

The U.S. and Implementing Multilateral Security in the Asia-Pacific: Can Convergent Security Work?

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The Obama Administration has embraced multilateral security politics in the Asia-Pacific more visibly and more extensively than its predecessors. It has done so, however, by applying several key preconditions for the U.S. involvement in this process: such involvement must be consistent with the purpose and maintenance of its bilateral alliances in the region, must reflect clear and shared interests and values which the U.S. could endorse and support, and must pursue clearly designated action plans to realize those interests and values. Subsequent to designating those criteria, U.S. policy planners have employed alternate strategies of multilateral retrenchment and counterpunching which, it is argued here, have muddled Washington's determination to achieve such conditions. Yet Washington has been reluctant to reconcile multilateral retrenchment and counterpunching by nominating a single unifying strategy to realize more concrete regional security and order-building. It is argued here that the convergent security approach provides an opportunity for the U.S. to become a more enduring and meaningful player in evolving multilateral regional security architectures. The risk incurred in adopting this strategy is that its success depends on the willingness of the U.S. traditional allies in the region to collaborate more effectively with each other. To date, Washington has adopted a combination of bilateral, plurilateral, and multilateral security approaches to realize more effective institution-building as a way to underwrite regional stability. It has not nominated any one Asia-Pacific institution to achieve this policy objective. Instead, it has pursued what is at least a tacit convergent security posture by nominating different institutions and networks to achieve a diversity of policy interests and outcomes.

Keywords: Convergent Security, Bilateralism, Multilateralism, Multilateral Retrenchment, Counterpunching, Specialization, Alliance 'Spokes'

1. Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, debate has intensified over whether power balancing as reflected in the “realist” approach to international relations or cooperative security between states as embodied by the liberal-institutionalist approach will shape the geopolitical future.¹ The growth of Chinese military power, the emergence of the global financial crisis, and the intransience of regional flashpoints such as the Korean Peninsula have challenged the efforts of regional policy-makers in promoting and institutionalizing order in the Asia-Pacific region. Yet institutionalism still remains a viable possibility in this area of the world due to organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Japan-China-South Korea Summit, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement, and the East Asia Summit (EAS) all undertaking appropriate initiatives to strengthen regional norms for cooperation and governance.

Realists have criticized the substance and applicability of these types of institutions to Asia-Pacific security. They claim, for example, that ASEAN’s legacy has been one of “limited intergovernmental and bureaucratically rigid interaction” rather than one promoting successful community-building in Southeast Asia.² Critics assert that the region as a whole remains highly competitive and is destined to be shaped by the hegemonic competition between great power holders.³ Accordingly, this region is “ripe for rivalry” with a set of regional subsystems under the orbits of China, India, and the U.S. competing for dominance, or at least balancing each other in ways where institutions and norms have little relevance.⁴ Such competition

1 Classic representations of the power balancing school of thought include Aaron L. Friedberg’s “Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia,” *International Security* 18, no. 3 (1993/94): 5-33 and more recently, Daniel Twining’s “America’s Grand Design in Asia,” *Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2007): 79-94. The institutionalist approach is argued by John G. Ikenberry and Jitsuo Tsuchiyama in “Between Balance of Power and Community: The Future of Multilateral Security Co-operation in the Asia-Pacific,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 2(1) (2002): 69-94.

2 David Martin Jones and Michael L. R. Smith, “Making Process, Not Progress: ASEAN and the Evolving East Asian Regional Order,” *International Security* 32(1) (2007): 148-84, quote from abstract, 6.

3 John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 360-401.

4 Friedberg, “Ripe for Rivalry,” 5, and Robert S. Ross, “The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century,” *International Security* 23, no. 4 (1999): 81-118.

conforms to the power balancing model in international relations rather than to the unlikely formation of a concert of power where large states collaborate in subordinating the national ambitions of any single power.⁵ Liberal institutionalists, however, view the Asia-Pacific order as part of a larger international order governed by postwar norms of free trade and global institutions that underpin multilateralism and interdependence. Neither China nor the U.S. can singularly dominate this order, but China and “the West” can work together in underwriting its preservation in both Asia and the international scene to ensure a more stable and prosperous world.⁶

Can a “realist-liberalist nexus” emerge that combines the strengths of both approaches and avoids the pitfall of becoming too reliant on one approach at the expense of the other? It is argued here that a third approach — the “convergent security” approach — can achieve such a reconciliation between the realist and liberalist outlooks. This approach offers the best chance in preventing conflict and realizing the vision for sustaining and expanding regional prosperity. Convergent security is defined as a “managed transition from a regional security system based predominantly on exclusivist bilateral security arrangements to one based predominantly on multilateral security arrangements.”⁷ In an Asia-Pacific context, it is a strategy designed to integrate the traditional bilateral security alliances over time with emerging multilateral security dialogues and mechanisms.

The idea of convergent security can be equated with several related concepts that have emerged in post-Cold War literature on Asia-Pacific security. The notions of “expansive bilateralism” and “extended bilateralism” introduced by Brian Job can be considered as illustrations. Expansive bilateralists have argued that the end of the Cold War signaled the weakening or even the removal of ideological rationales for sustaining threat-centric bilateral alliances. American-led bilateral alliances in the

5 The concert idea has been recently discussed in Hugh White’s “Power Shift: Australia’s Future Between Washington and Beijing,” *Quarterly Essay* 39 (September 2010).

6 John G. Ikenberry, “The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (2008): 23–37.

7 William T. Tow and Amitav Acharya, *Obstinate or Obsolete? The U.S. Alliance Structure in the Asia-Pacific*, WP 2007/4 (Canberra: Department of International Relations, Australian National University, December 2007), 32.

Asia-Pacific could be gradually supplanted by multilateral groupings united by common rules and norms for regional governance. These alliances could thus be “extended” into more inclusive, multilateral institutions over time.⁸ Ralph Cossa has written about “virtual alliances”: the notion of two or more U.S. bilateral alliances combining to institutionalize three-way or four-way avenues of cooperation on a specific security issue. Cossa specifically focuses on the U.S./Japan relations with South Korea and the notion of intensifying those three countries’ security cooperation on the Korean Peninsula via the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG).⁹ “Ad hoc” multilateral groupings anticipated by those who framed the Four-Party Talks and the subsequent Six-Party Talks on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula have also been assessed in his literature and will be further discussed in more detail later on. None of these concepts, however, embody the conscious design of integrating bilateralism and multilateralism to the extent anticipated by convergent security. The idea of virtual alliances does foreshadow the emergence of pluri-lateral or mini-lateral groupings that will also be discussed later in this article.

There are several ways that convergent security may be implemented. These include but are not limited to: a) merging the existing bilateral alliance arrangements into multilateral groupings that embrace specific policy objectives and are less threat-oriented than their bilateral predecessors, or b) reconstituting the bilateral alliance purpose and mission so that they co-exist more easily with the politico-economic and security agendas typically projected by regional multilateral groupings. Convergent security is realized when bilateral alliances shift away from being exclusivist relationships that merely focus on responding to distinct threats or on balancing power. It then evolves into a more distinct

8 Brian L. Job, “Multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific,” in *Bilateralism in a Multilateral Era: The Future of the San Francisco Alliance System in the Asia-Pacific*, edited by William Tow, Russell Trood, and Toshiya Hoshino (Tokyo/Nathan: Japan Institute of International Affairs/Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, 1997), 161–2.

9 Ralph Cossa, “U.S.-Japan-Korea: Creating a Virtual Alliance,” *PacNet*, No. 47, December 3, 1999, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/pac9947.pdf>. Also see James L. Schoff, *Building on the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group*, IFPA Interim Project Paper (Tufts, MA: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, November 2004) and Victor Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Berkeley, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

cooperative arrangement that works with selected multilateral groupings (of three or more states) to attain regional stability and prosperity through multilateral security.

Because the U.S. has dominated postwar bilateral security politics in the Asia-Pacific, it is inherently the key actor with the ability to make any convergent security strategy work in this region. We will accordingly focus our discussion on how effective a player the U.S. has recently been in meshing bilateral and multilateral security politics in the Asia-Pacific region. We initially trace the American shift from rigidly prioritizing bilateral security politics in Asia to adopting a policy posture more compatible with working with multilateral groupings in the region. We then link this trend with two broader characteristics found in contemporary U.S. grand strategy that could facilitate Washington's adoption of either realist or liberalist approaches to Asia-Pacific security politics. We then assess how the U.S.' evolving regional security posture may determine the extent to which it will embrace and fulfill the convergent security approach to that region's strategic development. The U.S. is encouraging its regional allies in the Asia-Pacific region to intensify their strategic capacity-building. It is also treating selected multilateral regional groupings as specialized agents for change and development. Both of these trends will be briefly assessed. We conclude that while the U.S. is gradually becoming more adept at reconciling bilateral and multilateral security politics in Asia, it must still identify and put into practice more tangible strategies than those of the present if it is to realize a true convergent security posture.

2. Background: Coming to Terms with Multilateralism

Since the founding of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1993, regional policy-makers have sought to integrate "multilateral and bilateral dialogue and consultations. . . featuring decision-making by consensus, non-interference, incremental progress, and moving at a pace comfortable to all."¹⁰ The ARF was created in the immediate post-Cold War era to

10 "About the ASEAN Regional Forum," ASEAN Regional Forum, accessed September 11, 2011, <http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/about.html>.

secure the best of both worlds for the Southeast Asian members of ASEAN — a breathing space needed for pursuing a regional security order predicated on multilateral regional norms but temporarily underwritten by a credible, American-led bilateral security network.

The quest to engineer a gradual shift from the Asia-Pacific's predominantly bilateral tradition in security politics to one with an increasingly multilateral approach was never going to be easy. Bilateral security relations are inherently exclusivist and largely confined to two (usually state-centric) actors in ways designed to extract maximum relative gains and geopolitical maneuverability.¹¹ The U.S.-led "hub and spokes" alliance system which spearheaded the American containment strategy during the Cold War highlighted bilateralism's predominance during that period of history and reflected Washington's preference to conduct security relations in that region asymmetrically.¹² Each bilateral security ally confronted its own unique security challenges (as opposed to America's postwar European NATO security partners facing a common Soviet land-based military threat). Each ally was better managed within a self-contained security relationship with the U.S. Multilateral security politics — the acting together of several states to build order and preserve common norms — was thus regarded by most U.S. policy officials as too impractical and unwieldy to address to the contemporary Asia-Pacific geopolitical environment.¹³ Writing for *Foreign Affairs* near the end of the George H. W. Bush Administration, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker succinctly encapsulated the traditional American preference for bilateral security politics in the Asia-Pacific: "What has fostered stability and secured economic dynamism

11 Brian Job observes that exclusivism is central to bilateralism and that the "enduring properties" of dyadic common interests more often than not sustains such an association. Job, "Multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific," 161–2.

12 Tow and Acharya, *Obstinate or Obsolete?* 28–9; Christopher M. Hemmer and Peter Katzenstein, "Why Is There No NATO in Asia? Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism," *International Organization* 56, no. 3 (2002); John S. Duffield, "Why Is There No APTO? Why Is There No OSCAP?: Asia-Pacific Security Institutions in Comparative Perspective," *Contemporary Security Policy* 22, no. 2 (2001); and Victor Cha, "Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia," *International Security* 34, no. 3 (2010).

13 Ed Olsen and David Winterford, "Asian Multilateralism: Implications for U.S. Policy," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 6, no. 1 (1994). For fundamental definitions of and background on multilateralism, see John G. Ruggie, *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

in East Asia for the past four decades is a loose network of bilateral alliances with the U.S. at its core. Our military presence, our commitment, our reassurance has constituted the balancing wheel of an informal, yet highly effective, security structure that emerged after World War II and endured throughout the Cold War years.”¹⁴

The Barack Obama Administration, however, has applied a more positive American policy approach toward multilateral security than its predecessors. It signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in July 2009 as a precondition for membership in the East Asia Summit (EAS), and agreed a year later that the U.S. would join that organization. President Obama has convened an annual summit with his ASEAN counterparts and has appointed an American ambassador specifically to that organization to represent U.S. interests there.

Washington has likewise played a key role in shaping the agenda for the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting+8 or “ADMM Plus” formed to address both traditional security issues such as maritime confidence-building in the South China Sea as well as broader or “non-traditional” security issues. The U.S. has been particularly supportive of infusing “mini-lateral” security diplomacy into its existing regional alliance frameworks and related security partnerships throughout the region. The perpetuation of the U.S.-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue and a resurgence of trilateral consultations between American, Japanese, and South Korean officials at “side-talks” conducted at the Shangri-la Dialogue and in other informal but important multilateral forums are some notable examples. So too are recent efforts being made to resurrect Six-Party Talks if and when North Korea is ready to meet requisite preconditions for their revival. American foreign policy officials now regularly attend key multilateral sessions convened in the region as part of the U.S. confidence-building efforts to reassure allied elites and populaces that the U.S. is “back to stay” in the region.

The U.S. is intensifying its multilateral involvement while also managing its traditional bilateral security alliance networks in the Asia-Pacific region

14 James Baker, “America in Asia: Emerging Architecture for a Pacific Community,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 5 (1991): 4.

and adapting those alliances into the rapid structural changes unfolding in the region. The U.S.-South Korean ties have become more robust than ever in the aftermath of escalating North Korean provocations, and recent South Korean opinion polls have shifted toward a more visible support of the American alliance. After a false start generated by the controversy over U.S. basing operations in Okinawa, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has replicated previous Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) governments by extending fundamentally unqualified support for the primacy of the U.S.-Japan bilateral alliance in Japanese foreign and security policies. Australian defense officials are also observing 60 years of postwar bilateral defense collaboration with Washington by entering into increasingly comprehensive consultations with their American counterparts regarding the two countries' respective force posture reviews. Ongoing reports of a more extensive U.S. military presence in Australia as power competition intensifies in the Indian Ocean point to the adaptability of the security treaty between Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S. (ANZUS) to geopolitical power shifts. The November 2010 "Wellington Declaration" which symbolizes New Zealand's gradual return to a more normalized defense relationship with its traditional U.S. ally after a quarter of a century of marginalization due to the U.S.-New Zealand nuclear policy dispute which erupted during the mid-1980s also points to this adaptability to geopolitical power shifts.

This simultaneous process of the U.S. maintaining a viable bilateral alliance while broadening its involvement in multilateral security initiatives is generally consistent with the convergent security vision. This process departs from that approach, however, insofar as convergent security anticipates that bilateral alliances function primarily as instruments to ensure adequate levels of American strategic presence and power while U.S. policy-makers ascertain which multilateral policy approaches best fit their country's interests in an increasingly fluid regional security environment. In fact, the U.S. has acted visibly toward strengthening its bilateral alliance networks while simultaneously moving toward embracing multilateral security policies in relatively discriminatory and limited ways. Washington is weighing up on how to best combine its hard power policy approaches and material attributes that have

underwritten the bilateral alliance politics and have traditionally cultivated the region; such diplomatic and (where appropriate) politico-cultural soft power components have been most conducive in cooperating with and balancing against rising Chinese regional power and influence.

3. Multilateral Retrenchment Versus Counterpunching

Before offering a preliminary “verdict” on convergent security’s overall applicability to the U.S. strategy in adjusting historic structural changes now under way in the Asia-Pacific region, we will briefly review what may be viewed as the overarching the U.S. grand strategy in the region and its corresponding allied responses. In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, Daniel Drezner characterizes the Obama Administration’s grand strategy as one beginning with “multilateral retrenchment” before shifting to “counterpunching.”¹⁵ Multilateral retrenchment can be defined as an explicit strategy to restore America’s image abroad by tailoring America’s overseas commitments more consciously, and thus shifting some of America’s traditional security roles to its allies and partners around the world. In May 2010, President Obama released a new U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) which emphasized a shift from the unilateral military approach which had been favored by his predecessor, George W. Bush. Acknowledging that the U.S. “remains the only nation able to project and sustain large-scale military operations over extended distances,” Obama’s NSS underscored the importance of international order-building, engagement, and collaboration as the preferred options for building long-term global and regional stability.¹⁶ The assessment of this approach thus far is that, while it was a clear strategy, it failed to deliver substantial results.

Major regional players, such as China or Russia, failed to adopt an equally cooperative approach, and rather sought to assume a greater

15 Daniel W. Drezner, “Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy? Why We Need Doctrines in Uncertain Times,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 4 (2011): 58.

16 Karen DeYoung, “Obama Redefines National Security Strategy, Looks Beyond Military Might,” *Washington Post*, May 27, 2010.

position in response to what they perceived to be a historically inevitable American strategic retrenchment in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. For instance, despite some “partial” progress in China’s regional role between 2007 and 2009, China failed to continue this pattern of engagement in 2010, a change which was particularly apparent on the Korean Peninsula and in the Eastern and Southern China Seas.¹⁷

The second strategy — “counterpunching” — involves a partial reversal of the multilateral retrenchment policy. It emphasizes a renewed U.S. engagement with the world in terms of pursuing America’s national interests and values, the reassurance of allies and partners, and an increased signalling of American determination to confront rivals around the world. As the global financial crisis imposed a protracted recession on the American economy since 2010, this second strategy has until very recently been less enunciated. Yet it has achieved some significant early outcomes. It is described in somewhat different language by Daniel Twining as a policy which seeks “to preserve Washington’s strategic position in the region by facilitating the ascent of friendly Asian centers of power that will both constrain any Chinese bid for hegemony and allow the U.S. to retain its position as Asia’s decisive strategic actor.”¹⁸ The Obama Administration’s new willingness to link the strategy of U.S. power balancing against a possible Chinese geopolitical rival by coalescing with other regional powers with an engagement strategy directed toward Beijing to pursue common geopolitical and normative interests on the Korean Peninsula, for example, has renewed America’s global prestige even though this counterpunching strategy has yet to be explicitly defined or sufficiently acknowledged by U.S. policy-makers. By tightening economic and diplomatic relations with other regional nations, especially partners and allies, and by confronting major security problems more directly, America’s capacity both to reassure and to deter in the Asia-Pacific region has been revitalized.

17 For an outline of this shift in momentum, see Thomas J. Christensen, “The Advantages of an Assertive China: Responding to Beijing’s Abrasive Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (2011): 57–9.

18 Daniel Twining, “America’s Grand Design in Asia,” *Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2007): 80.

4. Reconciling Perspectives

How well does Drezner's interpretation of the Obama Administration's grand strategy actually capture American policies and behavior in the Asia-Pacific region? Does the change in Obama's policy imply that America has in fact turned to pursuing convergent security via the back door? Or does the policy merely revert back to a classical power balancing strategy that adapts to and emerges within the structural and ideological forces in the region? Contributing a Japanese perspective on these issues, Yoshihide Soeya identifies a number of instances where the Obama Administration's policy in the Asia-Pacific has indeed followed a pattern of convergence between bilateralism and multilateralism. Yet his interpretation of this convergence shares some common traits with Drezner's description of Obama's multilateral retrenchment.¹⁹ The Obama Administration's early openness to dialogue with North Korea is illustrative. So too is its treatment of China as a "stakeholder" rather than an outsider in the international order as well as its approach in encouraging other states in the Asia-Pacific region to take up more concrete security roles.

It is worth noting, however, the difference in perceptions that exists in terms of the willingness of America's partners to contribute more to overall regional security. Whereas Drezner views the attempts of America's partners in increasing their security contributions in response to Obama's retrenchment policy as a failure, Asian analysts such as Soeya view such activities by Japan, Australia, and South Korea in increasing their security cooperation to the "intra-spoke" level as highlights. This process, which has been underway for well over a decade, points to some continuity between Obama's policy and that of the Bush Administration, as well as the presence of factors outside the role of the U.S. that drives convergent security in the region (for example, the rise of China and the increasing importance of non-traditional security issues). However, this difference in perspective also points to the low-level nature of cooperation among U.S. allies and partners. There has never been any sort of "Asian NATO" nor is

19 Yoshihide Soeya, "U.S. and East Asian Security Under the Obama Presidency: A Japanese Perspective," *Asian Economic Policy Review* 4, no. 2 (2009): 297–8.

one likely to form anytime soon. This impression is reinforced by the authors' background interviews with various allied policy officials who confirm that although well planned and highly calibrated interaction between U.S. allies and friends can be viewed positively, actual intra-spoke cooperation amongst them remains at a low level. This also helps in explaining the aforementioned shift in policy in the Obama Administration from that of an initially and largely exclusive prioritization of regional institutionalism to that of a more balanced approach incorporating both liberal institutionalism and power balancing components.

As previously intimated, the Obama Administration's policy of counterpunching in the Asia-Pacific region became most evident in the latter part of 2010. One failure of the entrenchment policy was due to China's increasing assertiveness, particularly over various maritime disputes where, for instance, it reportedly announced that the South China Sea was a "core interest" (on a par with Taiwan).²⁰ America's counterpunch was to reassert its own interests in that region. The U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced in July 2010 that the U.S. had a "national interest" in the South China Sea.²¹ The signing of the TAC (along with America joining the EAS), Washington's new engagement strategy with Burma, and the building of stronger ties with countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia can also be viewed in a similar context. The Obama Administration has also been active in trade negotiations, such as the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and the TPP.²² Furthermore, following the dispute of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in late 2010, the U.S. affirmed that the Senkaku fell within the scope of the bilateral treaty made between the U.S. and Japan. In a meeting in September 2010 with then Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara, Clinton explicitly committed the U.S. to

20 David Pilling, "China's Spreading Core Interests," *Financial Times*, September 13, 2011.

21 Global Security, "South China Sea," accessed November 14, 2011, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/south-china-sea.htm>.

22 See Chengxin Pan, "Is the South China Sea a New 'Dangerous Ground' for U.S.-China Rivalry?" *East Asia Forum*, May 24, 2011, accessed September 14, 2011, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/05/24/is-the-south-china-sea-a-new-dangerous-ground-for-us-china-rivalry/>; Ernest Bower, "'After Hillary' Era Concerns Southeast Asia," *East Asia Forum*, March 30, 2011, accessed September 14, 2011, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/03/30/after-hillary-era-concerns-southeast-asia/>.

defending the Islands if they were to be attacked.²³

If these changes do indeed represent a shift in America's grand strategy under Obama, they also raise important questions about convergent security's future relevance to Asia-Pacific regional security. Two seminal enquiries relate to the possible directions of America's multilateralism for the future and the implications of any future American multilateral posture when understanding the role played by bilateralism, multilateralism, or any other "isms" in the region and the scope of convergence between these different security mechanisms.

5. Recent Directions of American Multilateralism in Asia: The Specialization Approach

As the U.S. Secretary of State, Clinton has endeavored to outline the Obama Administration's evolving outlook on multilateral security politics in the Asia-Pacific region. In a major address delivered to the East-West Center in Honolulu in January 2010, Clinton indicated that U.S. strategy for participating in and building up regional security architectures would be predicated on the following components: a) any such involvement must be consistent with the interests and values underlining the sustainment of U.S. bilateral security alliances in the region; b) regional institutions enjoying U.S. affiliation and support would need to demonstrate "clear and increasingly shared objectives" such as enhancing regional stability, expanding economic opportunity, and promoting the advancement of human rights; and c) they would need to demonstrate effective "action plans" that would allow them to become more than mere "talking shops" and to gain credibility and respect within the international community.²⁴

23 John J. Tkacik Jr, "China Tests U.S.-Japan Alliance," *Washington Times*, October 5, 2010, accessed September 14, 2011, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/oct/5/china-tests-us-japan-alliance/>; Aurelia George Mulgan, "U.S.-Japan Alliance the Big Winner From the Senkaku Islands Dispute," *East Asia Forum*, October 26, 2010, accessed September 14, 2011, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/10/26/us-japan-alliance-the-big-winner-from-the-senkaku-islands-dispute/>.

24 Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks on Regional Architecture in Asia: Principles and Priorities," addressed at the Imin Center-Jefferson Hall, Honolulu, Hawaii, January 12, 2010, accessed November 14, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135090.htm>.

To date, U.S. policy planners have opted not to endorse a single, over-arching approach in building, supporting, or participating in regional institutions along the lines recently proposed by some Asia-Pacific leaders (examples include Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Asia-Pacific community initiative launched in 2008 or Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama's East Asian community proposal initiated in 2009). They have instead pursued a more discriminate strategy of promoting the application of different and existing multilateral bodies to specific issue-areas. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping remains the paramount means for advancing U.S. economic interests, although this is increasingly supplemented by Washington's promotion of the TPP to facilitate regional free trade. The Obama Administration has prioritized the EAS as a favored method in developing regional security dialogues because it includes all of the region's major players (the ten ASEAN members plus China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, and the U.S.). The EAS is viewed by U.S. policy-makers to be less prone to domination by China, which instead prefers the "ASEAN+3" (ASEAN plus China, Japan, and South Korea) format for discussing East Asian security issues on a more regionally exclusive basis.

Under this multilateral posture of "specialization," the survival and relevance of the U.S. bilateral alliance system remains as an intact and viable agent for realizing convergent security in the long run. Washington's emphasis on pursuing "shared objectives" in regional security politics, moreover, has provided a way to derive the best from both the bilateral and multilateral worlds by developing "mini-lateral" or "pluri-lateral" structures that can draw on the relative strengths of both bilateralism and multilateralism. Pluri-lateral or mini-lateral security policy can be defined usually as three but sometimes four or five states meeting and interacting informally (in the absence of a governing document) to discuss issue-areas involving mutual threats to their security or, more often, to go over specific tasks related to building regional stability and order. Pluri-lateral groupings lack the exclusivity that usually underpins bilateral security arrangements and ensures that both allies extract maximum relative gains by associating with each other in response to threats or in carrying out mutual interests. They are also not "norm builders" in the same sense as multilateral

institutions. While they embrace the need for cooperation on specific issues, such cooperation can be temporary or more enduring depending on how urgent or long-term a particular issue proves to be.

The development of pluri-lateral arrangements by the U.S. and its regional allies has generated a subtle process of bilateral-multilateral co-existence or what Victor Cha has labeled a “complex patchwork” of bilateral, pluri-lateral, and multilateral arrangements and instrumentalities.²⁵ U.S. officials are increasingly extolling the virtues of mini-lateral initiatives to address specific policy challenges. In a Congressional testimony delivered in March 2011, Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell noted that the U.S. will “take ambitious steps” to increase trilateral cooperation “to further develop a more integrated Northeast Asia security architecture” and indicated that the “institutionalization of trilateral cooperation will be an important focus of U.S. diplomatic efforts.”²⁶ In an important October 2011 address delivered in Tokyo, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State William Burns praised the role of trilateral consultations conducted by allied officials with their U.S. counterparts in Japan, Australia, South Korea, and other security partners.²⁷ Pluri-lateralism continued to gain momentum during the second part of 2011, with President Obama conducting bilateral side-talks with Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda of Japan at the APEC summit in Hawaii and with policy leaders of both Thailand and the Philippines at the EAS conclave in Bali, focusing on common issues of concern to all parties, including nuclear non-proliferation, counter-terrorism and maritime security.²⁸ Pluri-lateral and multilateral security regime-building continues apace with most Asian security partners collaborating with the U.S. in the Proliferation Security Initiative and pursuing a new maritime security

25 Victor Cha, “Complex Patchworks: U.S. Alliances as Part of Asia’s Regional Architecture,” *Asia Policy* 11 (2011).

26 Kurt M. Campbell, “U.S. Policy Toward North Korea,” remarks to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington D.C., March 1, 2011.

27 William J. Burns, “The Enduring Value of the US-Japan Alliance,” remarks at the University of Tokyo, Japan, October 27, 2011, accessed November 14, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/s/d/2011/176266.htm>.

28 Lynne Sweet, “Obama in Hawaii, Australia and Indonesia: Briefing,” *Chicago Sun Times*, November 12, 2011.

partnership with ASEAN states (the Regional Security Maritime Initiative or RMSI proposed by the U.S. in 2004 was blocked by Indonesian and Malaysian sensitivities about sovereign patrolling in the Malacca Straits, but in November 2011, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta introduced a new version of the RMSI during the EAS meetings in Bali).²⁹ All of these American efforts are designed to posit the image of the U.S. exercising active leadership in regional security politics by applying diplomatic, economic, and military influence in a complex patchwork of dialogue and institutions. It is consistent with the transition process envisioned by the convergent security approach: realizing greater effectiveness in regional order-building by the management of this complex patchwork in ways where mutual interests and enduring norms are cultivated without resorting to geopolitical rivalry or conflict.

6. Implementing Convergent Security: Can the “Spokes” Lead the Way?

The major challenge confronting American bilateral alliance politics in the Asia-Pacific in a broader convergent security context is to supplement or even replace the “exclusivist” component of the country’s traditional bilateral ties with more contemporary, symmetrical relationships reflecting mutual or cross-cutting interests needed to function effectively in an increasingly complex regional security environment. But the U.S. must do so without relinquishing the rationales and advantages of security collaboration which drove the bilateral alliances in the first place.

Different analysts have proposed various approaches for realizing this policy equilibrium. William Tow and Amitav Acharya have advocated updating the American bilateral security network by establishing greater “alliance mutuality” between the U.S. and its junior allies in the region. Alliance mutuality is “a *condition* (rather than a strategy or process) reached in bilateral alliance politics where relations between the more powerful and less powerful ally in a particular security dyad have matured from distinctly

29 Michael Richardson, “U.S. Shifts its Focus on China,” *Canberra Times*, October 31, 2011.

asymmetrical to more evenly balanced sets of interests and interactions. This situation of progressive equilibrium, moreover, is increasingly acknowledged and operationalized by both states in their security relations with the other.”³⁰ In writing about developing East Asian security architectures, Kei Koga has recently argued that bilateralism must be reformed (rather than supplanted) by the U.S., allowing its regional allies to exercise greater diplomatic autonomy within a “regional security nexus” designed to facilitate a “more open” regional security community without jeopardizing their fundamental bilateral security relationships with Washington.³¹

Advocates of those wishing to sustain U.S.-led bilateralism along its traditionally exclusivist lines nevertheless argue that Washington’s bilateral alliance network works effectively as a hedge to prevent a hostile rival from usurping regional balancing and order-building at the expense of the U.S. and its allies, or at least a hedge that provides the basis for modifying regional crises with ad hoc coalition-building by managing specific regional crises.³² In both of these cases, new strands of multilateralism or pluri-lateralism are built upon existing bilateral frameworks to address specific problems and issues (for example, disaster relief, nuclear non-proliferation, or balancing a rising hegemon) that are emerging quickly in an increasingly complex regional security environment. These issues may not allow for the time or trade-offs usually needed for the building of an overarching and credible multilateral regional security architecture. These variants can serve as instruments for creating the necessary “breathing space” for more comprehensive multilateral frameworks to develop, by achieving short-term conflict avoidance and preventing widespread anarchy in the aftermath of natural or man-made disasters. But they must be allowed to function devoid of ideological baggage or fervent nationalism that often fuels resistance to addressing and resolving security dilemmas in ways that go beyond the narrow national interests that are more often than not reinforced through

30 Tow and Acharya, *Obstinate or Obsolete*, 27.

31 Kei Koga, “The U.S. and East Asian Regional Security Architecture: Building a Regional Security Nexus on Hub-and-Spoke,” *Asian Perspective* 35 (2011).

32 Jae Jook Park, “The US-led Alliances in the Asia-Pacific: Hedge Against Potential Threats or an Undesirable Multilateral Security Order?” *Pacific Review* 24, no. 2 (2011); Cha, “Complex Patchworks,” 35–40.

“exclusivist” bilateral security postures. Even multilateral constructs — especially in their nascent form — tend to reflect balancing strategy rather than cooperative behavior. This is evidenced by the ASEAN states’ continued determination to play a decisive “pivotal” role in the ARF or the EAS, and by China’s recent tendencies to regard the Shanghai Cooperation organization as an anti-hegemony instrument directed at containing U.S. power in Central Asia and the ASEAN+3 as a means to marginalize U.S. power and influence in East Asia.³³

The simultaneous opportunity and risk of the U.S. adopting a true convergent security strategy is the requirement that its regional allies are sufficiently mature to conduct reasonably independent relationships with countries and groupings outside the traditional domains of bilateral alliance politics. More allied independence from Washington is not inherently inimical to the U.S. interests if such actions leads to a more self-confident, but still supportive, group of American regional security partners capable of bridging the East and West on critical politico-security and economic issues of the day and of facilitating the breakdown of cultural barriers between Asian and extra-regional powers. By doing so, they will generate a more comprehensive spirit of inclusivity and cooperation across previous Asia-Pacific divisions without relinquishing the insurance that existing bilateral alliance frameworks still provide in the event of policy miscalculation or unexpected aggression. Bilateralism under an American guarantee remains alive and well and is the strategic benchmark for the U.S. strategic policies and behavior in the Asia-Pacific. But the specific *tactics* of alliance management will need to become more agile and egalitarian with “smart power” increasingly assuming a central role in the U.S. policy planning for alliance politics.

33 Not all Western analysts, however, perceive the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an anti-hegemonic grouping primarily directed toward the U.S. and its allies. See, for example, Stephen Aris, “Shanghai Cooperation organization: An Anti-Western Alignment?,” *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 66 (December 2009). A recent treatment of ASEAN’s pivotal role in Southeast Asian multilateral security politics can be found in Fenna Egberink and Frans-Paul van der Putten’s *ASEAN, China’s Rise and the Geopolitical Stability of Asia*, Clingendahl Paper No. 2 (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, April 2011).

7. Conclusion

In terms of our understanding the progress of convergent security in the Asia-Pacific, it is possible, in view of the Obama shift, to draw some initial conclusions about the current direction of convergent security. More importantly, under the Obama Administration, the changes thus far have involved both the bilateral and the multilateral sides of the convergent coin. As originally envisioned, convergent security anticipates a relatively linear — even deterministic — process of transition from bilateral associations historically predicated on zero-sum calculations and designed to underwrite the asymmetry of the U.S. power to a more variegated and complex framework able to accommodate the different levels and forms of political power and institutional structures. As the U.S. moves to reshape its global strategy in the aftermath of its military withdrawal from Iraq and its impending retrenchment from Afghanistan, however, it is also consciously applying a multidimensional strategy of diplomatic engagement, economic interaction, and selective military projection in the Asia-Pacific region to realize a conscious fusion of bilateral and multilateral security approaches in this area of the world. The newly released strategic guidance statement clearly declares the intentions of the U.S. to work toward achieving a “rule based international order” in conjunction with its Asia-Pacific bilateral alliance partners. An acceptable regional military balance in the region should be viewed as a facilitator for this objective and a mediator for the “cooperative bilateral relationship” between China and the U.S. and not as a mere American tool being used to balance perceived military threats for the sake of balancing alone.³⁴

But any such quest remains tempered by the selective implementation of the U.S. and allied hedging strategies at appropriate intervals and as insurance against the prospect that regional norm-building and comprehensive security politics will fail to produce those levels of regional security community-building required to gradually supplant more traditional power politics in the region. The latter geopolitical outcome is clearly at odds with

34 U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: USGPO, January 2012), accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf.

the more benign vision of enduring multilateral security architectures anticipated by the convergent security approach.

What does this alternative situation imply for the future of “hub and spokes” alliance politics in the region? The maintenance and development of complex patchworks, no less than the convergent security formula, will require that the U.S. and its regional partners creatively revise and effectively coordinate their security policies. This reflects the changing nature of bilateral alliance security politics. The old defense burden-sharing debates, for example, will assume new forms that accentuate niche areas of collaboration and require higher levels of allied commitment to the U.S. strategic doctrine and postures. The air/sea battle blueprint is a seminal test case in this regard. The broadening of sub-alliance or “intra-spoke” alliance relations will also proceed and intensify over time. This may well be in the form of the U.S. working with its allies in a pluri-lateral or mini-lateral context to confront and resolve specifically targeted issue-areas. All of these trends are symbolic of the American counterpunching strategy taking hold throughout the region. This also underscores the American determination to play a greater role in both the Asia-Pacific’s burgeoning security institutions and the region’s still robust bilateral security arrangements. The challenge confronted by the U.S. in implementing convergent security through the “front door” in an open and transparent manner is to contribute in building regional confidence and viable politics for security and to find and pursue strategies for bilateralism and multilateralism that do more than just coexist. Complementary strategies incorporating the best of bilateralism and multilateralism must be identified and pursued by Washington so that complex patchworks can be gradually supplanted with security blueprints that are more overarching, coherent, and enduring.

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