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Of Asean and East Asian security

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I WISH to state at the outset that I do not reject outright the importance of power and national interest in post-Cold War East Asia. I have never subscribed to talk or theories that a specific cultural framework (the Asean way) or the East Asian way) can act as a complete substitute to the bipolar world of the Cold War for the obvious reason that it is very difficult to define precisely what this cultural framework is.

But, more important, it is naive to think that nations can solve important problems of war and peace simply because of a cultural tendency towards consensus. While Churchill is surely right to say that "jaw-jaw" is better than "war-war", that is true only up to a point. After a while, more concrete measures have to be taken to prevent "war-war".

Neither do I believe that economic interdependence can completely replace the balance of power in this post-Cold War East Asia. For two reasons. One is that not all East Asian countries are involved in the booming East and Southeast Asian economic order. One refers to examples like North Korea and Myanmar which, for reasons of history and ideology, are not fully integrated into the Asian economy.

They, particularly North Korea, could upset East Asian stability. Second, even within an economically interdependent Asia, there can be asymmetric interdependence in that one area may be more dependent on the other. Such dependence can be politically exploited by interested parties. The anti-Tanaka riots of 1974 are a case in point.

Asean countries have also not exactly rejected the notion of power balance. They have accepted the need for continued US military involvement in East and Southeast Asia, thus underscoring a belief that US might is needed to maintain strategic stability for the moment. Moreover, the arms build-up of many Asean states recently indicates that should the US decide to withdraw, the former should at least have as much means as possible to defend themselves against any nation with hegemonic intentions.

This though, does not mean that the East Asian situation is entirely comparable to 19th century Europe as some have suggested and that Europe's past is necessarily East Asia's future; thus if 19th century Europe exploded because the balance of power system could not accommodate an expanded Prussia, so a post-Cold War East Asia might not be able to accommodate a rising power, be it Japan or China. Or conversely, as some have maintained, because there are now multilateral arrangements in Europe to contain the demons of the past or rather as sometimes said sotto voce, to prevent a resurgent Germany from creating trouble again, then by the same token, the lack of multilateral arrangements in post-Cold War East Asia could lead to a rising power-like China upsetting the balance.

Nor does it mean that economic interdependence and cultural uniqueness do not matter at all in the shaping of a new order in Asia. Even if these cannot replace a power system, they can constrain and influence the ultimate shape of the power balance (and should be given a try before a more naked balance of power system is advocated); and that those who consider these as of no significance are as erroneous as those who think these can replace power as the determinant of the Asian order.

One basic problem in the argument about Europe's past being Asia's future is that it could be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because of the perceived parallel between what an expanded or expanding Germany had caused to the power balance in 19th century Europe and what a rising East

Asian power, presumably China, can do to the East Asian power balance, therefore other countries involved in the region should take the necessary steps to prevent such a happening, steps leading ultimately to the "containment" of China.

Where it may be quite possible a rising China genuinely wants to integrate itself peacefully in the East Asian order, containment action taken by countries, particularly those countries perceived by the Chinese to have done them wrong in the past, may make China react negatively. As Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad the Prime Minister of Malaysia has argued, if you treat China like an enemy, it may turn out to be an enemy.

But to say that such comparison could lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy should not of course make one ignore the seriousness of the argument about the potential instability of East Asia. Many have suggested that Chinese actions over Taiwan and the Spratlys together with the way they treat their citizens are indicators of what a powerful China will do. Moreover, there is the possibility of a US withdrawal which could lead to a vacuum which could be filled by a hegemonic China.

Or put in another way by the Harvard scholar, Sam Huntington, the United States for more than a century would not tolerate a dominant power in East Asia (as it would not in Europe). Hence, a China or a Japan that could rise to be such a dominant power could clash with the United States.

Many in Asean would argue that such arguments are somewhat crude if not an apocalyptic way to interpret or predict East Asian events.

In the first place, it is not that easy to devise the kind of multilateral arrangements of Europe for Asia, given the two vastly different situations, particularly if they involved security ties. There are still some unsettled political problems (China and Taiwan, Japan and Russia over northern territories and so on), and historical mistrust to make such arrangements feasible. Moreover, small countries like those in Asean are not sure such multilateral security arrangements of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation type might not be used as instruments for big power domination.

One could argue that security arrangements could be effected by nations with not too many political problems among themselves. But that might lead to an arrangement for containing China with all the potential instability such containment implies.

Second, many in Asean would contest whether some Western scholars might not be overestimating China's capacity to be the region's hegemon even if it wanted to. The tasks of bringing a huge population into some decent standard of living, and of maintaining some semblance of political stability in a huge nation undergoing change would absorb all the energies of its leaders. They will have little time to be the region's hegemon.

One could also say otherwise, that a China having to deal with internal political problems may be tempted to look for external diversions. Then again it might not in that China may have learned some lessons from a Soviet Union which broke up because it could not sustain even a regional hegemonic role. Chinese actions viewed by some quarters in the West, such as recent action over Taiwan, as aggressive may be viewed in some Asean quarters as defensive ones, while Chinese human rights violations do not suggest in some Asean quarters as necessarily presaging an aggressive China anymore than Russian human rights violations in Chechnya presage an expansionist Russia.

That being so, might not there be a case for trying out the Asean way, which is first to acknowledge China's emergence as a major power whose sentiments and wishes should be taken into account in regional interactions; and thus engaging it by involving it in multilateral forums such as the Asian Regional Forum, the Asia Pacific Economic Forum, the

United Nation and hopefully in other organizations such as the World Trade Organisation.

Following this, might not a consensual approach based on the Asean way be used to get all the relevant countries to sit together in a forum, based on conflict reduction and confidence building. Many westerners might consider such a process as a waste of time but it remains to be seen that the other "hard" alternative of confrontation necessarily works. After all, Asean by its consensual approach has reduced tensions with Indochina, once thought of as an adversary not easily placated, and has gone some way in winning China's trust.

Finally, one must not underestimate economic interdependence as a constraint on the outbreak of conflict (e.g. over the Diayutal Islands or the Senkakus). This means on one hand, Asian nations with massive flows of trade and investment with each and also with the United States would not want such disrupted by conflict. On the other hand, those left out of East Asian economic prosperity such as Indochina and Myanmar because of war and a policy of isolation are now aware of the folly of their past policies, and are eager to participate in such prosperity.

Even North Korea maybe opening up on this score. If given the chance for such economic integration, they would not likely create instability. Such economic interdependence serves as an appropriate backdrop to the operation of the Asean way.