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Asia-Pacific Regional Security: A Chinese Perspective

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In recent years, some countries gradually placed the proposals of establishing an Asia-Pacific security mechanism on agenda. Moreover, there is a quite complex security situation in the region, and the chaos of the so-called “China threat” is frequently heard. Under these circumstances, there is a great need to international academic circles for hearing various voices from this region, especially including Chinese, conducting studies on the Asia-Pacific security situation.

Different Security Settings

In general, most countries would like to see peaceful and stable circumstances, keeping from turmoil and conflicts in the regions where they are located, especially in the neighboring area. Peace and stability are beneficial to the domestic development and governance, as well as conducive to all kinds of trade and exchanges among countries, which I believe serves in fact as a base to establish a security mechanism.

From the perspective of historical experiences, there are four basic modes to realize peace and stability¹:

The first one is the so-called “hegemonic peace”, in which a certain superpower prevents any possible serious troubles through its coordination and threats. For instance, in period of the Cold War, the United States controlled its backyard—Latin America, and the Soviet Union depressed the East European as the patriarch of “the great socialist family”.

The second mode is the “allied peace”, in which several countries form an intimate “security community” on basis of similar institutions, norms and cultures, so that wars between them are easily prevented. The “Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe” which took shape in middle 1970s in Helsinki of Finland is a typical case.

The third, named “balanced peace”, is a kind of peace after relevant countries reached by balance of power, since “the relative balance leads to relative harmony”, which is not rarely seen in the modern Europe.

The last one is “cooperative peace”, in other words, the involved

countries, through all kinds of exchanges, trust and cooperation etc., eliminated or reduced the possibility of conflicts.

Here it must be noted that the four modes mentioned above cannot be separated definitely and absolutely. Usually they are interlocked, and will lead to similar security framework..

Keeping the pictures above in mind, let's talk some on Asia-Pacific region. It's well known that a couple of powers and state groups either put forward specific proposals on the establishment of the Asia-Pacific security mechanism, or gave out tentative signals on the matter.

The first is the "axis-spoke model" proposed by some in U.S and Japan. They put their tentative ideas on the Asia-Pacific security mechanism model so-called "wild-goose pattern", or concentric circle -- I may called concentric arcs. Whatever the expressions are, they have something in common: The United States are the real leader and coordinator; the U.S.-Japan Security Agreement or Alliance is the axis; the Western value system and regulation function as the standards of norm; all the countries involved in different ways and levels are brought into (or at least attracted) various forms at different levels. Their typical conceptions are: within the security mechanism, the inner layer as a core is the U.S-Japanese security alliance; among the several layers in the middle, there are such organizations and countries as ASEAN and Republic of Korea; and the outer layer are the "trouble" countries, such as China and Russiaⁱⁱ. This pattern has the superficial form of "cooperative security", while it has in the essence of "hegemonic peace". When the important powers like China and Russia realize that they are expelled (let alone being threatened) out of core, they will oppose to the model sternly. It is surely not for stability.

The second one is the "security integration model", so-called "Asia Security System", proposed by the former Soviet Union, which can be also called "bound model". This is the prototype of "Conference on Security and Cooperation of Helsinki". The major points may described as: firstly, through the multi-lateral agreement with strong binding force, an intensive and multi-level coordinating relation would be established.; secondly, with avoiding frictions and confrontations as the central task, the model advocates the integration of defense; thirdly, while guaranteeing the military security, the model promotes the economic and trade cooperation, cultural and scientific exchanges. As a sort of "allied peace", it is the outcome of modern history in Europe whether Western or Eastern ones. However, with the special background for generation and adaptability to the European circumstance, as some specialists pointed out, the model was established on the cornerstone of "historical coherence of culture norms". As a result, just as the economic model of

Europe did not fit in the situations of Asia-Pacific trade and cooperation, the “integration” of European collective security doesn’t cope with Asia-Pacific security environment.

The third is the “equal-units cooperation model”, which may be called “necklace model” according to its featuresⁱⁱⁱ. Some small or medium-sized countries represented by Malaysia, called for the models, such as “ East-Asia Economic Forum”, “dialogue on regional security at multi-level and various channels”, “the meeting between ASEAN countries and China, Japan, Russia and United States”, etc. The primary features of these cases are: the states, big or small, enjoy certain equality (at least in the dialogue process and security settings); any controlling force and interference from the outside world are likely opposed, the attempt to copy European economic and security integration has been resisted. The primal path to realize the security which is adapted to the characteristics of Asia-Pacific region is mainly focused on coordination and dialogue, especially by gradual progress with diversity voices. From the speeches of the leaders of ASEAN like Mahattir and Lee Kwung Yue, one witnesses that the model is more like a special balance peace, a dynamic equilibrium process established on the tactics of “win large by small”, though it has some component of “cooperative peace”. Special attentions and efforts has been given to the balance of powers among big powers: for instance, it doesn’t exclude the existence of the United States in Asia, which is considered as the base stone for the maintaining of balance of power. The model actively encourages China and Japan to play the constructive role, while continuously keep the equal distance from them. It advocates bringing Russia into the development process of Asia-Pacific political affairs, economy and security, considering its global influence on one hand and its far geo-distance to the center of Asia on the other. It highly values the overall figure of ASEAN that speaks to the outside world in one voice.

Chinese Views on Asia-Pacific Regional Security

I think that the Asia-Pacific security mechanism in Chinese views is mostly within the scale of “cooperative security”, as well as combines some elements of “balancing security” to some extend. Here, so-called “Chinese views” are in fact reflected by official statements available to the general public. While they are all “official” in the sense of being affiliated one way or another with respective government agencies, the view they reflect are by no means unanimous. There are four main points:

One, it should insist unswervingly the five principles of “peaceful co-existence”. The five principles favored by Chinese are consisting in

mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity, and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence. President Jiang of PRC said when he invited to speak at Harvard university that they can be contributions in answering the question "what kind of world should mankind bring to the 21st century?"

Two, the pattern should be conducive to the establishment of a new conception of security at the turn of centuries. In the era of globalization, along with the deepening of the economic interdependence among countries, security of a country, regional security international security, more and more rely on the trust and cooperation with each other. China, noticing and admitting this trend, realizes its dual character, which promotes the development and exchanges on one side, and increases the risks and frictions on the other side. Many Chinese belief that economic security should become an essential constituent of the new conception of security. Therefore, in the forthcoming establishment of the Asia-Pacific security mechanism, special attention and emphasis must be given to the "comprehensive security". In other words, besides the prevention of the military friction and clashes, the contents of "unconventional security", like prevention of financial risk, trade conflicts and ecological digression crises, are also emphasized.

Three, it should respect the diversity, plurality of the political regime and culture of the relevant countries. With the most diversified economies, political lives, cultures, and constitution of nationalities, Asia-Pacific region may have the largest diversities in the world. Therefore, Chinese strongly demands that the new Asia-Pacific security mechanism not only pay special attention and respect to this plurality and diversity, but also guarantee the continuity and deepen of this diversity through its agenda, setting and regulation. In compliance of this spirit all countries within the region may deal with the disputes between one and another peacefully, reduce or decrease the potentiality of confrontations, and provide a new sample to solve the global conflicts.

Four, it must oppose to hegemonism in regional and global affairs. Chinese vigorously opposes carrying out their own goals and policy in hegemonic ways in international and regional affairs by other countries. Also, it should be built on the basis of non-alliance without direct aiming at or damaging the interests of the third party. Instead of the conventional military alliance or security union, the Asia-Pacific security mechanism should be a form beneficial to security dialogue and cooperation.

The core of security: complex relationship among powers

Drawing from the Asia-Pacific “cooperative security model” in theory, one has to regard the relations among major powers in reality as a bases of setting regional security since they consist of both heavy fetters and flexible benefits. Narrowed down to the Asia-Pacific region, the setting is expressed as a “stereoscopic triangular structure with multiple sides” among the US, Japan, Russia and China .

There are seemingly inevitable confrontations among them, let me just mention two: One is between United States, a sole superpower in post Cold War world and People’s Republic of China, a new rising power with its own cultural tradition and diverse international view. In Asia-Pacific region this conflict expresses itself in almost all crucial cases: in military proliferation problems, in South China sea disputes, in Taiwan question, in the new guideline of U.S.-Japan defense treaty, in human rights issue, in trade deficit issue, etc. None of them could be solved easily, but none of them does not produce effects on regional stability. There are some tough forces in both sides wish to handle a gun with precision, but none of them could meet its own destination without loses. It has been and will certainly be a long road for the two powers to engage each other. Another is connected with the first: deep-rooted suspect feelings between U.S., Japan as one side and China, Russia as other side, in many (not all) cases all the time. Clearing up this suspicion become more difficult after U.S.-led NATO’s air strike against Yugoslavia. People in Russia, especially in China widely have shared an opinion that U.S.-Japan defense treaty, especially armed with TMD recently could be an base for another “NATO’s expansion”, in East Asia or even directly at Taiwan strait.

Under the tensile surface there are more complex and flexible situations. However Chinese’s hope that a multi-leveled connection could be built on the basis of equality, mutual trust, and coordinating dialogue, China has admitted in fact the traditional existence of U.S., and its balancing role in Asia-Pacific region. China doesn’t indiscriminately oppose to the existing bilateral security agreements between U.S. and some Asia-Pacific counties (such as Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, and the Republic of Korea), “if they don’t aim at China as an enemy, and if they don’t exceed to their original scales”. In some cases the gap which may conduct conflicts of China vis. U.S. are not so serious as outsiders believed; for instance, in Korean Peninsular both side have common interest besides diverse ones.

Russian is a element for complex. For many reasons, Chinese admits clearly or unclearly an Asian character of Russia, and supports the comprehensive return of this huge European-Asian country, especially when Sino-U.S. relation became tensile more and more recently. Yet Chinese is not ready to enter alliance with Russia again to resume the “comrades” as the case of 1950s. In the struggle again so-called

“Unipolar world”, China and Russia may close to each other further though both know clearly the limitation of it— for the self-interest and for the time being. Also, in some Chinese mind, Japan’s role as a political power with self-curb could be accepted, opposing to attempt of its military expansion beyond the post-war Constitution’s limitation. Germany, which plays a significant and positive role in European economic and security integration, can be cited as an reference, some Chinese said. It is nearly impossible to prohibit such economic powers as Japan and Germany to become more and more influential in the region and the world, these Chinese believe when arguing with others who are afraid of Japanese memory on history and strongly against this neighbor’s expansion whatever militarily or politically. The common prerequisite is that Japan not only makes self-examination on its crime during the World War II, but also shows the sincerity of its remorse. Many Chinese prefer to selectively support Japan’s behavior on regional cooperation and development (for example, its suggestion of establishing “Asia Foundation” and its effort in technology transmission). Premier Zhu of China said to his Japanese counterpart in Beijing this Summer that “I don’t know whether I should believe many Japanese’s promise to keep Japan as a peaceful country, I would like to see the future for the words.”

The relationship between powers and minor states or others has been also checked. Many Chinese believe that the major countries should establish security contacts more closely with the small and medium-sized countries, and regional and international organizations (like ASEAN, East Asia Forum, APEC and the United Nations). A multilevel regular consultation system is available, which includes summit of national heads, meeting of foreign ministers, conference of specialists, and non-official or semi-official channels. Try to imagine: such an Asia-Pacific security mechanism becomes a kind of “pressure reducer”. The Asia-Pacific security mechanism could finally involve the scope and content of the conventional military security, for instance the limitation of nuclear and biological weapons, disarmament, reduction of border conflicts, and enhancement of the trust among participant states in peace-keeping activities. Furthermore, it can include the content of “non-conventional security”, such as the prevention of monetary crisis, decrease of financial risk, the relief of the tension and diplomatic disputes caused by trade frictions, the cooperation in solving the environmental problems or sea boundary disputes and fishing conflicts according to the Law of Sea launched by UN, etc.

To People’s Republic of China, Asia-Pacific region has been the crucial area in past twenty years and, in my mind, could be an axis seat in coming two decades or so—this position can be judged by economic

investment and trade figure, by military and geographic means, or by ideological and cultural importance. Given the tragic pictures recently years happened in Africa and Europe as well as in South Asia (a much nearer area to China), Chinese views of Asia-Pacific regional security are rather more optimistic. They understand that China should and could do more efforts to improve its domestic regime, foreign policies as well as the emerge(s) shown to his neighbors and larger international community. They also hope (many of them even believe in sincerely) that although there are many obstacles and difficulties challenging the peace and stability of the region as whole, their own region could solve (or soft at least) those tough problems at last by varies ways and approaches of their own whether ready done or not yet. Right or wrong, the view reflects a kind of perhaps ambiguous but real mind.

ⁱ The concepts of “peace”, “stability” and “tranquility” in international relations can only be some comparative ones. The “internal peace” said by Cant could hardly be realized in the time of national state. Those concepts used by the scholars of international politics mainly refer to the “status of non-fight”.

ⁱⁱ For instance, reference to the theoretic design of the “concentric arc” by R.A.Scalapino, is quoted from the “On the Dual Structure of Asia-Pacific Security Mechanism”, *World Economy and Politics*, Vol.11,1994

ⁱⁱⁱ Wang Yizhou, *Analysis on Contemporary International Politics*, Chapter 10: “On Pacific Era”, Shanghai People’s Publishing House, Aug. 1995, pp. 459-460