The Real Pacific Solution: A NATO for Asia

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The Real Pacific Solution: A NATO for Asia

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Introduction

Nick Bisley of Monash University writes that recent security crises in the Asia-Pacific region "illustrate the institutional limits of security in the region and the pressing need to rethink the broader basis of regional security and more specifically, the nature of the American alliance system."

Bisley argues that:

> "security in the region requires a multidimensional approach of the kind which the alliance system cannot deliver due to its military bias. The regional security environment, with its blend of old-fashioned power politics and non-traditional transnational threats, requires something which can provide the military heft of an alliance system with the diplomatic and logistical capacity of an international organization."

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Essay - The Real Pacific Solution: A NATO for Asia

The recent break down of order and social cohesion in the Solomon Islands and East Timor has demonstrated the on-going challenges that weak states face, as well as the kind of security problems that continue to beset the broader Asia-Pacific. The rioting and violence in Dili and Honiara has prompted Australia to dispatch troops to attempt to stabilise the situation and help restore order to these troubled societies. Australia is playing a decisively hegemonic role in this corner of the Pacific and while it has been relatively successful in the past, the task is getting harder, both operationally and politically. Indeed the recent deployment of troops to East Timor is beginning to demonstrate the limits of the kind of hegemonic role that Australia can play. More importantly, as these recent deployments, as well as past efforts, such as the ad hoc coalition to support the East Timor independence process, show existing regional institutions are singularly incapable of coping with the complexities of the security challenges facing the region. APEC and ASEAN simply do not have any crisis response capacity, the US alliance system-the mechanism through which American military power underwrites the security of the Asia-Pacific-is also not particularly well suited to undertake such actions. Hence Australia taking the lead in a range of ad hoc coalitions to try to create some kind of order and more broadly to act as a kind of security guarantor within this part of the Pacific. The problem of course is that there are a host of political problems that beset such actions-the least of which are the on-going charges of imperialism and arrogance which, given the comments of the Australian Prime Minister are not without foundation-to say nothing of the extremely limited ability of Australia to conduct these kinds of activities over any great distance or timeframe. These cases illustrate the institutional limits of security in the region and the pressing need to rethink the broader basis of regional security and more specifically, the nature of the American alliance system.

Trilateral Security Dialogue: A Semi-significant Development

Condoleezza Rice was in Sydney in March this year participating in the first ministerial level Trilateral Security Dialogue between Australia, the US and Japan. One of the reasons these talks were being held was, ostensibly, to discuss new security challenges and to work out a common position on these, as well as a range of other matters relating to their alliance commitments and security interests. From a regional security point of view the talks are notable for a number of further reasons. First, they represent the latest phase of the enhancement of America's alliance relationships with Japan and Australia (and notably *not* South Korea) and point at the dual function that these are now intended to have. [1] For the US, the primary purpose of these alliances is to provide a political framework for the military basis of America's dominance of the Asia-Pacific. America is by some measure the most powerful military force in the region and the alliances facilitate this forward projection of force, both operationally and politically. The alliances also have a new and further role. They are intended not only to coordinate the regional projection of force but also to play a vital role in America's broader global security strategy. The alliances have moved beyond their original focus on Cold War regional containment and are now pieces in a global political and military programme.

Second, the trilateral dialogue is notable because historically America has preferred to conduct its Asia-Pacific regional security and strategic policy on a strictly bilateral basis. [2] Although it has participated in the ASEAN Regional Forum, Washington does not take that talk-shop particularly seriously and has not sent a ministerial level representative for some time. Moreover, the US has

also never encouraged, and indeed sought to minimise, cross-alliance discussion and action. [3] Third, the issues the Trilateral Dialogue addressed represent a recognition by the three that regional security is shaped as much by non-traditional threats, such as pandemics and economic governance, as it is by the more orthodox geopolitical matters.

In a general sense then the Trilateral Security Dialogue, and the commitment for it to be regularised, represents a small but important development. It is broadly intended to advance regional security and improve three-way cooperation and coordination at both the regional and global level. Interestingly, the joint statement released after its conclusion noted that the talks focussed particularly on strengthening cooperative frameworks within the Asia-Pacific. [4] While doubtless worded so as to allow the reader to infer more than was said, the statement does imply some basic recognition that regional security requires enhanced international cooperation. The implication of the talks, and more concretely of the respective actions of the three countries, is that some improvement in coordination among themselves may be required. However, they appear to feel that there is no need to rethink the mechanisms through which they seek to stabilise and secure the region. The participants seem unaware or wilfully ignorant of the extent to which the existing structure of their security arrangements is unsuited to the current environment and that such 'cooperative frameworks' for regional security that do exist are both few and, in policy terms, of little substantive consequence.

America's Anachronistic Alliance Approach

Given that America's military presence has been central to the stability of the Asia-Pacific for the past 30 years why should we conclude that the current system is inappropriate? Officially the current American system of regional security involves three elements: bilateral military alliances and agreements; regional multilateral dialogue; and ad hoc cooperation on specific issues such as piracy and terrorism. This three-way structure sounds as if it has the range to be effective. The problem is that the first element is by far the most important and swallows the vast majority of the resources, both fiscal and bureaucratic, that the three partners devote to regional security matters. The primary policy focus for the three, and the only systematic mechanism for coordinated *action* of groups of states, is the military alliance system. The region has shown, most notably in East Timor, that on occasion multilateral responses to security problems can be crafted. The problem is that the circumstances which brought that operation into being are unlikely to be replicated in other situations (such as Papua or Taiwan).

If, in spite of the rhetoric, the main plank of regional security for the allies and hence for America's approach is a military alliance, why should we be concerned? The major problem is that the primary security and strategic challenges facing the region require much more than the one-dimensional military deterrence that the current alliance system provides. Military power is of course an important means to secure and stabilise the region and, in some places, it is the most appropriate policy. But it is not the only means through which the goals of regional stability and security can be advanced. More worryingly, military power is limited in its ability to deal with the most acute challenges that we face. In the case of infectious disease transmission, easily the most immediate cause for alarm, it is next to useless. It has shown a singular inability to deal effectively with transnational crime and terrorism. Even on the Korean Peninsula, the locus of military force in East Asia for half a century, the forward projection of American military power through its alliances with Japan and South Korea has failed to halt nuclear proliferation. The current arrangements are also far from optimal for responding to an increasingly militarily capable China. Viewed from Beijing, the ring of alliances, combined with America's general distrust of multilateral fora, looks suspiciously like containment redux: the current US and Japanese trend towards a militarised response to China's rise may well be not only ineffective, but counter-productive through the generation of a regional

security dilemma. Indeed, there are good reasons to conclude that increasingly the region is not being secured by America's alliances. Primarily this derives from its approach to China, but it is also propelled by America's encouragement of Japanese military normalization.

Rethinking Security Cooperation

Put simply, as events in Timor and the Solomons illustrate, security in the region requires a multidimensional approach of the kind which the alliance system cannot deliver due to its military bias. The current preference for bilateral military means to achieve regional security, backed with some half-hearted regional diplomacy, is simply not enough. At the most obvious level, human security crises which require a careful balance of political, military and economic response are beyond such systems. Moreover, an increasingly prosperous and militarily confident China requires more sophisticated handling than the blunt sword of encirclement and deterrence. Equally, some security crises, such as the on-going nuclear stand-off in Korea, are best dealt with through subtle, sophisticated and coordinated diplomatic manoeuvring among a range of states. Even the most cursory consideration of regional security issues shows up the limits of a system that, in essence, relies exclusively on deterrence through the plausible threat of force. If Japan, Australia and the United States are serious about dealing with the full range of international security challenges which lie in wait then the time has come to think hard about a more effective means to pursue these ends. The military aspect does have a place but America, Australia and Japan's cooperation in substantive regional security policy needs to move beyond this single focus. Beyond the distortion of resource allocation that it creates, the three allies need to ensure their policy structures suit the security terrain of a dynamic Asia-Pacific. More precisely, the US currently has a system which has made it the predominant military power in the region. But this predominance now neither delivers the capacity to shape political outcomes in its favour in crucial issues of security, such as in North Korea, nor does it provide any meaningful way to advance its interests in resolving unorthodox security problems such as an infectious disease crisis. Given the lack of capacity to shape the outcomes of most of the more urgent security problems in the region, it is strange that the US, and its allies, appear to be willing to foot the bill for such an expensive system of dubious utility.

An Asia-Pacific NATO

In this sense then, transformation of the two bilateral alliances into something more suits both the region and the allies. Specifically, the regional security environment, with its blend of old-fashioned power politics and non-traditional transnational threats, [5] requires something which can provide the military heft of an alliance system with the diplomatic and logistical capacity of an international organization. Ideally, one would like all the regional major powers pursuing the goals of regional and security in a coordinated and multidimensional fashion. Given that this is unlikely in the short term, what can be done? While still more possible than probable, the optimal approach, one that can project not only a credible military force but also coordinate responses to specific political and non-traditional challenges, involves transforming the bilateral alliances into a multilateral cooperative security organization similar to NATO. Importantly it should model itself after the institution that NATO is today and not its Cold War containment incarnation. NATO has now become much more than a military alliance. [6] It has a clear human security agenda, it has a robust political purpose in consolidating democracy in Eastern and Central Europe, and a multidimensional approach to its actions, such as its peacekeeping operations in Macedonia and Afghanistan.

The point of reorganizing America's military presence in the region, and its interactions with local partners, in such a way is as follows. Most importantly, it would provide an institutional structure for regional security that provides enhanced efficacy through an improved political mechanism. A growing challenge that the US faces in the region is the decreased legitimacy that its current arrangements are thought to have. The problems of legitimacy are nowhere more evident than in

South Korea. The alliance, and indeed the broader relationship, is suffering from not only short term frustrations at Bush administration policy, but a longer term disillusionment with the broader American position which is seen by many Koreans as an unreasonable imposition. It is clear that the region would be manifestly worse off, in the short to medium term, if the US left suddenly. Thus it is necessary to deal with the diminishing political returns of the current set-up. And it is precisely this political benefit that a genuinely multilateral system would provide. An institutional setting whereby members meet regularly and have permanent diplomatic as well as military representation can significantly enhance the legitimacy of America's military presence by providing a multilateral blessing by all interested parties. The important point about such as system is that it does not require subservience to the dominant power: as we saw among the NATO membership during the Iraq intervention members of an American dominated alliance need not always fall into line with American policy. Of course the equality of a NATO-style institution may provide a disincentive among the more hardline in Washington. Why would the US want to reduce the freedom of movement that it currently enjoys? The answer, of course, lies in the benefits which multilateralism provides. It would reduce the immediate cost to the US of its military dominance, it would provide a more effective political framework for American military force and, most importantly, be better able to stabilise the region than the current arrangement.

More specifically, the organization will need to be genuinely multilateral otherwise it will lack legitimacy and the necessary diplomatic heft needed to change the status quo. Such an organization would need also to focus on and plan for coordinated action to cope with the broader range of human security problems in the region. This would mean that action would involve not only traditional military deterrence but also crisis prevention and management across a range of sectors. Third, it should have an organizational structure which would allow it to coordinate political and diplomatic action for more effective non-military reactions to crises. Finally, there is the question of membership. While America's allies in the region are not all as enamoured of current policy as Japan and Australia-New Zealand and South Korea both have fraught relations- the existing alliances would be the logical core along with those states with whom the US has arrangements that are below the alliance level such as Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore. Indeed, just such a multilateral framework can be an excellent means to improve relations with both South Korea and New Zealand and to entice them into the fold. In the longer run it should again follow NATO's lead and seek to expand its membership to include states who have previously been thought to pose security threats. Of course the most pressing challenge would be to convince China that this is not beefing up a containment policy. The most obvious way of doing this is to seek to include China from the outset as a dialogue partner with the view to membership in the longer run.

Among many of the challenges facing the region, China is perhaps the most complex. The region needs to convince China that its interests lie in security cooperation and not competition. While China seems relatively well-disposed to this approach at present-witness its reasonably constructive role in the Korean nuclear stand-off-the region needs to work to provide a context in which this will continue while making clear that there is collective concern at some of its more bellicose rhetoric and actions. The American allies must also recognise that their current approach does not advance that end. The creation of a multilateral system offers opportunities that the existing system cannot. It can act to help enhance the legitimacy of America's military presence in the region and provide a structure to better respond both to China and to the real and unorthodox security challenges which bedevil the region.

Building Trust

Such a proposal would not be uncontroversial; any military system that involves Japan instantly sets many in the region on edge. But this points at a further opportunity for a multilateral organization, it

provides a setting in which regional concerns about Japan's military power, and indeed concerns about the US, could be assuaged. Equally, it can play an important role in placating nationalist demands in Japan and elsewhere, for a more independent relationship with the US. Placing military force within a multilateral goes some of the way to placating the concerns which lie at the heart of insecurity in the region: the uncertain relations among the major powers. Multilateral institutions provide a mechanism, though far from perfect, not only for the more effective organization of the projection of force and response to crisis but also for the construction of the most important commodity in international security: trust.

The Trilateral Security Dialogue is an interesting development in regional security, but there is a good chance that discussion will simply refine the current arrangements and fail to address the deeper problems in the region. If America wishes to secure not only itself but to assist in fostering regional security, and if Australia and Japan to help it do so, it should begin to think seriously about creating a robust multilateral security system in the Asia-Pacific. The present trajectory of US security policy fails to project American influence in anything other than the most blunt fashion and, more importantly, its contribution to regional security appears subject to the iron law of diminishing returns.

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End notes

[1] See Nick Bisley 'Enhancing America's Alliances in a Changing Asia-Pacific' in Journal of East Asian Affairs 20.2, 2006.

[2] For the most recent formal articulation of this see Department of Defence, The United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region, 1998 Washington, DC: USGPO.

http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/easr98/index.html

[3] Interestingly, in recent years figures of some significance have begun to float the possibility of some change in this direction. See the following piece penned by the former head of the US Pacific Command and his chief political adviser: Dennis C. Blair and John T. Hanley, ' From Wheels to Webs: Reconstructing Asia-Pacific Security Arrangements' in The Washington Quarterly 24.1, 2001, pp. 7-17.

http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/washington_quarterly/v024/24.1blair.html

[4] Minister for Foreign Affairs, Australia, Trilateral Strategic Dialogue: Joint Statement Australia-Japan-United States, 18 March 2006, Sydney.

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2006/joint_statement-aus-japan_usa_180306.html

[5] See Nick Bisley '"The New Security Environment" in the Asia-Pacific: An Australian Perspective' in Derek McDougall and Peter Shearman (eds), New and Old Security Agendas: Australian

Perspectives London: Ashgate, 2006, pp. 69-83.

[6] Karl Kaiser 'The New NATO' in Asia-Pacific Review 10.1, 2003.

Nautilus invites your response

The Austral Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to the editor, Jane Mullett: austral@rmit.edu.au. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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