

# The challenge of the Asian Security Architecture

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In the first decade of a century that the entire world agrees is Asia's, this great continent — home to half the world's peoples and resources — finds itself at a strategic crossroads. Will it be able to give rise to new architecture and institutions that foster stability, security, cooperation, and growth? Or will it continue to remain mired in the suspicions and insecurities that outside powers have traditionally taken advantage of in order to offer themselves as 'balancers' of power in the region?

During the visit to India last week of President Hu Jintao of China, the Indian and Chinese governments seemed to signal their willingness to take the first road. Indeed, the goal of Asian architecture figured explicitly in the Joint Declaration issued by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Mr. Hu. Both sides agreed "to expand their coordination within regional organisations and explore a new architecture for closer regional cooperation in Asia." Seeking to allay latent suspicions about each other's role in the emerging patchwork of organisations that have sprung up across the continent in the past few years, the two countries said they "positively view each other's participation in Asian inter-regional, regional and sub-regional cooperation processes."

But if China and India are to translate these fine words into reality, there is need for greater clarity in the foreign policy establishments of both countries. Clarity not only in terms of how they see each other, but also in terms of the role they envisage the United States playing in Asia. Two years ago, for example, India was actively promoting the idea of an Asian energy grid linking major oil and gas producing and consuming countries in the continent with India, China, and Iran serving as major arteries. Unfortunately, with the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal on the anvil, pan-Asian hydrocarbon cooperation is no longer being seen in New Delhi as a priority. And with the Bush administration opposing the development of regional organisations that "exclude" the U.S. — a point forcefully made by Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at the Shangri La conference in Singapore earlier this year — India has consciously been limiting its participation at SCO events.

Since energy and the SCO are now more or less on hold as far as India is concerned, the only pillar of the emerging Asian architecture New Delhi still seems excited about is the East Asia Summit.

The EAS is good but it may not be enough. Events have moved so rapidly since 9/11 that India and China have not had the chance to fully assess the evolution of U.S. strategic thinking in Asia or study the implications the growing American military presence in the region is having on regional security. Despite fashionable talk of the "decline" of America, the U.S. is an ascendant military power in the world and in Asia. It may lack the power to establish a new order but it certainly doesn't lack the ability to destroy the old. Both India and China need to factor this into their strategic thinking. They need to develop relations

with each other — and with the United States — that can serve to restrain the destructive exercise of U.S. power in the region. And this restraint can be brought about not by establishing a new bilateral or trilateral entente against the U.S. as some imagine but by pushing for the development of an Asian cooperative security architecture to deal with conflicts and contradictions on the basis of Asian strategic interests and values.

India recognises the destabilising nature of U.S. policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Palestine, North Korea, and Iran but the dominant section of its foreign policy and security establishment still clings to the notion that the U.S. could help the country “balance” a rising China in Asia. This was the burden of the major policy speech made by Shyam Saran as Foreign Secretary last November at an India-U.S. business meet in New Delhi.

The U.S. has responded to the prospect of institution building in Asia with initiatives and coalitions of its own. Soon after the Cold War, it floated the idea of an Asian version of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and an Asian Nato, both of which failed to materialise. The APEC forum came into being linking all countries in the Asia-Pacific but its ambit has remained static. Today, Washington is pursuing two principal lines of action in order to ensure its “leadership” in Asia. Both depend crucially on its emerging “strategic partnership” with India.

The first is the so-called “Big Four” strategy where the U.S. works alongside India, Australia, and Japan. The post-tsunami naval cooperation between the “Big Four” was an example of this but India has been reluctant to convert one-off humanitarian operations into a more concrete strategic arrangement. The second U.S. strategy is the so-called “Five plus Five”, which seeks to add on to its five existing military alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and Philippines the support of five “hedging” powers, viz. India, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, and New Zealand. In both these strategies, the object of U.S. partnership building is China. Not surprisingly, these efforts have not gone unnoticed in Beijing.

The Indian willingness to be seduced by the U.S. illusion of “balance” is driven mostly by a fundamental lack of understanding of Chinese policy. For example, many Indian analysts mistakenly imagine the ‘string of pearls’ strategy whereby China is developing naval facilities in Pakistan or Myanmar is primarily directed at India. In reality, the Chinese concern is with protecting its sea lines of communication from potential disruption by the U.S. Likewise, Chinese arms sales to Pakistan are seen only as an attempt to “contain” India rather than as an investment by China in a strategic relationship that gives Beijing naval access to the Arabian Sea through which its oil and gas imports pass.

### **Globalists and Asianists**

Above all, India has failed to understand that the Chinese foreign policy establishment is not monolithic and that different trends are constantly jostling for space against each other. Ever since Zheng Bijian developed his influential thesis of China’s “peaceful rise” in 2003, Western scholars have tended to focus only on the debates this thesis has generated within the Chinese Communist Party. Since then, “peaceful rise” has made way for “peaceful development” and now, “harmonious world,” as the official defining characteristic of Chinese foreign policy. While these nomenclatural shifts have been carefully tracked by scholars, less well known and understood is the division within the Chinese foreign policy establishment between the so-called ‘globalists’ and Asianists. The former consist mainly of

`America hands' — officials who have served in the U.S. or on the U.S. desk — who believe Chinese interests are best served by going along with U.S. policy on a wide variety of issues. The latter consist of those who link China's future to its ability to develop harmonious relations with all major Asian countries, particularly India but also Japan.

Except for brief moments — such as when the U.S. bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 or when the U.S. EP-3 spy plane was forced down by China in 2001 — the `globalist' trend has dominated. Nor are the lines always neatly drawn. However, some evidence of the different approach favoured by the two became apparent in China's response to the North Korean nuclear test last month. The initial Chinese reaction, which reflected the `globalist' perspective, was sharply critical of North Korea. Subsequently, the Asianists argued that it was U.S. policy itself that pushed North Korea to the wall and that Beijing could not afford to burn its bridges with Pyongyang. Since then, China's tone has changed and its attitude and pronouncements are more in line with South Korea than with the U.S.

Within China, it is the Asianist impulse that is pushing the country towards establishing better relations with India. But there is also a growing realisation that confrontation with Japan only encourages Japanese militarism and strengthens the U.S.-Japan alliance and that Beijing needs to repair its relations with Tokyo too.

In the final analysis, China, India, and Japan are the three principal pillars on which the cooperative Asian security architecture would have to be based, with a reunified Korea and also Russia eventually serving as pillars four and five, and ASEAN playing the role of sheet-anchor. For matters to go in this direction, however, it is vital that the Asianist line — in China and in India — prevail. Asia is too big to be led by any one power and neither China nor India nor Japan can or should aspire to "lead" Asia either by themselves or in alliance with an external power.

Since a regionalism that is cooperative would also be inclusive, there is no reason for the U.S. to feel excluded and work against the emerging institutions. Like others from outside Asia, the U.S. too would be welcome to take part in any future Asian security framework. But only as an observer or even a participant and not as a "leader" or "driving force."

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