

COUNCIL *on*
FOREIGN
RELATIONS

*International Institutions and Global Governance Program
Japan Studies Program*

Northeast Asian Regionalism: A (Possible) Means to an End for Washington

Ralph A. Cossa, Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies
December 2009

This paper is based on “New Regional Security Architecture for Asia,” a CFR project directed by Senior Fellow Sheila A. Smith.

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher dedicated to being a resource for its members, government officials, business executives, journalists, educators and students, civic and religious leaders, and other interested citizens in order to help them better understand the world and the foreign policy choices facing the United States and other countries. Founded in 1921, CFR carries out its mission by maintaining a diverse membership, with special programs to promote interest and develop expertise in the next generation of foreign policy leaders; convening meetings at its headquarters in New York and in Washington, DC, and other cities where senior government officials, members of Congress, global leaders, and prominent thinkers come together with CFR members to discuss and debate major international issues; supporting a Studies Program that fosters independent research, enabling CFR scholars to produce articles, reports, and books and hold roundtables that analyze foreign policy issues and make concrete policy recommendations; publishing *Foreign Affairs*, the preeminent journal on international affairs and U.S. foreign policy; sponsoring Independent Task Forces that produce reports with both findings and policy prescriptions on the most important foreign policy topics; and providing up-to-date information and analysis about world events and American foreign policy on its website, [CFR.org](http://www.cfr.org).

The Council on Foreign Relations takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

For further information about CFR or this paper, please write to the Council on Foreign Relations, 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065, or call the Director of Communications at 212.434.9400. Visit CFR's website, www.cfr.org.

Copyright © 2009 by the Council on Foreign Relations®, Inc.
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.

This paper may not be reproduced in whole or in part, in any form beyond the reproduction permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law Act (17 U.S.C. Sections 107 and 108) and excerpts by reviewers for the public press, without express written permission from the Council on Foreign Relations. For information, write to the Publications Office, Council on Foreign Relations, 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065.

This project has been made possible by grants from the Robina Foundation, the United States-Japan Foundation, and the Korea Foundation, and by support from CFR's program on International Institutions and Global Governance. CFR's Japan programs are made possible in part by the generosity of the following corporate sponsors: Canon USA, Mitsui & Company, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries America, Mitsubishi International Corporation, Sony Corporation of America, and Toyota Motor North America.

Introduction

This paper addresses the place of Northeast Asian regionalism in U.S. foreign policy. It aims to help both a U.S. and global audience better understand how important (or unimportant) the task of building regional security architecture is to the United States in its overall East Asia foreign policy agenda. It focuses in particular on the currently ill-fated Six Party Talks (involving North and South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States) and how this denuclearization process influences U.S. attitudes toward Northeast Asian regional cooperation. It also puts the quest for a regional security architecture in broader perspective, arguing that it is not an end in itself, but one means of achieving the desired end of a more peaceful and stable Northeast Asia—one in which the United States continues to play a constructive part.

It should be noted at the onset that there are three parallel efforts underway in terms of regional cooperation, at the Asia-Pacific, East Asian, and Northeast Asian levels respectively. This paper will focus on the last, but the other two cannot be ignored since these parallel efforts influence how and if the states of Northeast Asia cooperate. The United States has long promoted regional cooperation but has focused more on Asia-Pacific regionalism than on Northeast Asian regionalism for a number of reasons that will be explored in this paper. Meanwhile, many regional states seem to prefer the middle alternative, East Asian multilateralism, with or without the United States.

The experience of the Six-Party Talks to date has reinforced the difficulties of Northeast Asian regionalism, even though Washington (and all the other parties, with the notable exception of Pyongyang) remains committed to the process, mostly (one suspects) for lack of any viable alternative. Some would argue that without North Korea's active involvement, Northeast Asian regionalism would be incomplete. Others say finding a common denominator low enough to incorporate the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) into the possible regional structure is likely to ensure its irrelevance (and that is assuming a common denominator can be found).¹ The author leans toward the latter view, unless North Korea makes the strategic decision to give up its nuclear weapons and allow itself to be integrated into the Northeast Asian community of nations.

Finally, it is useful to remember at the onset that building architecture differs from promoting regional cooperation or ad hoc cooperation toward a specific task, although the latter can help lay the groundwork for the former. This paper concludes that Northeast Asian regional cooperation, as manifest in the Six Party Talks, is currently designed less to lay the groundwork for Northeast Asian regional security architecture than to deal with bilateral issues, including U.S.-DPRK denuclearization, alliance management with Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK), and U.S.-China relations.

Defining the Region and U.S. Priorities

The United States has long considered itself a “resident power” in Asia and sees the ideal regional security architecture—both for Northeast Asia and East Asia at large—as one that builds upon the existing U.S. bilateral security alliances, allowing the United States to remain a member of the regional security community.

For the purposes of this paper, we assume that the United States is *of* Northeast Asia—even if not geographically *in* Northeast Asia—and will remain a major player in the region, even if others see the “ideal” Northeast Asia as one in which the United States is less engaged. When addressing Northeast Asian regional integration, therefore, the paper is talking about the Korean Peninsula (at some point hopefully unified, but today composed of both the ROK and DPRK), China, Japan, Russia, and the United States.

The author is also inclined to add Mongolia to the mix and only somewhat less inclined to add Canada, even though both will be ignored for the purpose of this discussion.²

What should not be ignored, but frequently is, is Taiwan, which remains a “core issue” between Washington and Beijing and an important factor in assessing both regional stability and the U.S.-Japan alliance, at least from Beijing’s perspective. Simply put, there can be no long-term regional stability or true regional integration without a successful resolution of the Taiwan issue. Again, for the purposes of this paper, Taiwan will not be dwelled upon, beyond periodic reminders to the reader that it cannot be ignored.

Alliances Come First

In terms of foreign policy priorities, sustaining and reinvigorating Washington’s bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea enjoy first priority, followed closely by the development of a “positive, cooperative, and comprehensive” relationship with China. While this paper will not dwell on the future of the U.S. alliance network here, given the focus of the paper, readers should note that the Obama administration, like all its predecessors, has made it clear that Washington’s bilateral security alliances with Tokyo and Seoul are the base upon which broader multilateral cooperation will be built. From a U.S. perspective, bilateral alliances and multilateral cooperation are not mutually exclusive—they complement and reinforce one another.

Regional mechanisms deter conflict by promoting cooperation, trust, and understanding, but they are not prepared (and generally not willing) to deal with crises once they occur. In the case of conflict, aggression, or even catastrophe, the United States looks to its alliance network or to ad hoc coalitions that usually include like-minded friends. The U.S. forward military presence, made possible in large part by alliance-basing and host-nation-support agreements in Japan and Korea, provides credibility to the U.S. defense commitment.

This does not mean the United States will continue its significant military presence in Northeast Asia forever. If and when the North Korea issue resolves itself, then U.S. force levels should and likely will be adjusted accordingly.³ But the alliances are, in the author’s opinion, critical for future regional stability and thus should remain. One should look at the U.S.-Australia relationship today as one potential model for future U.S.-Japan and/or U.S.-ROK alliance relations. There are no large U.S. bases in Australia, nor are there significant numbers of U.S. military forces based there on a permanent or even rotating basis. But the alliance remains strong. The two sides exercise and fight together and remain highly interoperable. With a benign security environment in Northeast Asia, similar relationships can be sustained with Tokyo and Seoul. These, in turn, will help sustain the benign security environment and provide a foundation upon which to build Northeast Asian regional cooperation.

If Washington’s alliances with Tokyo and Seoul continue to provide the foundation upon which future U.S. Asia policy is built, that foundation needs reinforcement, especially in light of the threat posed by North Korea’s unrepentant pursuit of nuclear weapons. During the last two years of the George W. Bush administration, there was some progress on the Korean denuclearization front, but even then there were serious questions as to whether Pyongyang had really made the “strategic decision” to give up its nuclear weapons program. Today, all but the most extreme optimists (or DPRK apologists) have concluded, based on definitive statements and actions by Pyongyang, that North Korea has decided to pursue its nuclear program relentlessly. As the North’s central news agency stated unequivocally (in response to [UNSC Resolution 1874](#), which was itself in response to Pyongyang’s May 2009 nuclear weapons test): “It has become an absolutely impossible option for the DPRK to even think about giving up its nuclear weapons.”⁴

The perception during the final Bush years that Washington was focused primarily on nonproliferation—keeping whatever nuclear capability that existed in North Korea in North Korea (and out of the hands of terrorists)—raised concerns that the United States was prepared to live with a nuclear-armed North Korea. In turn, this raised concerns (which continue to be expressed both in Tokyo and Seoul) about the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella and U.S. extended deterrence. While the Obama administration has held firm in demanding complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization, fears remain that Washington might eventually yield to DPRK demands and accept North Korea as a de facto nuclear weapon state. Similar concerns are being raised by China and other U.S. allies.

Pyongyang's current refusal to return to Six Party deliberations keeps both the threat and concerns alive. The Obama administration faces a dilemma, deliberately created and advanced by Pyongyang. It can either accept North Korea's demand for direct bilateral negotiations and try to do something about its growing nuclear capabilities, at the risk of undercutting and marginalizing its South Korean and Japanese allies (not to mention China), or it can hold fast to its demand for multilateral negotiations and in the meantime stand idly by as Pyongyang further develops its nuclear arsenal.⁵ In this case, insisting on a multilateral response is, in effect, putting the bilateral alliances first, due to the recognition that cutting Seoul and Tokyo out of the process, while perhaps marginally improving the prospects of progress on the denuclearization front, could create a crisis of confidence among the allies.

Building a "Positive, Cooperative, Comprehensive" Sino-U.S. Relationship

A few words about Sino-U.S. relations are also in order before going into a deeper discussion of Northeast Asian regionalism. The U.S.-China relationship is one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world. Even before the global financial crisis, the bilateral relationship was becoming more complex and its impact was being felt throughout Asia and beyond. Today, the two nations face a growing number of political, economic, and security concerns which can best—perhaps only—be solved if there is cooperation between Beijing and Washington.

This is not to imply, however, that the two can solve the global financial crisis or other world problems by themselves. For important geopolitical, security, and economic reasons, Washington can not appear to be ignoring Tokyo or its European partners, even as it reaches out to broaden and deepen its economic relationship with Beijing. If the bilateral U.S.-China relationship is among the world's most important, many in Washington (and at least one voice in Honolulu) would echo former Ambassador Mike Mansfield in asserting that the U.S.-Japan relationship is still *"the most important bilateral relationship in the world today—bar none."* This is not to imply a zero-sum game between Tokyo and Beijing; from a U.S. perspective, both relationships are critical.

As important as economic cooperation is today in the face of the global economic challenge, this represents just a small dimension of the overall Sino-U.S. relationship. The United States and China face a myriad of challenges where the interests of both are threatened and where common solutions or approaches are the best way forward. On the plus side, there has been increased cooperation between Washington and Beijing in pursuing the common goal of Korean Peninsula denuclearization and the two sides have reached a kind of consensus on keeping stability in the Taiwan Strait. But the two governments' differing priorities make future tension all too possible over both issues, and over issues as diverse as Iran, Darfur, Africa, or Latin America (not to mention Burma or Tibet).

The good news is that both sides seem committed to trust-building and enhanced cooperation. After U.S. president Barack Obama and Chinese president Hu Jintao met in April 2009, the White House released a [statement](#) saying both leaders "agreed to work together to build a positive, cooperative, and

comprehensive U.S.-China relationship for the 21st century.” They agreed to establish a “U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue,” with U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton and Chinese state councilor Dai Bingguo chairing the “strategic track” and U.S. treasury secretary Timothy Geithner and Chinese vice premier Wang Qishan chairing the “economic track.” What a difference the word “and” makes. During the Bush administration, there was a “Strategic Economic Dialogue,” but the focus was almost exclusively on “economic.” Now, the dialogue can truly become strategic, assuming that all the above-mentioned security issues will now be put on the table and seriously discussed (a huge and largely untested assumption).

The initiation of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue between Washington and Beijing increases the need for Beijing, Washington, and Tokyo to engage in high-level trilateral dialogue to help ensure that improved Sino-U.S. strategic ties do not strain U.S.-Japan relations. Ever since normalization, U.S. presidents have believed that it was possible—indeed necessary—for Washington to simultaneously have good relations with both Tokyo and Beijing. The Bush administration, for all its faults elsewhere, did a pretty good job of balancing the two bilateral relationships, providing a solid base upon which the Obama administration appears intent on building.

Regional mechanisms provide additional forums in which bilateral and trilateral cooperation can take place, but the track record to date has been mixed at best. Many Chinese openly question why Japan needs to be in the Six Party mix and (in the author’s view inaccurately) blame Japan’s “obsession” with the North Korean abduction issue as hampering denuclearization talks (although this is now a moot issue, at least until talks resume). When Sino-U.S. relations are strained, multilateral forums all too often become “battlefields” where each (verbally) shoots at one another.

Regional Cooperation

At the conceptual level, this author would argue (at least from a U.S. perspective) that today, Northeast Asian regionalism is a possible means to an end for promoting regional stability, but has thus far been viewed as a limited tool. This is due to the difficulty of creating a broad regional approach to security in Northeast Asia, given the diversity of the states involved and their varying degrees of confidence in the United States and in one another. As a general rule, the Six Party Talks have underscored and magnified these differences more than it has helped to close existing gaps.

There was a period of time during the Bush administration when developing Northeast Asian architecture seemed to enjoy a degree of prominence. Rumor had it that U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice had prioritized this objective. Ironically (but perhaps not coincidentally), that interest waned about the first time she participated in an informal session with her other Six Party foreign minister counterparts along the sidelines of an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum Meeting.

For its part, the Obama administration seems committed to keeping the Six Party Talks going, but this does not equate to support or enthusiasm for broader institutionalized Northeast Asian regional cooperation (just as signing the ASEAN [Treaty of Amity and Cooperation](#)—which the Obama administration did this past July—does not necessarily equate to joining the East Asia Summit, which is the primary architecture-building mechanism in East Asia at large). Discussions of Five Party Talks (sans North Korea) are likewise more aimed at dealing with a specific issue (North Korean denuclearization) than the establishment of a broader approach toward regional cooperation or institution-building.

In examining the current state of play, one must acknowledge a number of regional institution-building efforts currently underway with varying levels of U.S. support/involvement and varying definitions of “the region.”

ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)

The twenty-six-member ARF brings together foreign ministers from throughout and beyond the Asia-Pacific region for annual security-oriented discussions.⁶ While initially focused exclusively on East Asia, the introduction of more South Asian members in recent years should ring warning bells about the ARF's future focus and effectiveness. Broadening its membership reduces the ARF's attractiveness as a framework for East Asian or Asia-Pacific community-building, although the presence of all important Northeast Asian players (except Taiwan) does permit occasional Six Party (and more) side discussions on Northeast Asian security issues.

Generally speaking, the ARF seems well-suited to serve as the consolidating and validating instrument behind many security initiatives proposed by governments and nonofficial gatherings. Various ARF study groups have provided a vehicle to move multilateral security cooperation forward in areas such as preventive diplomacy, enhanced confidence-building, nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and maritime cooperation (including search and rescue), all of which help promote greater transparency and military-to-military cooperation.⁷ But its contribution to the regional security order remains somewhat constrained.

Few expect the ARF to solve the region's problems or even to move proactively to undertake that mission. The agreement to "move at a pace comfortable to all participants" seemed aimed at tempering the desire of more Western-oriented members for immediate results in favor of the "evolutionary" approach preferred by the ASEAN states, which sees the process as being as (or more) important as its eventual substantive products.⁸ The Asian preference for "noninterference in internal affairs" also has traditionally placed some important topics essentially off limits, although this may be changing (witness ASEAN's increased willingness to comment on Myanmar's domestic politics). Nonetheless, the evolution of the ARF from a confidence-building "talk shop" to a true preventive diplomacy mechanism (as called for in its [1995 Concept Paper](#)) promises to be a long and difficult one.⁹

Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)

At an even broader Asia-Pacific level, there is the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) "gathering of economies,"¹⁰ which involves a number of Latin American participants.¹¹ While primarily aimed at managing the effects of growing economic interdependence, APEC has had an important political and security role as a result of its annual Leaders' Meetings.¹² APEC is, first and foremost, aimed at promoting free trade and economic cooperation, but the assembled leaders also address terrorism and nuclear proliferation, and issue statements dealing with nontraditional security concerns like pandemic disease, natural disasters, and energy security. President Obama is scheduled to attend his first APEC session in November 2009 and is expected to host the 2011 session somewhere in the United States (hopefully Honolulu).

As with the ARF, APEC will remain more suited to talking about security problems than actually helping to implement solutions. In addition to the usual drawbacks associated with East Asian multilateralism, APEC has the added "problem" of including Taiwan. Rather than using this venue as a vehicle for incorporating Taiwanese views into the regional security debate in a quasi nongovernmental setting, Beijing has tried to block any substantive security-oriented activities and further isolate Taiwan from the dialogue—a practice that has not been significantly tempered despite the improved cross-Strait atmosphere.

While the United States and many of its regional allies (especially Australia and Japan) attach great importance to APEC (and secondly to the ARF), many in Asia (especially China) seem to be placing more emphasis on East Asian subregional (as opposed to broader Asia-Pacific) institutions and community-

building efforts, such as ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), which currently do not include the United States.

ASEAN Plus Three and the East Asia Summit

While Washington focuses on ad hoc initiatives and Asia-Pacific regionalism, the states of East Asia have continued their community-building efforts. In December 2005, Malaysia convened the first East Asia Summit involving the ten ASEAN leaders, their Plus Three partners (China, Japan, and South Korea), and Australia, New Zealand, and India. Russian president Vladimir Putin was also invited to meet, but not to officially join, the other sixteen assembled leaders at the first annual EAS.¹³

Still undefined four years later is how the EAS (or the APT, for that matter) will interact with broader regional organizations such as APEC or the ARF. To its credit, the [chairman's statement](#) from the second EAS “confirmed our view that the EAS complements other existing regional mechanisms, including the ASEAN dialogue process, the ASEAN Plus Three process, the ARF, and APEC in community building efforts.”¹⁴ Details as to how these various efforts will mesh, however, are still lacking.

The big question today is whether the United States will join the EAS. No decision has been made, but the U.S. signing of ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation during this year's annual ASEAN-U.S. Dialogue along the sidelines of the July 2009 ARF now removes any hurdles to moving forward. Given that the APT has been clearly designated as the preferred East Asian community-building mechanism and the EAS provides a direct link to this “Asia for Asians” forum, a U.S. decision to join the EAS would make a great deal of sense.¹⁵

The Bush administration balked at joining the EAS for at least three reasons. First, it requires members to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Second, it remains unclear just what the EAS objectives are—it is described as a “leaders-led” dialogue without a great deal of structure. And third, joining would supposedly require two presidential trips annually to Asia (which is not always true, since APEC meetings are frequently in non-Asian states, such as Peru in 2008 and Sydney in 2007).

The first problem has been resolved. The third could also be easily handled by arranging the APEC and EAS Summits back-to-back or in close proximity during years when APEC is held in Asia. Given the degree of overlap between the two meetings, most leaders would probably welcome this approach, and it would help guarantee at least one Asia visit a year by the U.S. president when APEC is held elsewhere. As to the agenda—what better way to help influence it than to sign up and attend? ASEAN and its Plus Three partners have already made it clear that ASEAN Plus Three is the primary vehicle for East Asian community-building, and that the EAS is the mechanism most closely associated with this effort. Simply put, if the Obama administration wants to have a role in the East Asian community-building process, it should join the EAS. Otherwise, the process will surely proceed without it and it will cede leadership in Asia to others.

Track-Two Initiatives

There are also a large number of other regional initiatives at the track-two (nongovernmental) level. These include the Shangri-La Dialogue, which involves defense officials from throughout and beyond the region, and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), which links think tanks from throughout the region and has developed a close working relationship with the ARF. Between the track-one and track-two levels, the Six Party Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD) has examined Northeast Asian security architecture issues for a number of years, as has CSCAP's North Pacific Security Framework Study Group (which involves all six members of the Six Party Talks, plus Canada and

Mongolia, and is open to participation by others—including Taiwan scholars in their private capacity).

Six Party Talks

The Six Party Talks represent the best example of task-oriented ad hoc multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia. This forum was established by Washington to deal with the specific task of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula. The talks were also intended—and served—to incorporate other parties into what many initially viewed as a bilateral U.S.-DPRK problem.

The creation of the Six Party process may represent one of the Bush administration's finest diplomatic hours.¹⁶ This initiative draws from the lessons learned during the 1993–94 North Korean nuclear crisis, where—despite close coordination—Washington was widely perceived as unilaterally cutting a deal with Pyongyang before sticking Seoul and Tokyo with the bill. While Pyongyang argued for bilateral consultations (and a separate U.S.-DPRK nonaggression pact or peace treaty), Washington rightfully insisted this time that participation by Seoul and Tokyo was “essential.” It also acknowledges the important role that China, and to a lesser extent Russia, must play if multilateral security guarantees are to be part of the final solution (as most would agree they are). Finally, the Bush administration recognized and tried to work around Pyongyang's strategy of trying to play all sides against one another by presenting different, conflicting messages depending on the audience.

The Obama administration has made clear its preference for the Six Party Talks to continue despite Pyongyang's “absolute rejection” of the forum.¹⁷ But to date, it has not taken a position on Northeast Asian (or broader) regional institution-building. If you examine Secretary Clinton's Senate confirmation transcripts or her scene-setting Asia Society speech prior to her first visit to Asia, for example, you will find zero hits for terms like regionalism and architecture. To date, support for the Six Party Talks has been focused exclusively on the forum's original role as a vehicle for Korean denuclearization.

Nonetheless, the creation of the Six Party Talks provides a framework for broader Northeast Asian multilateral cooperation in the future. The talks contain a Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism Working Group (chaired by Russia) that is supposed to address the question of future regional security architecture. If the talks eventually succeed, most parties agree that a more formalized mechanism must evolve in order to implement the agreement, provide necessary security assurances, and monitor compliance, as well as facilitate whatever aid packages are associated with the final accord. If the talks fail, some (this author included) would argue that there will be an even greater need for some form of institutionalized cooperation in order to manage the danger posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea. If and how the Six Party mechanism transitions into a more institutionalized Northeast Asian forum will help determine the degree of future security cooperation in this East Asia subregion and Washington's involvement in it.

As indicated in the introduction, it may be easier to start the building process without North Korea than to create a mechanism built on a common denominator low enough to include Pyongyang. China and Russia—while still not fully persuaded—appear more receptive today than ever to initiating five-way talks to deal with North Korea's continued lack of cooperation. This new possibility increases the prospects of developing habits of cooperation essential to institutionalized regionalism and of speaking with one voice in response to Pyongyang's threats. As a case in point, Secretary Clinton apparently used their common presence in Thailand to meet with the other four Six Party foreign ministers—but not with Pyongyang's representative—to craft a joint response calling on Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons.

In addition, the various trilateral arrangements and broader efforts (at the governmental and track-two levels) are also creating habits of cooperation that can provide a foundation for future Northeast Asian

regional cooperation. These efforts include the Plus Three dialogue, which used to be linked specifically to ASEAN but which is now tentatively venturing out on its own; the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group involving the United States, Japan, and ROK; and the embryonic U.S.-Japan-China Dialogue, which was supposed to have been initiated this past summer but is now apparently on hold as a result of Chinese reluctance.

Future Outlook and Conclusion

As have all its predecessors, the Obama administration is expected to stress that it sees its bilateral alliances and emerging multilateral security mechanisms as mutually supportive, not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, it must be sensitive to accusations that its alliance network is a “leftover vestige of the Cold War” and take greater pain in articulating how existing alliances compliment the broader multilateral security effort. For that matter, it must also resolve the potential conflict inherent in the previous administration’s penchant for focusing on “coalitions of the willing” to address growing security challenges—the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and Six Party Talks being two prominent examples of such coalitions—even while proclaiming the centrality of the alliance network.

The current Asia-Pacific alliance structure (which includes alliances with Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines, as well as the ROK and Japan) will and should continue to enjoy pride of place; multilateral and regional community-building efforts are only supported to the extent that they do not interfere with or undermine the traditional bilateral alliance structure. This is the way it has been for the past several decades and it has not changed with the Obama administration, its general receptivity to multilateral cooperation notwithstanding.

Through active participation in APEC and the ARF, the Obama administration will likely demonstrate Washington’s continued commitment to multilateral cooperation and Asia-Pacific community-building. One hopes that it will also support East Asian initiatives that do not include the United States (such as the APT) and demonstrate this support by participating in the EAS at some point. In short, the Obama administration must stress that its commitment to, and preference for, pan-Pacific institutions (like ARF and APEC) in which it participates does not indicate hostility toward pan-Asian multilateral efforts which, through building a sense of East Asian community, can help move the broader agenda forward—as long as these organizations are not aimed at undercutting or diminishing the U.S. role or U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

The area where current trends toward regional cooperation appear most fruitful is in the apparent willingness of current multilateral mechanisms and even bilateral dialogues to address nontraditional security concerns and issues such as climate change and environmental degradation. These are less controversial areas where habits of cooperation can and are being built. Even the ARF, long branded a “talk shop,” recently conducted a disaster relief exercise involving navies and coast guards from around the region. The Obama administration’s receptiveness to seriously addressing nontraditional security issues has opened new doors of cooperation that can pay future dividends in terms of regional confidence- and trust-building.

Meanwhile, support for Northeast Asian regional architecture-building is likely to be placed on the back burner until North Korea rejoins the Six Party Talks and honors its earlier denuclearization commitments, or the other states of Northeast Asia decide to formalize their efforts to jointly contain the North Korean nuclear threat. Absent normalization of relations between Washington and Pyongyang—which in this author’s view must come after or at best simultaneously with denuclearization—or a decision by the other five to proceed in this direction without Pyongyang (which China for one still seems reticent

to do), it seems hard to imagine a comprehensive, formalized, Northeast Asian dialogue mechanism being created in the near future.

Nonetheless, the Six Party Talks have been useful in combating Pyongyang's divide-and-conquer tactics and has helped keep Washington's two Northeast Asian allies firmly tied into the DPRK denuclearization process. It has also served as a useful vehicle for building and testing Sino-U.S. cooperation. As a result, this multilateral mechanism has been more useful in building and supporting Washington's bilateral relationships in Northeast Asia than it has been at laying the foundation upon which to build Northeast Asian security architecture.

Endnotes

1. On the other hand, North Korea has proven itself capable and at times all too willing to provide the common denominator upon which the other Northeast Asian states could collaborate. But the task here has been Korean Peninsula denuclearization or dealing with a Pyongyang that refuses to follow that path, rather than architecture building per se.
2. The author recognizes that some would prefer to ignore Russia as well. This would be a mistake. Not only can Russia be useful in dealing with North Korea (where it is at least slightly more trusted than China), it can be highly disruptive if left out or marginalized.
3. Either through the North's absorption by the South (the preferred solution) or through some form of federation or confederation agreement that brings about genuine peaceful coexistence.
4. "DPRK Foreign Ministry Declares Strong Counter- Measures against UNSC's 'Resolution 1874,'" KCNA, Pyongyang, June 13, 2009.
5. It recently claimed that "reprocessing of spent fuel rods is at its final phase and extracted plutonium is being weaponized" and that "experimental uranium enrichment has successfully been conducted to enter into completion phase" ("DPRK Permanent Representative Sends Letter to President of UNSC," KCNA, Pyongyang, September 4, 2009). But it is impossible to declare with any certainty just what Pyongyang has been doing at its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon and elsewhere or what kind or how advanced its uranium enrichment program is.
6. The ten ASEAN states (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar/Burma, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam), plus Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Russia, South Korea, North Korea, New Zealand, and the United States, plus most recently Pakistan, Timor-Leste, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.
7. See, for example, the "Statement by the Chairman of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) on the Terrorist Acts of the 11th September 2001, Bandar Seri Begawan, 4 October 2001," and the "ASEAN Regional Forum Statement on Strengthening Transport Security Against International Terrorism," and "ASEAN Regional Forum Statement on Non-Proliferation," issued at during the July 2, 2004, Jakarta, Indonesia ARF meeting. Such statements have become regular attachments to ARF Chairman Statements and are frequently echoed at ASEAN Summits.
8. For the ARF's guiding principles, see "Chairman's Statement: the First ASEAN Regional Forum, Bangkok, Thailand, July 25, 1994," <http://www.aseansec.org/2105.htm> (accessed September 28, 2007).
9. For more background on the ARF, see "The ASEAN Regional Forum: A Concept Paper," Dept. of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, Washington DC, July 15, 2002.
10. APEC is not referred to as a gathering of states or governments due to the presence in its ranks of Hong Kong and Taiwan.
11. APEC started out as an informal dialogue group, growing from an original twelve members (Australia, Brunei, Canada, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and the United States) in 1989 to fifteen in 1991 (with the addition of China, Hong Kong, and "Chinese Taipei") to its current strength of twenty-one, with the addition of Mexico and Papua New Guinea (1993), Chile (1994), Peru, Russia, and Vietnam (1997). Institutionalization began in February 1993, when the APEC Secretariat was established in Singapore. For details, see "Key APEC Milestones," APEC website. http://www.apec.org/apec/about_apec/history.html.
12. A history of the Leaders' Meeting, and all associated documents, can be found on the APEC Secretariat website, <http://www.apecsec.org.sg>
13. For details, see the Chairman's Statement of the First East Asia Summit. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Dec. 14, 2005 (hereafter 2005 EAS Chairman's Statement), <http://www.aseansec.org/18104.htm>.
14. Chairman's Statement of the Second East Asia Summit, Cebu, Philippines, Jan. 15, 2007, <http://www.aseansec.org/19303.htm> (accessed September 28, 2007).
15. For the author's rationale on why joining the EAS makes sense for the United States, please see Ralph A. Cossa, "East Asia community building: Time for Washington to Get on Board," *Issues & Insights* Vol. 8, No. X, October 2008, available on the Pacific Forum CSIS website, www.pacforum.org.
16. Please note this refers to the *creation* of the multilateral process, not necessarily to its results to date. For background information on the Six Party Talks process, see Scott Snyder, Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman, "The Six Party Talks: Developing a Roadmap for Future Progress," *Issues & Insights* Vol. 5, No. 8, August 2005, available on the Pacific Forum CSIS Website http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/issuesinsights_v05n08.pdf. Read the "Regional Overview" and various Korea-related chapters of *Comparative Connections* (available at www.pacforum.org) for quarterly updates on the progress (or lack thereof) of the Talks.
17. With North Korea, nothing ever seems to be really absolute. In fact, during an October 2009 visit by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, Kim Jong-il indicated that Pyongyang would be open to multilateral talks, even in the Six Party format, but only after U.S.-DPRK dialogue had resumed.