Reflections on an Asian Regional Security Architecture[1]

Over the course of time, Asian states have succeeded in constructively addressing security issues, despite the relative miscarriages of Pan-Asian ideas during the same period. Asia today faces several security risks and the corresponding consequences. In this context, an Asian regional security architecture would serve to secure Asia's future.

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The Situation

Asia is today again the centre of gravity of the world's economy and politics. It is therefore all the more important that Asian states handle Asian security issues well if they are to safeguard and continue the unprecedented growth and prosperity that the last three decades have brought to so many of their people in so many Asian countries.

And yet, when one looks at Asia from India, it appears bipolar or paradoxical, bifocal. East of India is an area of dynamic economic growth where the state is the primary unit of politics, security and the economy. West of India, states are either non-existent, fragmented or unfinished, economies are more informal and almost feudal rather than formal or modern, and the political and security agenda is often determined by non-state actors. Central Asia displays the characteristics of both. One could almost say that while the Asia-Pacific is Westphalian, west Asia is pre-Westphalian. (Europe thinks it is post-Westphalian, until it is brought down to earth by realities such as Brexit).

The overall sense one gets form this critical juncture is that Asia is at a moment of strategic opportunity and fluidity. Asia can build on its past successes if it is able to guarantee the security that is an essential precondition of prosperity and growth. If there are great opportunities today, the risks are also very great. These include security and geopolitical risks.

The Asia-Pacific has seen rapid shifts in the balance of power as a result of changing economic weights, and massive military modernisation programmes. This change has occurred in a crowded

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[1] This paper is a revised version of a public lecture presented by Mr. Shivshankar Menon in Beijing on 28 June 2017.

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geopolitical space, where several powers are rising simultaneously, and several established powers seek to maintain their relative dominance. The shift in the balance is accentuated by the dim prospects of the global economy and the need for all Asia-Pacific countries to make significant internal adjustments of their economies and societies.

Three larger trends characterise the Asia-Pacific security situation today:

- The return of classical geopolitics in terms of contention among the great powers, rekindled territorial and maritime disputes, and security dilemmas between pairs of states;

- Contested commons in outer space, the high seas and cyber space; and,

- The absence of an overarching security architecture or group of countries to address security issues in the sub-region.

In west Asia, on the other hand, the security situation is vitiated by:

- The unwillingness of a sizeable number of states to accept the present disposition of forces in the region, evident in shifting coalitions and short-term tactical responses to a region in turmoil that is seen. The emergence of Iran as one of the most powerful geopolitical factors in the region since the first Gulf War removed Iraq as a factor, has seen counter-balancing reactions by some Sunni monarchies led by Saudi Arabia, and rebalancing by states like Turkey, Qatar and Egypt. Israel has a *de facto* coalition with the Sunni monarchies. These are short-term tactical responses to a region in turmoil.

- The increasing strength of non-state actors, groups and militias, which is greater than that of the nominal state in some places. (While individual extremist and terrorist groups like Da'esh may rise and fall, the overall comparison is not encouraging for the state in west Asia other than Iran, Egypt and Turkey.) Indeed, the state in the conventional meaning of the term no longer exists in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Libya over large swathes of ungoverned territory across west Asia and north Africa.

- The direct involvement of external powers like the United States (US) and Russia in the military and internal affairs of states of this sub-region. The weaker the state structures the greater the involvement.

And yet, Asia is one geopolitical unit, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will make it more so. In both eastern and western Asia one can see:

- A decoupling of the sub-regional order from the fragmenting global political and economic order.

- Disengagement by the US, or at least a transition to US disinterest in maintaining stability, order and the balance of power, to transactionalism, and to a much greater reliance on regional states, as it tends to its own internal issues.

- An increasing reliance on nationalism throughout Asia for legitimacy by regimes that feel threatened by rising uncertainty, by their diminished capacity to manage events, and by what they see as greater external and internal threats.

Consequences

The overall result of this situation is a widespread sense of insecurity throughout Asia, which fuels arms races in both sub-regions, though of much greater lethality and consequence in the Asia-Pacific. Geopolitical space has opened up, and uncertainty is high. In this situation, larger rising powers with clear agendas and capabilities of their own will find opportunity, but smaller powers will have to rebalance their policies and are badly affected by narrowing options.

The other consequence of these trends is the evident inability of the traditional security architecture in Asia to cope with today's challenges. The US hub-and-spokes system is unable to deal with issues in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, or with the North Korean nuclear and missile programme. Nor could one or two powers, such as a new G-2 between China and the US, solve such issues. The reason is simple. This is a geopolitically crowded neighbourhood, power is more evenly distributed than before, and other countries too have vital interests in these issues. (For instance, a solution which legitimises North Korean nuclear weapons would also legitimise possession of the same weapons by North Korea's other neighbours, Japan and South Korea.) In west Asia it is evident that there is no order to cope with serial crises and a region in turmoil.

This is not to create the impression that the situation in Asia is considered so explosive that a war among great powers is likely or inevitable. Nor is it a Thucydides trap. Quite the contrary, the gains for the powers from conflict, or even from settling existing issues in their own favour, are unlikely to outweigh the costs of conflict with another power to their security, prosperity and internal order. Nor does the use of military force offer a solution to security issues in the region.

But short of a war among great powers, there is plenty of kindling lying about, ready to be fired. The risk of major powers being sucked into local conflicts is higher than it has been for some time. Witness the steady increase in US military involvement in Syria and its return to the fighting in Iraq. There has also been a steady rise in other kinds of conflict and violence throughout Asia, both within societies and between them.

What to do?

First, what not to do. Asia is different from either 19th century or 20th century Europe. So a single-shot solution like a Concert of Europe or the Helsinki Accords will not work. Asian states need to devise solutions that work in Asia.

So what should the states of Asia do?

- Asian states should be Asian, devising an architecture for the Asia-Pacific that is practical, inclusive, and open. In west Asia, an order is needed which reflects existing realities. For instance, an order that seeks to deny Iran's position by virtue of her geography, history, statecraft and capabilities is doomed to fail and will merely provoke more conflict.

- In both sub-regions, accepting and working with multi-polarity is the only way to reflect the reality of today's distribution of power, not an attempt to impose an artificial hierarchy when power is actually scattered. History suggests that multipolar systems work and are longer lasting than binary or unipolar systems. In Asia, the historical norm has been of multiverses cooperating and working with each other, and times of greatest prosperity have come when Asian states have been multipolar and most connected to each other.

- Asia should work from the bottom up to reduce the risks of conflict or accidents, building habits of cooperation among the countries of Asia. Terrorism is one issue on which there is much greater scope for cooperation among Asian countries. An issue like maritime security and freedom of navigation is critical for the world's major trading nations who are now in Asia. Cyber security is the other area where the gains from cooperation would be significant. These three issues, counter-terrorism, maritime security and cyber security, are three which

require collective rather than national solutions, and which will affect Asia's future well-being directly.

- The states of Asia should also put in place the means to prevent trouble while peace prevails, building crisis management mechanisms, and confidence building measures (CBMs) bilaterally and among groups of countries. The example that India and China have together shown, of discussing a settlement of the boundary dispute while maintaining overall peace and tranquility on their border shows the value of CBMs and crisis management mechanisms where disputes exist.

- As for the institutions that such cooperation requires, it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel and start yet another institution or institutions. Instead, existing institutions like CICA, BRICS, SCO and EAS should be used and adapted to serve practical purposes, allowing those states and organisations which are ready and able to cooperate to do so on the security challenges that have been mentioned.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is optimism about the future of Asia. Pan-Asian ideas have a long and not very successful history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, having been hijacked in the service of nationalisms of various Asian countries. But despite that history, for several decades Asia has consistently displayed the flexibility and ability to find practical solutions to security problems, and has provided sufficient security to make possible the greatest improvement in human well-being ever in history. Now the states of Asia must ensure that rising geopolitical uncertainty and security challenges are not allowed to prevent Asia's future march to prosperity.

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