Security architecture in Asia: the interplay of regional and global levels

Barry Buzan

Abstract I argue that there is a distinct and longstanding regional structure in East Asia that is of at least equal importance to the global level in shaping the region’s security dynamics. Without considering this regional level neither ‘unipolar’ nor ‘multipolar’ designations can explain East Asian international security. To make this case, I deploy regional security complex theory both to characterize and explain developments in East Asia since the end of the Cold War. The shift from bipolarity to unipolarity is well understood in thinking about how the ending of the Cold War impacted on East Asia. Less written about in Western security literature are the parallel developments at the regional level. Prominent among these are the relative empowerment of China in relation to its neighbours, and the effect of this, as well as of the growth of regional institutions, and the attachment of security significance to East Asian economic developments, in merging the security dynamics of Northeast and Southeast Asia. How China relates to its East Asian region, and how the US and China relate to each other, are deeply intertwined issues which centrally affect not only the future of East Asian, but also global, security. With the notable exception of some crisis between China and Taiwan, this whole pattern looks mainly dependent on internal developments within China and the US. Also significant is whether the basic dynamic of interstate relations in East Asia is more defined by the Westphalian principle of balancing, or by the bandwagoning imperative more characteristic of suzerain–vassal relationships. The main probability is for more of the same, with East Asian security staying within a fairly narrow band between mild conflict formation and a rather odd and weak sort of security regime in which an outside power, the US, plays the key role.

Keywords China; East Asia; Japan; regional security complex; Southeast Asia; US.

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1. Introduction

How can one best understand the security architecture in East Asia? Is Asia’s security largely determined by the dynamics of superpower polarity at the global level (bipolar during the Cold War, arguably unipolar now), or does the region have its own structure and dynamics that either override or interact with those at the global level? Either way, what can one learn from studying East Asia’s security architecture about the likely future of this important part of the international system?

I will argue that there is a distinct and longstanding regional structure in East Asia that is of at least equal importance to the global level shaping the region’s security dynamics. I will further argue that the ending of the Cold War enhanced the importance of the regional level compared to the global one (Katzenstein 2000). The relative autonomy of regional security is constructing a pattern of international security relations radically different from the rigid structure of superpower bipolarity that defined the Cold War. This pattern is not captured adequately either by ‘unipolar’ or ‘multipolar’ designations of the international system structure. Nor is it captured by the idea of ‘globalization’ or by the dismal conclusion that the best that IR can do in conceptualizing the security order of the post-Cold War world is to call it ‘the new world disorder’ (Carpenter 1991).

In this section I set out the theoretical approach I use to understand regional security structures, and make the case that East Asia can be compared to other regions. I also sketch a brief history of the region as seen through this theoretical lens. Section 2 gives a short summary of the regional security situation in East Asia during the Cold War. Section 3 provides a more detailed examination of East Asian security dynamics during the 1990s. It looks at how the ending of the Cold War enhanced China’s regional position, at how regional institutions emerged, and at how these developments, plus a particular understanding of the regional political economy, generated an integration of the security dynamics of Northeast and Southeast Asia. This section also considers how the shift at the global level from two superpowers to one impacted on East Asia’s security. Section 4 sets out two possible scenarios for the region: security regime or conflict formation. It argues that the key variables shaping the choice of futures are to be found largely within the US and China and the relationship between them. That relationship in turn depends on what kind of relationship China develops with its neighbours, which depends not only on what happens in China, but also on how the underlying character of security relations in the region actually functions.

The analysis is based on regional security complex theory (RSCT) (Buzan 1991: Ch. 5; Buzan and Wæver, 2003). The central idea in RSCT is that since most threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones, security interdependence is normally patterned into regionally based clusters: security complexes (RSCs). As Friedberg (1993: 5) puts it: ‘most
states historically have been concerned primarily with the capabilities and intentions of their neighbours’. Processes of securitization, and thus the degree of security interdependence, is more intense between the actors inside such complexes than it is between actors inside a complex and those outside it. Security complexes may well be extensively penetrated by the global powers, but their regional dynamics nonetheless have a substantial degree of autonomy from the patterns set by the global powers. To paint a proper portrait of global security, one needs to understand both of these levels independently, as well as the interaction between them. The overall architecture of RSCT involves examination of security dynamics at four levels: domestic, regional, interregional and global. The normal expectation is that the interregional level will be relatively weak except either where the boundaries of RSCs are breaking down (external transformation), or where a global-level power links two or more complexes together (which can produce a looser supercomplex). The theory distinguishes between globally operating superpowers, great powers whose sphere transcends two or more regions, and regional powers whose sphere is largely contained within a single RSC. Its central focus is security interdependence whether negative (conflict formation) or positive (security regime, security community). It uses structure at the regional level (boundaries, anarchy-hierarchy, power polarity, discourses of amity and enmity – securitization and desecuritization) both as a benchmark to assess significant change, and as a basis for identifying the most likely pattern of evolution. It expects to find RSCs everywhere, the main exception being the condition of overlay, in which security dynamics are overridden by outside powers (e.g. colonization, Europe during the Cold War).

RSCT uses a blend of materialist and constructivist approaches. On the materialist side it uses ideas of bounded territoriality and distribution of power that are close to those in neorealism. Its emphasis on the regional level is compatible with neorealism’s structural scheme, but it contradicts the tendency of most neorealist analysis to concentrate heavily on the global-level structure. On the constructivist side, RSCT builds on the securitization theory set out in previous works (Buzan et al. 1998; Wæver 1995). It thus breaks from neorealism by treating the distribution of power, and the patterns of amity and enmity, as essentially independent variables. Polarity may dispose, but it does not determine, the character of security relations. The processes of securitization are essentially open, and subject to influence by a host of factors. The use of this theory can be taken as rejecting the view that international relations in East Asia are somehow unique, and that general theories of the international system therefore cannot be applied to it (Richardson 1994; Mahbubani 1995; Kang 1995). All too depressingly, East Asian international relations are quite amenable to analysis in terms of securitization, power politics and RSCT.

In a nutshell, the post-decolonization story of Asia in terms of RSCT looks like this (see Maps 1 and 2). During the Cold War, two out of the
RSCs in Asia during the Cold War

Note: This map represents East Asia around the early 1970s. China and Japan are both great powers. NE Asia and SE Asia are heavily penetrated, but keep their indigenous dynamics sufficiently not to be overlaid.

Map 1
Map 2

RSCs in Asia Post-Cold War

Note: This map depicts the region circa mid-1990s. The NE and SE Asia RSCs have merged, and Australia has been drawn into the East Asian RSC.
three great powers (China and Japan) were located in Northeast Asia. Asia consisted of three RSCs, all heavily penetrated by the superpower rivalry, but with South Asia largely shaped by its own regional security dynamics, while Northeast and Southeast Asia were so embroiled in the Cold War as to have their local security dynamics severely affected by it. With the communist victory in China’s civil war in 1950, China became steadily more influential in the security dynamics of both South and Southeast Asia. The resultant interregional security dynamics were both strong enough and sustained enough to generate an Asian supercomplex centred on China, but with only weak links between South and Southeast Asia. The ending of the Cold War meant that China was the major beneficiary of greatly reduced superpower penetration, and this strengthened the interregional dynamics of the Asian supercomplex. Southeast Asia also benefited from superpower withdrawal, and moved away from being a conflict formation shaped substantially by outside ideological rivalries, and towards an ASEAN-based regional security regime. At the same time as this internal transformation, Southeast Asia underwent an external transformation, effectively merging its security dynamics with Northeast Asia to form a single East Asian RSC. South Asia retained its status as an independent RSC, but still remained tied into the China-centred Asian supercomplex. India further inched its way towards great power standing by creating a complex centred on itself, but had not at the time of writing yet succeeded in breaking the bipolar pattern with Pakistan in South Asia.

Asia carries its own distinctive historical baggage. With the exception of Japan, China and Thailand, all Asian states are post-colonial constructions, and even those three were heavily penetrated and influenced by Western imperialism (Gong 1984). But in Asia, unlike in the Americas and Africa, the process of decolonization left behind a state system that by and large reflected patterns established by pre-colonial political history. This meant that with the exception of a few de novo creations such as the Philippines and Indonesia, the post-colonial states in Asia had the advantage of being able to anchor their legitimacy in their own history. While this synergy helped a system of modern states to take root in Asia, it also carried pre-colonial history forward into post-colonial international relations. Before Asia was incorporated into the European-made global international system, it had its own security dynamics. For much of East Asia, the main reality was the waxing and waning of Chinese imperial power. South Asia was largely separate from this Sino-centric system, and had its own internal cycle of empire and fragmentation. In Southeast Asia there are long histories of wars amongst Burmese, Cambodian, Thai and Vietnamese kingdoms, and also a long history of Vietnamese resistance to Chinese power. During the late nineteenth century, there were substantial migrations of Chinese into many Southeast Asian states, and the consequences of this still play a big role in the domestic politics of these states and in their relations with China. Asia also had its own colonial history, with Japan’s imperial venture.
between 1895 and 1945 leaving deep scars throughout East Asia, and particularly in China and Korea. This linkage between the new states and indigenous history underpins the idea of the state, and thus resonates in the security dynamics of Asia on all levels. In some cases it underpins contemporary securitizations between states (India and Pakistan, two Koreas, China and Vietnam), and in some within them (China, Indonesia, India, Pakistan). It also conditions how Asia relates to the global level, particularly as to the great power claims of India, China and Japan.

Asia is strongly shaped both by the insulating qualities of its geographical size and diversity, and by the presence of great powers within it. The impact of geography is expressed in the formation of three distinct RSCs in post-colonial Asia: first, a great power one in Northeast Asia emerging during the late nineteenth century; and after the Second World War, two standard RSCs (i.e. ones containing only regional powers) respectively in Southeast and South Asia. The fact that Asia contains great powers means two things: first that the interregional level of security dynamics has been much stronger than would be expected amongst a set of standard RSCs; and second, that Asian regional security dynamics have stronger links to the global level in both directions than one would expect in the global–regional links of a standard region (where the global level might well penetrate strongly into the regional, but the reverse is much less common). These features set the framework within which the Asian security story has unfolded over the last half-century. Because of its links to the global level, Asia, and especially East Asia, was a major area of superpower rivalry during the Cold War, second only to Europe. As a consequence the transition from Cold War to post-Cold War matters a lot in Asia. The subdivision of Asia into three distinct RSCs was a product of intervening geography and low interaction capacity. But as the level of absolute power available within Asia rose, geography mattered less. As a result, a second theme in this story is the steady knitting together of the three regional security dynamics, especially between Northeast and Southeast Asia, and to a lesser extent between both and South Asia.

Compared to other regions, the Asian case has some striking features that set it apart. Asia contains two great powers (China and Japan), and a third state (India) that is the leading aspirant for elevation from regional to great power standing. It also contains three nuclear weapon states (NWS – China, India, Pakistan) and a possible fourth (North Korea), plus three nuclear threshold states (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan) practising ‘recessed deterrence’. A co-location of adjacent great and regional powers on such a scale has only one other precedent, Europe, and the most apt comparison is not with today’s Europe, embedded in a thick weave of regional institutions, but with the balance-of-power Europe of the nineteenth century. Asia now, like Europe then, contains a range of substantial powers in varying degrees of industrialization. Japan, like Britain, is an advanced industrial society, well ahead of the others in wealth and development, and located offshore.
from a turbulent continent. China, like Germany, is big, centrally located, rapidly increasing in its absolute and relative power, has border problems and historical enmities with several of its neighbours, has an authoritarian government, backs onto Russia, and is in nationalist mood. Many in the region fear rising Chinese military power and assertiveness (especially Vietnam and Taiwan, also India). Some fear the migration threat that might unfold if China fell into political turmoil, and the environmental threat from its rampant industrialization. Nationalism is widespread and strong throughout Asia, and has plenty of cultural, ethnic, historical, status and territorial issues to feed on. As in nineteenth-century Europe, liberal democracy is deeply rooted only in a few places, thinly present in others, and completely absent in many. Industrialization means that both absolute and relative power levels are in flux. It also means, as it did in Europe, that there is sustained tension between the desire to seek national economic advantage, and the pressure to get entangled in economic interdependence. Sovereignty and independence are highly valued, not least because it is still within living memory for many that they were denied by Western and/or Asian imperialists.

There are limits to this analogy. Europe was also obsessed with sovereignty, nationalism and social Darwinism, but it did not suffer from the political and social traumas of recent colonization and decolonization by outsiders. By contrast, the contemporary great powers in Asia are boxed in by a superpower and two other great powers. Also unlike nineteenth-century Europe, Asia has no regional parallel to the European concert of powers, finding itself instead embedded in a global international society largely created by the Western powers. Asia’s weak regional institutional development is, however, offset by two constraints not available to nineteenth-century Europe: the deterrence effect provided by nuclear weapons, and an outside superpower prepared, up to a point, to hold the ring for Asian security. Asia is also much bigger than Europe, and the geographical barriers to interaction within it are much more formidable than those in Europe. The Himalayas, for example, are a rather more significant insulator than the Alps, with the not surprising consequence that Asia is much more culturally and ethnically diverse than Europe. These differences matter, as does the fact that the liberal global Zeitgeist of international relations in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is quite different from the imperial one of the nineteenth.

Therefore nothing in this analogy suggests that Asia is inevitably heading into its own version of Europe’s calamitous civil war of 1914–45, or that Asia, like Europe before 1945, will inevitably form a single RSC. What it does suggest is the high probability of rather classic power politics behaviour as the Asian mainstream over the next few decades. Politico-military security has priority, and the use of force, even all-out war, is understood as a possibility in many places. Economic development is a priority not just for welfare objectives and maintaining military strength, but also for moving
up the ranks of military power. In what follows I will focus mainly on developments in East Asia since the ending of the Cold War, but readers should keep in mind that the supercomplex level also matters, and that while South Asia still has considerable autonomy in its security dynamics, the weight of the super-regional level is increasing.

2. East Asian RSCs during the Cold War

In Southeast Asia decolonization produced a fairly typical post-colonial conflict formation. It was almost entirely composed of weak states, but since most of these had solid historical roots, a set of relatively durable modern states eventually emerged. Like that in the Middle East, this RSC quickly became heavily penetrated by outside powers. In Northeast Asia, only the secondary states (Korea and Taiwan) were post-colonial. China and Japan had never fully lost their independence to the colonial powers, and both came out of a great power past. The Cold War situation in East Asia (especially Northeast Asia) was parallel to that in Europe inasmuch as the region was a main frontline in the superpower rivalry, with stationing of superpower forces in several countries. But it was different in that Europe was overlaid (the regional dynamic subordinated to the global one), whereas in Asia China only briefly, if at all, lined up with the superpower securitization, and indigenous regional dynamics remained active under the Cold War cloak. The East Asian RSCs were heavily penetrated by the global level, but not overlaid by it.

Cold War logic divided Korea, China and Vietnam, so generating the local hot wars that also differentiated Asia from Europe. It tied Taiwan, South Korea and Japan firmly into the pattern of Cold War alliances constructed by the US to contain the communist powers. Except as a historical shadow (Buzan 1988, 1996), Japan was almost completely out of the picture as an independent strategic player in the region, featuring mainly as a US ally and dependant. After 1960, an independent China played mainly at the global level in a three-cornered game with the United States and the Soviet Union. But China also played a significant role in Southeast Asia, pursuing a rivalry with Vietnam that had roots independent of the Cold War. Thus although Northeast and Southeast Asia were distinct RSCs for this period, there were already strong signs of the linkages to China that would later draw the two regions together into a single East Asian regional security dynamic.

Using the levels of analysis scheme from RSCT to think about East Asian security dynamics during the Cold War produces the following picture. From a global perspective, the triangular game of containment and counter-containment amongst the US, the USSR and China spanned not only East Asia but also South Asia. This global power game penetrated deeply into domestic and regional security politics throughout the region. At the inter-regional level, the geostrategic position of China, and to a lesser extent,
historical memories of Japanese imperialism, spanned the Asian area sufficiently to think of it as a supercomplex: three regions loosely linked by great-power-driven interregional security dynamics. But at the regional level, South, Northeast and Southeast Asian security dynamics were largely separate. In Northeast Asia an older conflict formation was heavily penetrated by superpower rivalry, though remaining visible in the local securitization rhetoric. In Southeast Asia there was a more active regional bipolarization, albeit one heavily shaped by Cold War impositions. The US, in stark contrast to its policy in Europe, cultivated mainly bilateral alliances, and did nothing to encourage the formation of regional alliances or institutions either within or between the two halves of East Asia (Katzenstein 1996: 141). It was that pattern of relative mutual indifference that was to change after 1990, when the re-linking of Northeast and Southeast Asian security dynamics at the regional level (and not just in Chinese, Japanese, US and Soviet perspectives) began to unfold.

3. The 1990s and beyond: an emergent East Asian complex

Unlike in South Asia, where the ending of the Cold War did not make much difference to the regional security dynamics, in East Asia it made a big difference. In Southeast Asia the withdrawal of Soviet power and the pulling back of US forces facilitated the shift away from a conflictual bipolarization and towards a security regime. In Northeast Asia, the confrontation on the Korean Peninsula remained in place, and Japan remained a subordinate partner of the US. The military confrontation of the Cold War dropped away, but only to give more freedom of action to China, whose weight in the region was increasing rapidly. This encouraged the local states to begin re-linking their security affairs on an East Asian scale. The main argument in this section is that by giving more weight to China, the ending of the Cold War opened the way for an external transformation in the regional security architecture of East Asia. As from the 1980s economically, and during the 1990s also in a politico-military sense, the states of Northeast and Southeast Asia increasingly began to merge into a single RSC. A benchmark date to signal the before and after points of this merger, could be 1994–95, when the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was set up, and Vietnam joined ASEAN. This merger had both historical precedents and Cold War precursors. As well as being driven by classical military–political security dynamics, the making of an East Asian complex was also driven by the Japan-centred economic integration of the region, which added a strong economic dimension to its securitization processes. As in Europe, the key US alliance structures stayed in place, but in East Asia, the US role as ringholder in the regional security dynamics remained considerably stronger than it was on the other side of Eurasia.

During the 1990s, the patterns of regional security interdependence in Asia underwent an external transformation. What had been the strong
interregional links of the Asian supercomplex became sufficiently dominant to meld the two eastern components of the supercomplex into a single East Asian RSC. The supercomplex continued on as the relationship between East and South Asia. This knitting together of an East Asian RSC involved two main stories. The first was China-centred, and grew out of the Cold War, and earlier, security links between China and Southeast Asia. With Soviet power out of the picture, the longstanding military-political links between China and Southeast Asia became more important, triggering the growth of links in the military-political security dynamics of Northeast and Southeast Asia. The second was Japan-centred, and stemmed from patterns of East Asian economic linkage that had been growing strongly during the 1980s. These patterns became increasingly securitized during the 1990s, providing an additional sector of regional security interdependence across the whole of East Asia.

The military-political story hinges on both the actual and expected rise of China's power in a regional context that during the 1990s was less constrained by outside powers than at any time during the twentieth century. Partly this was simply a matter of China’s relative regional weight being increased by the almost total withdrawal of Soviet, and the partial withdrawal of American, power from the region. In both the Soviet/Russian and US cases, this withdrawal was much more conspicuous in Southeast than in Northeast Asia. Partly it was to do with the juxtaposition of China’s strong economic growth during the 1980s and 1990s, with the faltering of Japan’s economy during the 1990s (Alvstam 2001), combined with its continued political weakness. In combination, these two developments left China freer to act without the constraint of either a fully-fledged regional balancer, or heavy competitive engagement in the region by outside superpowers.

The resulting enhancement of China’s weight and freedom of action in East Asia focused attention on its domestic developments, and what kind of state, and what kind of neighbour, it was likely to become. Finding a firm answer to that question remained an elusive goal. If China remained centralized and grew strong, then the question was whether it would be aggressive or benign. Some argued that it would be militarily incapable of serious aggression (Kang 1995: 12–13; Dibb 1995: 87–8); and/or that it would be restrained from such adventures by its interest in development (Kang 1995: 12; Mahbubani 1995) and its adaptation to international society (Zhang 1998; Foot 2001). Concern about a possible ‘China threat’ nevertheless became widespread in East Asia, not helped either by China’s sometimes bellicose behaviour or its lack of transparency (To 1997: 252, 261; Soeya 1998: 204–6). Those wanting to take a more malignant view had plenty to draw on. There was the general idea that rising powers seek to assert their influence (Segal 1988; Shambaugh 1994). Attached to this were two ideas that seemed to amplify it. First was the idea of China as a revisionist power, not closely wedded to the existing international order, and with many
territorial, cultural and status grievances against it (especially over Taiwan). Second was the idea that China was a classic model of authoritarian modernization (Bracken 1994: 103–9), unrestrained by democracy and vulnerable to nationalism and militarism. Reinforcing these views was China’s continued willingness to resort to aggressive behaviour and threat or use of force against its neighbours – India, Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam – and its continued cultivation of historical hatred of Japan. Some saw China and Japan as natural, or potential, rivals (Roy 1994: 163; Clermont 2002). In support of malign views were China’s cavalier attitude towards nuclear testing and the export of missile and nuclear technology to Pakistan and Iran, and the gathering reaction against its unfair and inhumane economic and political practices (prison labour, piracy). Its behaviour in the South China Sea, and towards Taiwan, offered a distinctly mixed prospect to those hoping that China could somehow be brought into the regional process of dialogue and diplomacy.

Throughout the 1990s uncertainty about China’s domestic developments made it difficult to fix an image of how it would relate to the wider Asian region. This uncertainty affected both the US and ASEAN responses to what the IISS called China’s ‘creeping assertiveness’ (Strategic Survey 1994–95: 191). As the 1990s unfolded, China’s relations with the region settled into a mix of unilateral bellicosity (over Taiwan and the South China Sea), and increasingly comfortable and skilled use of multilateral fora such as ARF to support those regional voices still concerned about excessive US influence. China also came out well from the economic crisis, both because of its contributions to rescue funds, and because of its ability to hold the line on its own currency. This strengthened its position against Japan, which continued to be unable to assert leadership.

By the early 1990s, loss of external support had largely forced Vietnam to abandon its direct military confrontation with China, and to seek a place within an expanding ASEAN. This shifted the strategic focus away from Cambodia and the Sino-Vietnamese land border, and towards the South China Sea in particular, and the wider East Asian pattern in general. During the Cold War, China’s territorial assertiveness in the South China Sea had been mainly against Vietnam, but also affected Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and later Indonesia. The Chinese military extended their occupations to the more southerly Spratly Islands in 1992, occupying atolls, and asserting claims to continental-shelf resources, and in 1994 occupied the Mischief Reef, long claimed by the Philippines, though not occupied by it. ASEAN failed to take a strong stand against these Chinese moves. China ignored various agreements not to use force, and continued with its policy of incremental occupations.

The shift to a wider regional strategic focus with China at its centre began soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the global and regional distribution of military power. As Leifer (1996: 26, 46) argues, post-Cold War ASEAN has been forced to see itself as part of a bigger security
picture, no longer confined just to Southeast Asia. Its not so hidden agenda is to engage China, which ASEAN does not want to do by itself, or in East Asia, but in a Pacific and even global context. The main vehicle for this reorientation has been the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which came into being in 1994. Japan played a significant role in this development, though eschewing leadership for itself (Foot 1995: 242). ARF usefully binds both Japan and China into a regional institutional framework, allowing Japan to address its historical problem (Sansoucy 2002: 15–16), China to address the fears of its neighbours, and both to avoid conspicuous balancing behaviour towards each other. The result, however, is the rather anomalous situation of a regional security body created and run by the minor powers in a region. An attempt by Japan in 1996 to bolster the security dimension of its relationship with ASEAN got a cool response as ASEAN proved unwilling to provoke China with any hint of an anti-China alliance (Strategic Survey 1996–97: 180–2). This episode underlines the tension within ASEAN between the preferred option of trying to engage China diplomatically by building a regional international society, maximizing the engagement of outside powers in the region, and trying to extend an ASEAN-style security regime to East Asia; and the fallback option of putting in place the means to resist China should engagement fail.

The ARF was helped into being by the fact that the US, with less strategically and more economically at stake in East Asia, ended its longstanding opposition to multilateral security dialogue in the region. ARF linked together the middle and small powers of ASEAN with their 'dialogue partners' the US, Japan, China, Russia, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Cambodia and the EU. Initially, North Korea and Taiwan were not included, but after the summit of the two Kims in 2000, North Korea was invited to participate. On the basis of its membership, ARF had some standing as a loose Asia-Pacific security regime. As Leifer (1996: 55) put it:

The undeclared aim of the ARF is to defuse and control regional tensions by generating and sustaining a network of dialogues within the over-arching framework of its annual meetings, while the nexus of economic incentive works on governments irrevocably committed to market-based economic development.

One way of understanding the setting up of ARF is to see it as a response to ASEAN’s inability to construct itself as a counterweight to China, and the need therefore to try to socialize China into being a good citizen. In addition to concerns about China’s interventions in Cambodia, its disputes with Vietnam and its expansion in the South China Sea, there was also concern about its growing influence in Burma. Chinese support for the military junta in Burma not only strengthened the junta against its domestic rebels and the civil opposition, but also allowed China to deploy intelligence
facilities in the Indian Ocean. Given China’s role in Pakistan, this excited concerns in India about Chinese military encirclement of India. The diplomatic isolation of Burma facilitated Chinese penetration. China was thus a key to explaining why ASEAN, pushed mainly by Singapore and Indonesia, invited both India and Burma to join the ARF, hoping thereby to counter Chinese influence, and acknowledging a shared interregional strategic concern between ASEAN and India in containing China (Strategic Survey 1996–97: 193).

After initially being uncomfortable with multilateralism, China quickly adjusted to the ARF, seeing advantage in using its soft procedures to fudge conflicts (Cossa and Khanna 1997: 222). The diplomatic level of the ARF is accompanied by the ‘track two’ arrangements of CSCAP (the Council for Security Cooperation in Asia Pacific), which brings together academics and policy analysts from the various countries. China upgraded its participation in ARF and CSCAP in 1996 in response to deteriorating relations in Northeast Asia and with the US. ASEAN had to struggle hard to maintain its leadership within an ARF containing several large powers. Japan and the US wanted more influence for themselves, and could threaten to use APEC as an alternative forum. China and India found ASEAN’s leadership a good mechanism for limiting US domination of the ARF. There was a tension between, on the one hand, the desire of many East Asian states (especially Japan) to keep the US engaged in the region to provide the balancer to China that they were unwilling to provide themselves, and on the other hand, the tendency of ASEAN to appease China, or not resist its encroachments, while at the same time resisting, or not supporting, the maintenance of a US military presence. Whatever its operational feebleness as a security regime, ARF was a symbolically important move in tying together Northeast and Southeast Asia. It was a combination of factors during the 1990s that tied Northeast and Southeast Asia together into an East Asian RSC. One key was a rising shared background of concern about China, reinforced by a set of active disputes, and weaker balancing of China at the global level. Another was the expansion of ASEAN’s security regime to cover all of Southeast Asia, which both brought relations with China into greater prominence, and provided the platform from which to launch ARF. Some Asian security problems remained largely disconnected from this
move, most obviously the dispute on the Korean Peninsula. The China–Taiwan dispute was also not linked into ARF, though Taiwan’s huge investments in Southeast Asia certainly gave the ASEAN countries an interest in the issue. It is easy to be dismissive about ARF’s incessant ‘dialoguing’ and apparent inability to confront conflicts directly, especially so in the wake of the East Asian economic crisis, which weakened ASEAN and ARF. But if viewed as the opening stages of an attempt to build a regional security regime in an area notable for the absence of regional institutions, it looks more impressive. Cultivation of ideas such as ‘cooperative security’ (nicely captured in the phrase often heard from Australian diplomats that they ‘seek security with Asia, not from it’), is beginning to develop a shared rhetoric of desecuritization across East Asia. This is reinforced by the promotion of norms regarding peaceful settlement of disputes, regular multilateral dialogue at several levels, and adherence to some international arms control agreements like those on nuclear non-proliferation. Although doing so slowly and unevenly, such cultivation does lay the foundations for elements of an East Asian security regime. These elements may not yet look very impressive when compared either with those in Europe or with the depth and extent of security problems in East Asia. But they look more impressive when compared either with the absence of them before, or with the situation in South Asia or the Middle East.

Viewed in a harder perspective as a response to concerns about rising Chinese power, the ARF could be read in two seemingly contradictory, but in fact complementary, ways. On the surface, it was a collective East Asian attempt to socialize China into being a good neighbour by entangling it in the dialogue networks. Given the ARF’s lack of dispute settlement or enforcement mechanisms, this aspect of it could, and often did, run close to being institutionalized appeasement of China. But under the surface ARF could also be read as laying the collective foundations for balancing against China if the socialization attempt failed, and the more malign interpretations of China’s development turned out to be true. The fear was that too conspicuous a pursuit of the resistance option would derail the preferred engagement one, and this reinforced a tendency within ASEAN, and indeed all of Asia, to see the balancing of China as first of all a US responsibility and only in the last resort a local one.

The second element in the merger of Northeast and Southeast Asia was the Japan-centred East Asian economic interdependence, which had already developed during the last decades of the Cold War. Often referred to as the ‘flying geese’ model, this took the form of a hierarchy of finance, production and technology spreading out from Japan into the countries of East Asia (Helleiner 1994). As Japan exported many of its lower-tech industries under the pressure of high wages and the high yen, it created concentric circles of investment in its neighbours, with Korea and Taiwan in the first circle, and Southeast Asia and China further out. During the
1970s and 1980s, this created a unique form of regionalism largely based on private capital and with virtually no international political institutionalization. It rested on strong commitment to shared pursuit of economic development goals. In many ways it was also based on shared adherence to the Japanese model of political economy. Alongside this Japan-centred economic system was the phenomenon known as ‘Greater China’, in which Chinese communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and elsewhere played a leading role in promoting trade with, and investment in, China (Yu 1996), so adding to the economic interdependence between Northeast and Southeast Asia.

These arrangements delivered unprecedented rates of growth during the 1980s and first half of the 1990s, and this growth plus the shared commitment to development goals came to assume an important role in the region’s self-understanding and self-presentation of its security (Cossa and Khanna 1997). Using arguments close to those associated with liberal thinking about interdependence, the line was developed that East Asia’s many political rivalries, territorial disputes and historical antagonisms could all be overcome, or at least shelved, by subordinating them to the common economic enterprise. Sustaining economic growth thus acquired an important security dimension in both East Asia’s domestic and international politics. Domestically, growth supported the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes that might otherwise have come under pressure to democratize. Internationally, the ‘flying geese’ model linked the region’s growth aspirations together, thereby providing a strong and immediate common interest amongst states that might otherwise have let their political antagonisms drift to the fore. In parallel to ASEAN’s earlier achievement, much of East Asia came to accept that politico-military stability was a necessary foundation for the successful economic development that would underpin regime legitimacy.

Signs of economic downturn in the region as a whole were appearing by 1996, and in 1997 this turned into a financial and then an economic catastrophe. Huge drops in the value of many of the region’s currencies were followed by credit collapse, widespread bankruptcy and sharp economic shrinkage. The intense economic pain was a major problem in its own right, but it also became a security problem in three ways. First, it threatened political stability in some authoritarian states, most notably Indonesia where it coincided with an already unstable succession problem. Second, it threatened the region’s economic model, so raising major questions about its ability to sustain growth into the future. And third, it stripped away the economic blanket that had been used to cover the region’s unresolved political and territorial disputes, leaving exposed a nasty-looking combination of weakened governments and a classical agenda of military–political security problems (Dibb et al. 1998: 9; Cossa and Khanna 1997: 225–7).

The more democratic governments seemed to weather the crisis quite well, but the difficult transition in Indonesia and increased authoritarianism in Malaysia undermined the political cohesion of ASEAN, weakening it as
a regional stabilizer. Doubts about the Asian development model undermined confidence in the future, and these doubts were reinforced by the prolonged failure of the region’s economic leader, and the source of its model, Japan, to find its own way out. Did the fault lie in the Asian model of capitalism, with its cronyism, lack of investment in longer-term development, unsound investments and over-capacity; or was it to be found in the wider practices of Western financial liberalism, reinforcing credit bubbles, empowering currency speculators and creating unstable collective irrationalities in the global financial markets? The latter interpretation fed a strong line of securitization against globalization, and strengthened demands for a regional response (Bergsten 2000). In part, this securitization can be interpreted as a direct response to the crisis, but in part it also reflected fear of the potential securitizing dynamics that the crisis opened up in the region itself, and can be seen as a (successful) attempt to divert attention away from those. It seemed clear that blame lay in both places, and that the Asian model of high debt-to-equity ratios was particularly vulnerable to liquidity shrinkage and currency collapse. This opened up a contradiction between pursuit of the model and pursuit of the global financial liberalization that created the possibility of such destabilizations in the future. More broadly, there was a contradiction between domestic political legitimacy, and global economic rules and norms that undermined distinctive national development projects. At the time of writing, recovery from this crisis remained very uneven, and the economic underpinnings of East Asian security still shaky.

Whatever the balance of fault, this crisis can be seen as a normal part of capitalist development, which has always proceeded by alternating bouts of success and failure. Like the other societies that have mastered this type of development, the Asians will have to undergo a learning process in which the cycles of success and failure teach them how best to adapt their political economies and societies to marketization and modernization. This process has never been smooth anywhere, and there is no reason to expect that it will be so in Asia. If the past is a guide to the future, cyclical recessions, occasional depressions, domestic political upheavals and dangers of extreme nationalism will all be part of the process, albeit within the context of a considerably more globalized international political economy than was the case for the first and second waves of modernizers. The question is how this almost inevitably turbulent process of development will impact on regional security in East Asia. The problem is a set of circumstances in which the maintenance of both domestic and international political–military security are strongly tied into an ability to sustain growth. The presence of only nascent regional institutions, and a thin veneer of cooperative security, combined with a rather daunting agenda of traditional securitizations, means that in East Asia nothing except prosperity, a thin commitment to desecuritizing dialogues, fear of nuclear weapons, and the presence of the United States act to moderate the regional (in)security dynamic.
In sum, the case for an emergent East Asian security complex rests on three parallel developments:

- First, a shared concern throughout Northeast and Southeast Asia about the implications of growing Chinese power.
- Second, the creation, albeit partial and fragile, of institutional security connections linking Northeast and Southeast Asian states.
- Third, the build-up of an East Asian regional economy, which is widely thought within the region to have strong links to politico-military stability.

In many ways it is fair to see the transformation of the regional level in Asia during the 1990s as a mirror image of the equally big changes at the global level. Within a few years around the ending of the Cold War, the major games of containment and counter-containment between the US and the Soviet Union, and between the Soviet Union and China, had disappeared. All that was retained of the extensive Cold War structure of great power intrusion into East Asia was the US position of local containment against China in support of US allies in Northeast Asia. Superpower disengagement raised ‘the prospect that East Asians will be left to come to terms with their own long-standing rivalries that were often suppressed under the blanket of the Cold War’ (Strategic Survey 1991–92: 117). These effects were most dramatic in Southeast Asia. Soviet forces were largely out of Cam Ranh Bay, and US ones were out of the Philippines by 1992, and the US had normalized relations with Vietnam during 1994–95. The US retained a generalized engagement with East Asia through its membership in APEC and ARF, but this rested on an explicit underlying linkage between the economic and military relations in the Asia-Pacific. American statements at APEC summits in 1993 and 1994 made it clear that the US linked the costs of its regional leadership role and military presence in Asia to continued access to the Asian economy (Stuart and Tow 1995: 48; Simon 1994: 1051). Public connections of military and economic relations in this way were not just a means of bringing American pressure to bear against the East Asian enthusiasts for a more specifically East Asian bloc. They were also a way of underlining the unequal quality of transpacific relations, and the continued dependence of the East Asians’ political and military security on the US presence. The US’s seizure of the leading role during the East Asian economic crisis underlined its dominance, and by the late 1990s the US was even re-establishing some of its military presence in Southeast Asia, a process reinforced after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001.

The virtual removal of the Soviet Union/Russia from East Asia as an intervening outside power had quite mixed effects. It certainly improved China’s military position, and increased its leverage against India and Vietnam. But it also weakened China’s bargaining power vis-à-vis the US, meaning that China had to make more concessions on things like adherence
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China had to balance among three not always complementary goals: not wanting to submit to US hegemony, or to allow the US to dominate Asia; not wanting to be drawn into a direct confrontation with the US, or be construed as a rival to the US; and wanting to increase its standing in international society generally, and its integration into the world economy in particular. In response to its new position, China cultivated relations with both Japan and ASEAN states, and its relations with South Korea, both economic and diplomatic, continued to blossom. It placed greater emphasis on its relations with East Asian and OECD states and less on those with the Third World. Russia was a dwindling military force even where its territory abutted East Asia. Sino-Russian relations were good, with China becoming a major purchaser of sophisticated weapons and defence industrial goods from Russia, and the two countries sharing an anti-hegemonic line against the US as sole superpower. They concluded a series of border agreements and CBMs to desecuritize their relations, and both supported the continued existence of North Korea. In some eyes, this was a kind of strategic partnership, aimed at offering some balance against US hegemony. But it was also a limited and shallow partnership, and was weakened by Russia’s tilt towards the US after 11 September. By contrast, Russo-Japanese relations remained cool, and the basic problems between them unresolved.

As already noted the pattern of US engagement in Northeast Asia was remarkably little disturbed by the ending of the Cold War. Indeed, after a period of uncertainty in the early 1990s, these US ties got somewhat stronger. The US role in Korea became more central with the actions taken to stem North Korean nuclear proliferation. Its engagement with Taiwan deepened as a consequence of the major US military role in the Taiwan Straits crisis during 1995–96 (Tucker 1998–99). Most complicated was US–Japan relations where the ending of the Cold War threw the US–Japan alliance into some disarray by taking the immediate rationale out of defence cooperation. Japan remained committed to keeping the US active in the East Asian security equation, and did not challenge US leadership. Japan began reforming its defence guidelines towards allowing a wider role for the JSDF and closer coordination with US forces in the region. But despite some formal revision of the US–Japan defence cooperation guidelines, doubts remained about whether, and to what extent, Japan would support the US in a crisis (Twomey 2000).

The removal of the Soviet factor brought US–China strategic relations into sharper focus, not least by stripping away any ambiguity about the reasons for continued US military engagements in Northeast Asia. Within this context, US–China relations nonetheless continued to fluctuate much as they had done during the last decade of the Cold War. Expectations of China’s rapid rise to great power status, or at least regional challenger in Asia (Christensen 2001), remained strong, and were underlined by the harder line of the Bush administration on China. The two no longer shared
a common concern about the Soviet Union, and there were tensions between them, *inter alia*, over trade; copyright violations; Chinese arms and nuclear and missile sales to Iran, Pakistan and others; US arms sales to, and political support for, Taiwan; US plans for missile defences; nuclear weapons testing in the run-up to the 1995 NPT renewal conference and the CTBT negotiations; and navigation rights. The high point of US–China tensions occurred over Taiwan during 1995–96, first over US granting of a visa to Taiwan’s president, Lee Teng-hui, and then over robust US naval responses to China’s military manoeuvres against Taiwan. Despite Chinese blustering, the US successfully demonstrated its military superiority over China even in China’s home waters (*Strategic Survey* 1995–96: 176–9; 1996–97: 167). Following this the US staged joint naval exercises with India in the Indian Ocean early in 1996, thus underlining the emerging all-Asia scale of security concerns about China. The Taiwan Straits crisis left the impression that China’s military bellicosity had been restrained only by a strong US response, and not by the still weak bonds of economic interdependence.

The post-Cold War pattern at the global level thus continued to run in close parallel to those at the regional and interregional levels in Asia. The dominant sector of security is the traditional military–political one, albeit with linkages to the economic sector, and China sits at the centre of all these patterns. The pattern of US engagement in the region, both backs up the regional and interregional Sino-centric security dynamics, and shares their ambivalence and uncertainty about the nature of the threat from China (if any) and the types of relationship with China that are both possible and desirable. The only substantial exception to this pattern is Korea, where the US supports the South and Japan against military threats from North Korea. In part, Sino-US relations have to be interpreted as part of the global-level dynamic, and the weight of this level could easily increase if China’s power grows sufficiently to make it a challenger for superpower status. But as during the Cold War, this global pattern remains entangled with the regional and interregional ones, in which China is the central indigenous player, and the US is an outside power intervening in that RSC.

4. Conclusion: scenarios for the Asian supercomplex

What SCT scenarios are possible and what not in Asia? Overlay is ruled out other than existing US commitments in Japan and South Korea. No outside state, not even the US, now has the capacity to overlay the region, and neither does any state within the region. China would be the only possible candidate for that role, and whatever traditional inclinations to seek regional suzerainty might still live within its political instincts, it lacks both the coercive capability and the civilization attractiveness that it once possessed. As Van Ness (2002: 143) notes, China has ‘negative soft power’. Like Europe before it, Asia now has too many substantial powers within it
to allow any one of them to take over the whole, and it has collectively become too big a centre of power for any one country to dominate it without that domination having major repercussions at the global level. Asia’s future is thus as some form of RSC, which leads to questions about its shape, and about its essential structure in terms of polarity and amity–enmity.

Asia has already seen one internal transformation (Southeast Asia) and one external one (the merger of the Northeast and Southeast Asian complexes). A second internal transformation looks close in South Asia, as it moves from bipolarity to unipolarity. There are no conspicuous inter-regional dynamics suggesting that external transformations between Asia and either the Middle East or Russia/CIS look at all likely. What remains a distinct, though uncertain, possibility is that the interregional dynamics linking South and East Asia will strengthen, transforming the supercomplex into a fully fledged Asian RSC. More on this below.

In terms of polarity, the prospects look pretty clear. In South Asia, unipolarity is a distinct, though not certain, possibility. Slowly but probably surely, India seems destined to outgrow its South Asian challengers and lift itself into prominence as an all-Asian regional power, if not a global great power. In East Asia, bipolarity looks durable, since no other state comes close to matching China and Japan. The Asian supercomplex is tripolar with little prospect of change.

In terms of amity–enmity the possibilities run from conflict formation through security regime to security community. South Asia remains a conflict formation and nothing points towards any prospect of it becoming a security community. Nuclear rivalry, water sharing, migration and environmental stress could all amplify the traditional sources of hostile securitization in South Asia. So too could India’s increasing hegemony, though there is little that India’s mostly feeble and internally divided neighbours will be able to do about it short of Pakistan initiating a nuclear war. But in general South Asia has proved resilient against big changes, and a good case can be made that India cultivates moderation by being an essentially balanced and slow-moving actor (Bajpai 1998: 193–7). Thus incremental change in the same direction as during the 1990s seems the likely call.

In East Asia the picture is more nuanced. Southeast Asia has moved from conflict formation to security regime, whereas Northeast Asia largely remains as a conflict formation. There seems little prospect that either East Asia, or Asia as a whole, will be able to form a security community in the foreseeable future. To achieve a security community requires a strong shared view of the status quo, and either or both of shared culture or well-developed institutions. Democracy may not be a necessary condition, but as suggested by the democracy and peace literature (and by the empirical cases to date), it is a huge asset (Lake 1992). East Asia seems a long way from meeting these conditions. Although ASEAN might count as a security regime, many other states in Asia are prepared to use force and to have it
used against them, spectacularly so in the case of India and Pakistan, the two Koreas and China and Taiwan, but also true between India and China, Vietnam and China, Singapore and Malaysia, and quite a few others. Border clashes remain a possibility in many places, but there is not much chance of one country invading and occupying another. There is not much shared culture, and still only the beginnings of solidly rooted institutions, though there is some shared interest in economic development.

Two plausible scenarios remain: East Asia could unfold into a classical conflict formation, or it could become a security regime. Either of these scenarios seems likely to strengthen the links between East and South Asian security dynamics, and thus to expand the process of external transformation that began with the merger of Northeast and Southeast Asia. As East Asia goes, so will go the Asian supercomplex.

**Conflict formation**

The East Asian RSC, and therefore the Asian supercomplex, could easily become a conflict formation. History has left numerous territorial disputes, status rivalries, fears and hatreds among the successor states and their peoples. It is hard to think of two adjacent countries within the region that do not have either or both of serious unresolved issues between them and active processes of securitization. The region has no shared cultural legacy, few traditions of international cooperation and a worrying number of strong nationalisms. The Cold War has left it with two divided countries, Korea and China, a number of nuclear and near nuclear states, and a still weak and most recently established framework of regional organizations. Berger (1993: 130) notes that none of the Western arguments for the decline of war (democracy, interdependence, institutions) applies in East Asia, and whether nuclear weapons will stabilize or exacerbate otherwise securitized relations is a matter of hotly contested debate. Segal (1997: 236–43) argues not only that China looks increasingly like a national socialist regime, but also that the process of democratization, especially where combined with nationalism, can inflame rather than ameliorate relations with neighbours.

As already argued, Asia is not unlike nineteenth-century Europe. It is dominated by powerful modern states that are the successful inheritors of the post-colonial legacy. Asia contains some very weak and even failed states, and for the people within those states the domestic level of security is very much to the fore. But overall, there is a robust set of Asian regional powers whose interplay creates a strong regional security dynamic. These conditions may enable, but they certainly do not make inevitable, a slide into conflict formation. The key to the outcome lies in what happens with China and the US. If China remains unified and adopts an aggressive posture, and if the US reduces its security engagement in East Asia, then a conflict formation becomes the most likely outcome. It is hard to say how these two developments might interact. A US disengagement might well
encourage Chinese hegemonism. Pugnacious Chinese behaviour could either draw the US in (constructing China as a global rival) or push it out (fear of engagement in Asian wars). Movements on the Korean Peninsula (war, reconciliation or a triumphalist takeover by the South) are unlikely in themselves to determine the direction of the region, but in conjunction with US and Chinese developments could help to push the region towards conflict formation mode. As suggested by talk during 2000 of a ‘global partnership’ between Tokyo and Delhi (Strategic Survey 2000–01: 184) a more assertive China could also draw India into the RSC as part of an anti-hegemonic coalition against China. Fear of China resonates in the domestic politics of several Southeast Asian states with significant Chinese minorities, especially Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia. It could encourage the open acquisition of nuclear weapons by Taiwan, and possibly Korea and Japan. In this scenario, China would certainly keep Pakistan as an ally, and perhaps Burma (depending on its domestic politics). A unified Korea still hanging on to its dislike of Japan might well try to stay neutral or bandwagon with China.

An East Asian conflict formation would be unlikely to end in war amongst its great powers, not only because of the fear of nuclear weapons, but also because of fear of jeopardizing economic achievements. More localized conflicts in Korea, over Taiwan, and in the South China Sea would be a distinct possibility.

Security regime

A security regime does not imply that relations amongst its members are harmonious and without conflict. Rather, conflict exists, but the actors agree to cooperate to deal with it. There has to be some agreement on the status quo amongst the great powers, a desire to avoid war, and an expectation that states will act with restraint when disputes arise (Jervis 1982: 360–2).

It is possible to imagine East Asia developing into this mode despite its difficult historical legacy. Those who hope for the triumph of economic rationalism and the effectiveness of Asia’s informal, transnational diplomatic style (Mahbubani 1995; Richardson 1994; Higgott 1994) support this scenario. The key conditions for it are: (1) that China either fails to develop into the dominant power in the region, or that it evolves into a great power that is perceived by its neighbours as relatively benign; and (2) that the US remains significantly engaged in East Asian security as the holder of the ring. Korea is again unlikely to shape the outcome by itself, though unification could complicate the maintenance of a US military presence. Since this scenario is dependent on the desecuritizing logic of economic rationalism being a stronger force than the securitization logic of power politics, it is dependent on a reasonable recovery from the economic crisis of the late 1990s. It is also dependent on the relative successes and failures in the
various attempts at institution-building around the region, particularly the
ARF, but also the moves towards economic regionalization noted by
Bergsten (2000).

The economic uncertainty in East Asia, and the relative fragility of its
institutions, suggest that if a successful regional security regime is to
develop, it will only be able to do so in the context of a supportive global
international environment. In one sense, this is simply another way of
stating the necessary condition for this scenario that the US must stay
engaged in East Asia. Many of the existing organizations in the region can
be seen as designed primarily to help bind the US to East Asia by creating
at least a rhetoric of an Asia-Pacific super-region. But as some of the more
astute observers in the region understand (Mahbubani 1995), the US is not
an East Asian state. It looks also to the Atlantic and to Latin America, and
Asia is only one of its roles. It can choose to be engaged in Asia to a greater
or lesser extent, but it is external to the region in either case (Buzan 1998).

These transregional organizations and economic relations are also more
than just ways to ensnare the US into a role in East Asia. However feeble
they appear, they do represent a willingness on the part of states in the
region to begin talking formally and regularly (however superficially) about
their regional security relations. It seems unlikely that this development
could go forward without US participation. For better or worse, many of
the East Asian states trust the US more than they trust each other. Symbolic
of this is the leading role played by the US in trying to defuse the nuclear
crisis in Korea. Regardless of whether one approves of the KEDO deal or
not, it is hard to imagine that anything would have been done within the
region to stop escalation if the US had not taken the lead. It might even be
argued that such an externally supported arrangement is not a true regional
security regime at all. In reality it lies somewhere between a conflict forma-
tion and a security regime, with the states of the region in effect allowing
their security to be managed by an outside player.

RSCT-based scenarios suggest that the security options for East Asia can
be reduced to a surprisingly narrow band. The East Asian RSC seems
almost certain to end up either towards the milder end of the conflict
formation scenario, or somewhere near the weak end of the regional
security regime. Only very extreme Chinese aggressiveness and a complete
transformation of Japan (both hard to imagine) could push it into a real
warring conflict formation like Europe was before 1945 (and South Asia
and the Middle East still are). Equally hard to imagine, at least for many
decades, is anything that could make East Asia into a strong security
regime, let alone a security community with a confederal structure like the
EU with actor qualities. Only if China becomes democratic and liberal do
moves in that direction become a possibility.

But although RSCT enables us to confine the scenarios for Asia to a fairly
narrow range of possibilities, it remains the case that the two crucial vari-
ables on which the future of Asian security depends – China and the US –
are fundamentally indeterminate (Buzan 1996). Developments in Korea could have a big local impact, but are unlikely to determine the course of the region as a whole. Japan could in principle reshape the region, but seems so mired in structural and historical problems that its most likely role is to adhere to the status quo, not changing much unless severely pressured by external events. Acquisition of nuclear weapons by Japan would almost certainly trigger securitization in China, but such a move by Japan is almost inconceivable without major prior changes in US and Chinese behaviour. Huntington (1996: 234–8) notes Japan’s historic tendency to align with the dominant power in the system, and if still true, this could raise interesting questions if it eventually has to choose between the US and China. Russia could re-emerge as a major player in East Asia, but given the depth of its domestic disarray this seems unlikely for the foreseeable future. India is unlikely to change Asia by itself, and much of its potentiality in the supercomplex hangs on how China and the US choose to relate to it. Indeed, it is a disturbing thought that India’s best chance of achieving the global status recognition it craves is if China and the US fall into rivalry and the US recruits India into a containment alliance.

That leaves China, which is already central to the security dynamics of the Asian supercomplex, and the US, which almost alone carries the burden of how much or little the global level impinges on the regional one in Asia. With China, the question is how quickly (or slowly) its power grows, and how much (or little) its postures and policies arouse fear in its neighbours. With the US, the question is how much (or little) it will remain engaged as an outside player in East Asia’s regional security dynamics, and whether or not Sino-US rivalry will grow to take on a major global-level dimension. In both cases the answers to these questions will be found largely within the domestic political economies of these two countries.

The China variable is quite straightforward and easy to understand. Part of it is a simple realist story about how China’s increasing power impinges on its neighbours and triggers securitizations. The other part is a more liberal story about the political character of China, and the likelihood and timing that its evolution from dictatorship to democracy will shift perceptions of its power from malign to benign, and thus trigger desecuritizations. In this context, it is worth noting the striking similarities between India and China in their general outlook (Bajpai 1998; Wu 1998). Both hold strongly realist perspectives towards their regions and the wider world. Both locate themselves in a historical self-perspective as great and ancient civilizational centres to which other peoples traditionally came for trade and enlightenment, but which were not themselves usually militarily expansive outside their region. Both have been sensitized by colonial experience, and consequently display a high concern with national cohesion (as an issue of power, and to prevent repeats of disunity allowing in foreign penetration). Both give high value to autonomy in economy, foreign policy and military capability, but both are also moving towards a more liberalized economy.
Despite strong anti-capitalist traditions. Both perceive the US as a key threat, but are nonetheless pragmatic enough to align with it on some matters. Both favour a multipolar international system. Such a structure gives greater autonomy to regional-level dynamics, and to great powers within their localities. These deeply rooted and shared features make both India and China likely to be essentially Westphalian great power players in Asian security. They will only be changed, if at all, by thoroughgoing internal liberalizations of a type not in prospect for many decades.

The US variable is, by contrast, surprisingly difficult to understand. The easy part to see is that a US withdrawal from Asia is unlikely because of US economic interests in Asia, and because it would mean the end of US superpower status. Withdrawal would have huge consequences because of the large role that the US plays in Asian security. The US presence enables Japan to remain a civilian power, suspends the question of what Sino-Japanese relations would become if left to their own devices, and provides leadership for local fire-fighting over issues such as Korea and Taiwan. Neither China nor Japan (nor India) has the standing to take up the role of Asian regional leader, and none of them looks likely to acquire it soon. ASEAN cannot by itself provide adequate regional leadership, though its ARF is better than nothing. How long it will take the Asians to grow out of this dependence on the US is hard to say. As in Europe, many find it comfortable (and cheap), and despite some inflated rhetoric, few oppose it absolutely. One consequence of this dependence is that US withdrawal could only really come about as a result of a domestic triumph of neo-isolationism in US politics that made it indifferent to Eurasian security, and content to set aside most of its global engagements. Such a development is not unimaginable, but neither does there seem to be any very strong move in that direction, and there is a host of powerful military and commercial interests likely to oppose it.

What is more difficult to see is the effect of the US being, and staying, engaged in Asia’s security. A simple realist reading would be that the ending of the Cold War meant that the US shifted from playing the more committed Cold War role of protector of the region, to playing the rather less committed one of balancer. A protector has to make sacrifices to preserve and strengthen its allies against a larger outside threat. A balancer can expect its allies to make sacrifices to court its favour. It is not for nothing that Britain was known as ‘perfidious Albion’ when it played the balancer role in Europe. Any state so placed will be tempted to manipulate the local divisions to its own economic and political advantage. Waltz even goes so far as to argue that the US itself will come to be seen as a threat by other powers (Waltz 1993). In the absence of a superpower rivalry to constrain its behaviour, the US still remains constrained from excesses of self-interest both by its economic interests in East Asia, and by the desire to preserve the legitimacy aspects of its superpower status. But idiosyncratic US projects such as national missile defence, largely driven by its domestic
dynamics, could still have major impacts on Asian security, as could the much commented upon US drift towards increasingly unilateral behaviour. The claim that US deployment of missile defences would trigger a proliferation chain in Asia, causing China, India and Pakistan to increase and upgrade their nuclear arsenals, is entirely plausible.

This realist view offers important insights into the US role in Asia. But a reading through RSCT requires one to focus more closely on how the regional (and in the Asian case also interregional) security dynamics interplay with the global-level ones. The puzzle to be solved here, is why there is much less balancing behaviour against China than its rising power, increasingly nationalist government, and behaviour in Pakistan, Burma, the South China Sea and Taiwan would suggest is appropriate. There are four possible explanations for this apparent underperformance of the balancing mechanism.

First, is that the traditional sort of strategic analysis that sees threats emanating from China to its neighbours is simply wrong. Either China does not represent a serious threat to its neighbours, and they are therefore correct in keeping their securitizations of it at a rather low level; or it does, but its neighbours are somehow blind to the facts. Given the sustained, and overtly military, pressure that China has put on India (by seizing territory and nuclearizing Pakistan), on ASEAN (by occupations and claims in the Paracel and Spratly Islands), and on Taiwan (by frequent threats and military demonstrations), it is hardly plausible that its neighbours would not have noticed, or not correctly evaluated, the threat.

Second, is that Chinese diplomacy has somehow been so effective that it has been able to intimidate its neighbours into a form of appeasement that restrains them from publicly responding to its provocations. The mechanism here is the threat that any balancing responses will cause an immediate worsening of relations and escalation of threats. This could be plausible given China’s ability to deal with the separate regions of Asia more or less in isolation from each other, and the formidable difficulties of constructing an anti-China coalition stretching from India through ASEAN to Japan. There is also the fact that China’s behaviour towards Taiwan is (rightly) seen as a special case, and its similarity to China’s behaviour in Southeast and South Asia therefore gets underplayed, making the whole pattern less visible.

Third is the possibility that the Asian international subsystem is dressed in Westphalian clothes, but is not performing according to a Westphalian script. This line of thinking (Fairbank 1968; Huntington 1996: 229–38; Kang 1995, 2000) projects Asia’s past into its future. It assumes that what Fairbank labelled the ‘Chinese World Order’ – a Sinocentric and hierarchical form of international relations – has survived within the cultures of East Asia despite the superficial remaking of the Asian subsystem into a Western-style set of sovereign states. Its principal effect is to subvert the expectation of balancing as the normal response to threat and power
imbalance in a Westphalian system, and to replace it with a propensity among the weaker powers to bandwagon. The idea is that hierarchical behaviour remains so deeply ingrained in Asian cultures that it makes their international relations not conform to the realist models of IR. This intriguing, and potentially extremely important, proposition cannot really be tested unless the US pulls out of Asia, leaving the Asian supercomplex to sort itself out entirely on its own terms. Its prediction does explain the observed underperformance of balancing, though it is hard put to explain India’s conformity with it given that India was never part of the Chinese world order.

Fourth is that the impact of the US engagement in Asia explains the underperformance of balancing: in other words, that there is a strong interplay between the security dynamics of the Asian supercomplex, and those at the global level concerning US–China relations. The argument is that the US presence as security ringholder in Asia allows Asian governments to see the job of balancing China as falling to the US. As a consequence, India, Japan and most of ASEAN underperform locally in balancing China. The US encourages such underperformance in several ways. It projects nuclear non-proliferation norms strongly onto the two Koreas, Japan, Taiwan, India and Pakistan; it cultivates Japan as a military dependant; and it has traditionally opposed Asian multilateral security initiatives. This behaviour is not simply a local application of US global policy, since the US has made little attempt to restrain Israel’s nuclear deterrent, or earlier those of Britain and France. Only Vietnam has tried to balance China, and did so in the teeth of US hostility to Hanoi. Since the US has to worry about China at the global level, and since China’s global prospects are heavily conditioned by its position in the Asian supercomplex, this underperformance of balancing locks the US in. It potentially stimulates US–China rivalry by putting the US into the frontline against China. This logic has unsettling links to the Chinese world order one sketched above. Westphalian logic suggests that if the US drew back from its ringholding position, other Asian states would be forced to balance, thus doing the US’s job for it at the global level. But while that interpretation creates incentives for the US to disengage, the Chinese world order one makes disengagement much more hazardous. If Asian international behaviour is to bandwagon with threateners, then US disengagement would hand China a regional suzerainty in Asia, which would greatly enhance its global position.

On this reading, and barring extreme behaviour by either China or the US, something like the existing configuration in Asia is potentially quite stable over a time span of a few decades. The US cannot risk withdrawing, and so has to preserve its sole superpower status by keeping Japan bound to it, and by pursuing with China what Segal (1999: 35) called ‘constraintment’: containing China militarily and politically, while at the same time engaging with it economically in the hope of liberalizing its internal development over the medium and longer term. China has a different incentive
to play the waiting game, hoping that its growing material capabilities will eventually deliver more of an ability to balance internally against the US, and not wanting to provoke Japan to shift from recessed to deployed nuclear deterrence. None of the Asian powers wants to become an overt rival to China or a frontline outpost for the US in some kind of mark 2 superpower rivalry. If one thus brings the global and regional-level dynamics together in assessing Asian security, a quite powerful case can be made that the main scenario is a slow working out of the existing patterns. The eventual outcome will turn on which happens first: whether China becomes more internally liberalized, and therefore less threatening; or becomes powerful while still nationalistic and authoritarian. The main threat to this scenario is a serious escalation in the Taiwan Straits. The problem is that China sees this as an internal question, whereas most others see it as an international one (albeit recognizing the special character of the case). If China feels compelled to deliver on its rhetoric against Taiwan, and proceeds against Taiwanese independence by force, then huge questions will be put on the table. Will the US prevent a Chinese takeover of Taiwan? Will Japan help it to do so? A ‘no’ answer to the first question would break the credibility of US engagement in Asia. A ‘no’ answer to the second would break the US–Japan alliance, and thus throw open the whole pattern of security dynamics in the Asian supercomplex.

Note


References


