America’s backyard, whereas others have argued that Southeast Asians will choose to side with America in the event of a Sino-US conflict, no matter the costs (Brzezinski and Mearsheimer, 2005).
Which scenario unfolds will depend on Washington’s calculation of its strategic interests in Southeast Asia. Although they appear less salient vis-à-vis the Middle East and Northeast Asia, the strategic importance of the sea lines of communication that pass through the region remains a critical factor in US global military deployment strategy and for energy security for Japan, which remains a key ally of the United States. Abandoning Southeast Asia is therefore not likely to be in the US strategic interest. What is questionable about the ‘sphere of influence’ argument is that Washington cannot count on Beijing to stop at Southeast Asia in competing with it for influence as a great power. In fact, an argument can be made that confidence derived from having successfully carved out a sphere of influence in Southeast Asia may well embolden Beijing to compete with Washington’s interests in other parts of the world, including the Middle East and Africa. Moreover, if neither ‘abandonment’ nor ‘trade-off’ makes sense strategically, then the approach most favourable to balance of power proponents would be to ‘contain’ China militarily. Indeed, this has been one of the key goals of hardliners, including some ‘neo-cons’, in Washington. But with America’s growing military distraction with Iraq and China’s easy proximity to Southeast Asia, provoking a strategic competition with Beijing over Southeast Asia will not necessarily lead to a US victory. A provoked China will be so much harder to contain, even if the United States were to pursue an encirclement strategy with the participation of Japan and India.

How America will eventually respond to the perceived Chinese challenge depends on how prominently balance of power logics figure in the calculations of US strategic planners. It bears reminding ourselves that Washington’s somewhat cool reaction to news of Beijing’s recent forging of closer ties with ASEAN suggests that the United States views the China–ASEAN trade agreement as a threat to US interests in the region. Citing US analysts, a Washington Post article recently warned that ‘the agreement shows how an increasingly bold China is forging alliances that would reduce, and possibly eventually challenge, America’s influence in Asia’ (Roberts, 2004).

This leads to the third point. The region’s fledging experiment with multilateral security deserves Washington’s support. Until now, this has been an uncertain and half-hearted affair. Yet, as we have seen earlier, such ambivalence flies in the face of the gains accruing to the United States from ASEAN multilateralism in the past. Today, with a weakened ASEAN, there is a greater need for the United States to throw its support behind multilateral security and not dismiss it. Conditions that enabled ASEAN to assume a managerial role in regional order during the 1980s and 1990s have changed to the point that America can no longer count on ASEAN to keep its own house – namely, the Southeast Asian region – in order. Again, as we have discussed earlier, with rising anti-Americanism since 9/11, ASEAN’s longstanding pro-United
States orientation can no longer be taken for granted, especially since ASEAN member governments have to worry about a possible popular backlash if they are to collaborate closely with the United States. At the same time, the decline of ASEAN’s own cohesion and clout – resulting from the burdens of membership expansion, the Asian financial crisis, and intramural tensions – also negatively affects US interests in the region. This means ASEAN is now less able to manage regional conflicts that America never had to worry about in the past.

Faced with such a declining regional capacity, and in view of the benefits offered by ASEAN to United States, it would seem logical that Washington should help to revitalize the association and the multilateral institutions in the wider Asian region, such as the ARF and the ASEAN+3. Nevertheless, Washington’s policy towards regionalism remains one of neglect or even, in some instances, opposition. This is based on a poor understanding of the benefits of multilateralism for US policy. And it risks undermining US interests and influence at a time when China’s clout in the region appears to be growing. Greater US support for multilateralism strategy may yield more benefits in the long term. This would require the United States to overcome a conceptual mind-block, which is the result of an underlying narrative about the US-led balance of power being the chief guarantor of regional stability, to the exclusion of the benefits of regionalism and multilateralism. Most important, robust US support for and participation in regional multilateral diplomacy would probably discourage any temptations for China to use and appropriate multilateralism for its own narrow ends, to the exclusion of the US interests in the region.

To be sure, the foregoing point could be seen as potentially counterintuitive to our principal argument, namely, that realists have exaggerated the US role in maintaining a balance of power in Southeast Asia, relative to the role of regionalism in engendering a cooperative security environment in which interstate rivalries have been muted and the scope for competitive great power intervention has been reduced. Our contention has been that a relatively distant US role in Asia has helped ASEAN to develop an institutional personality and play a major role in managing regional order. Should ASEAN now seek closer engagement of the United States in regional multilateral institutions, which might end up overshadowing its own role in regional order? Or would regional stability be better served if the United States continues to leave the region in ASEAN’s hands? Apart from the fact that the very question implies an implicit acknowledgement of the importance of regionalism relative to US-led balancing strategies, we argue that a continued role for regional institutions in managing regional order in an environment in which America remains relatively less interested or uninvolved in regional affairs would indeed be conducive to regional stability. But if Washington increases its
involvement in regional affairs in pursuit of its narrow and unilateral interests, it will undermine regional order. Although realists may find such a US role an affirmation of the balance of power dynamic, the implications for regional order might be negative. On the other hand, closer US engagement in the region through multilateral institutions led by ASEAN or developed around the ASEAN process would help regional stability. At a time when there are growing signs of US global unilateralism and regional assertiveness since 9/11, it is important that the balance of power argument does not blur the damaging effects of renewed US engagement in regional security affairs. American interventionism that is undertaken mainly in pursuit of a narrowly defined war on terror or for a unilateralist goal of containing China, instead of contributing to regional stability (through balance of power maintenance, as realists would argue), would actually create a pernicious hegemony – all the more reason why ASEAN should seek to pre-empt or moderate such unilateral assertions of US power in the region, by engaging the United States through the norms and processes of cooperative security.

Fourth, the Southeast Asian region has hosted several still ongoing institutional developments that hold the promise of bringing significant change to the way security has long been managed in the region. At least two such developments are noteworthy. The first has to do with the ‘liberalization’ of Southeast Asian regionalism, which is partly the consequence of democratic transitions in the Philippines, Thailand, and most recently Indonesia (Acharya, 2003). Regional cooperation in Southeast Asia has long remained the exclusive preserve of governments, and the engagement by civil society has been minimal despite the proliferation of ‘Track 2’ processes. Nevertheless, the growing attention given to new security concerns has led to NGO-initiated campaigns on environmental degradation, human rights abuses, poverty, and social justice that have been pursued at the regional level and that usually run counter to official policy. Contra longstanding official positions on security matters, civil society actors seek to challenge the dominant discourse and practice of security in their efforts to ‘build constituencies for peace’ (Caballero-Anthony, 2004).

Another development has to do with a discernible trend towards legalization or formalization in regional practices. Not many today would be surprised to find that the hallmarks of the once-venerated ‘ASEAN Way’ (decision-making by consensus, preference for informality and organizational minimalism, and so on) are increasingly coming under duress for their failure to facilitate ASEAN’s effort at coping with new challenges. As it is, the association has not been particularly averse to arming itself with formal provisions for monitoring compliance through the use of regional mechanisms that have legally binding dispute-settlement authority backed by sanctions, such as the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone Treaty, the
ASEAN Free Trade Area, or the Regional Haze Action Plan. Such agreements challenge the model of ‘soft’ multilateralism cum regionalism with which many so readily associate ASEAN. The latest expression of such ASEAN-styled Gesellschaft is the declared intention to establish an ASEAN Security Community (ASC).15 However, the manner in which ASEAN member nations have hitherto managed bilateral disputes suggests that the main instrument for resolving intramural problems, notably the High Council, would probably not be employed, and that, even when it is, it may be hampered by the non-interference principle, which the ASC has reiterated. At best, the ASC, according to one analyst, ‘promises the vague long-term prospect of more effective mechanisms for regional conflict resolution and, ultimately, a less fragile region offering fewer opportunities for interference by the rising Asian major powers as their diplomatic assertiveness and military capacity grows’ (Desker, 2003).

Along with other aspects of regional transition, the twin developments of liberalization and legalization argue for the likelihood of increased pressures on regional governments to allow for a more participatory and multilateral approach to regional security management. Should these shifts occur, even if only incrementally, a ‘business as usual’ approach to the security of the region may no longer be possible, and, in that respect, the longstanding adherence to a US-led balancing strategy may either have to be revised to cater to changing regional perceptions of what best provides for the security of Southeast Asia.

5 Conclusion: incomplete balance, incipient community

In this essay we have sought to contest a familiar and influential argument that has commanded and continues to command considerable respect among strategic planners and security analysts in Southeast Asia. American strategic dominance, it is argued, is central to the security of Southeast Asia, and it is through a US-led balance of power strategy that the region’s security and prosperity are best maintained. But as it turns out, it is also through such insistence on US primacy that alternative expressions of regional security management, not least multilateral security dialogue and other regional processes, are all too easily dismissed as inconsequential to the security and stability of the region.

15 See the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II), Bali, 7 October 2003; available at: http://www.aseansec.org/15159.htm. Consisting of twelve principles, the ASC concept emphasizes the continued importance of existing political instruments such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, as well as the ZOPFAN Declaration and the SEANWFZ Treaty, to regional stability. According to the ASC concept, these instruments would continue to play a key role in confidence-building measures, preventive diplomacy, and approaches to conflict resolution.
Does the proposition about the necessity of American primacy hold up in the face of the foregoing analysis? Our discussion of historical and contemporary developments within Southeast Asia argues against hasty dismissals of alternative modes of security management. Important as the US strategic presence has been for Southeast Asia, our analysis nevertheless demonstrates that American engagement in the region has also been ambivalent. Although that ambivalence has been replaced with a somewhat more focused approach after 9/11, the spotlight on the region has not made the situation any better, and may probably have worsened it. The best prospects for improving regional security, as we have argued, are found in the collective reconsideration – by the United States and regional governments – of the merits of security multilateralism, which is not new to the region as ASEAN has already been at it for quite a long time.

To be sure, not everything about ASEAN multilateralism has been good or productive. Nor should multilateralism be regarded as a kind of ‘silver bullet’ for resolving all of the security challenges confronting the region today. But that has not been our argument. Rather, our concern has simply been to restore an appreciation for the historical and contemporary record of US involvement in Southeast Asia, which does not demolish the received wisdom about America’s role in the region as much as deconstruct it (which is not quite the same thing). Although a balance of power certainly exists in the region, what our analysis reveals, first, is that that balance is incomplete, owing to American ambivalence. Second, there clearly is an incipient community as embodied in ASEAN, which has benefited the United States. Indeed, without the region’s increasing fluency with multilateral practices and processes – albeit a ‘soft’ multilateralism at that – the security of Southeast Asia would probably have been far worse than it has been.

References


