TOWARDS A POST-US REGIONAL SECURITY ORDER IN EAST ASIA?

Book launch / Seminar, 27 November 2014, Brussels

There is a significant uncertainty about the US security commitment to East Asia over the next 15–20 years, underpinned by China’s economic and military rise. This uncertainty affects the present-day strategic perceptions and behaviour of East Asian countries, and of the US itself. Under its ‘rebalance to Asia’ policy, the Obama administration has undertaken various measures to assure its partners in Asia that the US has both the intention and capacity to remain engaged in the region. However, doubts about the sustainability of Washington’s security commitments do remain in East Asia.

This strategic uncertainty and the responses it triggers by regional players are shaping Asia’s evolving security order. What do these changing regional dynamics in Asia mean for Europe? The European Union strives to strengthen its involvement in East Asian security, not least by seeking a membership in several regional fora that have been established in recent years. Doubts about Washington’s future security role in East Asia may well influence the possibilities that are open to Brussels for achieving its objectives. Moreover, how the US responds to strategic uncertainty is likely to affect the transatlantic relations, as well as a possible US-EU cooperation on Asian security.

This seminar, held on occasion of the launch of the book Changing Security Dynamics in East Asia: A Post-US Regional Order in the Making? (Eds. Atanassova-Cornelis E., van der Putten F.-P., Palgrave, 2014), examined the impact of the present-day strategic uncertainty in Asia about the future US role on the perceptions and behaviour of the US, China and Asian countries. The seminar also looked at the implications of regional uncertainties for the evolving Asian order, and how this is relevant for the European Union’s approach to East Asian security and for the transatlantic partnership.

This event was jointly organised by the European Institute for Asian Studies, the Madariaga-College of Europe Foundation and The Clingendael Institute.

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Session 1: Strategic Uncertainty and the Asian Security Order

Session 1 of this seminar began with an introduction by Mr David Fouquet, chair of the event and senior associate of EIAS, in which he highlighted the importance of the topic, which has been growing throughout the past 15 years given the changes in the geopolitical landscape of the region. For Mr Fouquet, there are ‘important messages from the findings of the book and the speakers’. The work of the book’s editors and authors is ‘something that will stand, [they have done] a useful job in analysing what has happened in the past ten years and [it] will be instructive to all of us’.

“A Post-US Regional Security Order in the Making?”

Dr. Atanassova-Cornelis began with a presentation of the book by addressing the strategic uncertainty and the Asian Security Order by first posing the question: Is such a regional order really in the making? This question is what led her and Dr. van der Putten to begin working on the edited volume “Changing Security Dynamics in East Asia: A Post-US Regional Order in the Making?”. She stressed that this project came in a context of the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and its peak in Europe, and the increasing salience of the debate on the perceived US “decline” versus China’s “rise”. This inspired them to gear their focus towards China’s growing influence in the region at a time of increasing strategic uncertainty related to the future security presence of the US in Asia. This then led them to question: For how long will the US remain committed to security in East Asia? Is Washington’s purpose in the region to contain China? Dr. Atanassova-Cornelis pointed out that the purpose of the various contributions to the book was to examine how this strategic uncertainty affects the present-day strategic perceptions and behaviour of East Asian nations, as well as of the US itself. The book also analyses the implications of this changing geopolitical reality in Asia for the evolving regional security order.

Dr. Atanassova-Cornelis then went on to introduce the structure of the book and its division into three parts: I) Evolving Regional Security Order in East Asia: Key Perspectives; II) East Asian Responses to Strategic Uncertainty; and III) Alternative Models of Regional Security Order. In the last part of the book, three alternative models were examined in particular. The first model was a “dual leadership structure” in which China would dominate the economic and financial landscape of the East Asian region, while the US would lead in the political and military dimensions. The second model focused on three Northeast Asian states – China, Japan and South Korea – and their evolving cooperation on non-traditional security, and it considered an alternative subregional order based on regionalism. The last model examined a regional security system of “mixed Asian community and deterrence logics”, which combined the deterrent functions of the US’ security presence with the role of ASEAN-centred regional security institutions for maintaining regional order.

Dr. van der Putten continued the second half of the presentation to discuss some possible implications that follow from – but are not included in - the book’s main findings. The book suggests that for the time being uncertainty about the future of the US’ role will remain a major feature of the region’s security dynamics. Dr. van der Putten pointed out that uncertainty about the US is not the only form of uncertainty that shapes regional security. According to him, there are other important uncertainties, in particular uncertainty about the future role of China. However,
uncertainty about the US is of fundamental importance as it is likely to remain a long-lasting feature of the regional order since the US is not physically located in East Asia. It is an external actor, unlike China – whose role could eventually become more stable if it succeeds in progressing from being a developing country to a more developed country. At present, uncertainty about the US is stimulating the development of ASEAN-based multilateralism, including the active participation of both Washington and Beijing. While according to Dr. van der Putten this is a positive development, at the same time this uncertainty destabilises the Sino-US relationship and thereby the region as a whole. In other words, in the long run it would be in the interest of regional stability if such uncertainty ceased to be relevant. For this, the US would need to be accepted by all regional countries, including China, as a permanent member of a clearly defined regional community. Even a hypothetical dual power-sharing arrangement for East Asia between China and the US would not remove this element of uncertainty. Under such an arrangement the question whether the US would eventually be able to retain its position in the region would continue to be relevant. Of course, a regional community that is based on multilateralism, inclusive of both the US and China, and accepted by both as the basis for the regional order – if at all possible - can only be the outcome of a long-term process. Nevertheless, Dr. van der Putten concluded that if this was the only alternative to dangerous instability, to a China-dominated region, or to a Sino-US war, then it would be necessary to keep this long-term aim in sight and to explore what steps were needed to move closer to it.

**US-China Relations and the strategic uncertainty in East Asia**

Professor Shi Yinhong, author of the chapter “China’s Approach to the US Role in East Asia: the Dynamics of Volatile Competition”, spoke of “China's Complicated Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping, and Evolving Strategic Rivalry against the US with its Associates”. He stressed how China, in spite of its internal challenges, is creating an assertive external policy on the foundation of its ‘national glory as a major power’ and he also spoke of how popular nationalism has reawakened. He likened President Xi to a “reawakening lion” who has much more centralised power and is adopting a stronger position towards its rivals. Although China’s policies have appeared to be much more assertive with the national hard-line policies of the country’s resurgence, catering to the demands of the people, Professor Shi pointed out several inconsistencies in the messages China was delivering concerning their external relations. Namely, the discourse about ‘the great resurgence of the Chinese nation’; the improvement in capabilities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and reports of a break-through in their military build-up; and the decline of references in the official discourse of the guiding principle of the Chinese foreign policy of ‘peaceful development’. He noted, however, that after the 18th Party Congress there had been renewed emphasis on the objective of a ‘new type of great power relationship’ between China and the US. Professor Shi explained that some trends in cooperation between the two great powers, namely on issues of international security such as those involving North Korea, Syria and Iran, can be observed.

Furthermore, in the days preceding the 2014 APEC Summit in Beijing, China and Japan announced their “Four-Point Consensus”, which is supposed to pave the way for smoother relations between both powers. Given that China faces many domestic and international conditions that shape its overall policies, its foreign policy prospects remain uncertain.
However, under President Xi, the objective of increasing China’s preponderance in the region above that of the US is clear. For this, President Xi is using the tools of “strategic military” and “strategic economy” by launching different initiatives competing with those proposed or sponsored by the US. For example, the proposal to create an Asia-Pacific Free Trade Zone (FTAAP) is in competition with the US-sponsored Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations which have been underway since 2011. President Xi’s leadership has had significant successes in terms of reaching military agreements with the US and Japan. However, the assertive military strategy within the South China Sea erodes the “soft power” China has worked so hard to cultivate in its international image and complicates its diplomatic relations with its peripheral neighbours. It is because of this that Professor Shi projects that China will focus its foreign policy efforts more on its “strategic economy” plans as a means to strengthen relations with its neighbouring partners.

The Uncertain Future of Asia’s Security Order

To conclude the first session, Professor Nick Bisley (La Trobe University, Australia) gave a presentation on “The Uncertain Future of Asia’s Security Order”. Professor Bisley began by contrasting the current security order in the region with how it was 30 years ago. He argued that this was a very stable international order with a period of peace and robust economic growth. The prerequisites for such a period of stability were the acceptance of US dominance and the geopolitical stability of maps and borders. However, nowadays the perception of the people in the region has changed and they fear for the security and certainty in the area. There is now the predominant idea that perceptions really matter in International Relations. There is generally a lack of confidence in current strategic arrangements. Professor Bisley asked the question: ‘What is it that we are uncertain about?’.

The Second World War was a very unstable period in the region because of Japan’s expansionist actions. However, from the 1970s onwards, up until the not-so-distant past, there was a very strong rapprochement in the building up of Sino-American relations. This only occurred however when the US had accepted China’s economic growth and when China had been able to cope with the US military presence in the region. This understanding allowed for a peaceful coexistence of both powers and laid the fundamental platform upon which economic prosperity in the region unfolded.

Professor Bisley noted that ‘none of this would have been possible without the Sino-American rapprochement’. Even though China did not particularly like the American military presence, it understood that it was conducive to its own long-term goals and to the stability of borders. Consequently, a stable military order was possible, owing to the US presence in the region. This allowed countries to focus their efforts on the improvement of their own economic capabilities. The countries in the region had a common understanding of the purpose of the American military presence in the region, this being the maintenance of regional stability. ‘Everyone accepted this, even if it was begrudgingly’.

However, the current situation is the opposite. ‘Exactly when do we see this understanding fraying?’. This, in Professor Bisley’s opinion, is a slowly emerging process, for which an exact date of the decay in Sino-American relations cannot be pinpointed. Confidence in the previous status-quo has ebbed away and Professor Bisley identified the following components: first, the lack of confidence or clarity
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of the expectations of the other countries. Countries are no longer certain as to what another country would do if and when lines were crossed. This state of expectation has become increasingly uncertain everywhere, as unease is growing. Second, there is a lack of confidence about the integrity of maps and current borders, and the role countries play in the current military balance. Professor Bisley underlined that what can currently be observed is a shift in countries’ military balance. Last, he identified the component of certainty in the previous world order. ‘We used to know what the rules of the world were’. Professor Bisley explained that he saw a positive step in the Xi-Abe meeting about crises-management mechanisms, but he signalled that at the moment there are no plans in the pipeline and no roadmap at the micro and macro level. It is for this reason that it is currently difficult to identify for whose benefit the current regional security order exists. ‘China and the US are at the greatest point of divergence, and it is important to know whose interests are being served in the current arrangements’.

In Professor Bisley’s opinion, there is a tendency, , for academics to focus on “neat stylised outcomes” when making their projections. It is therefore possible, in this context, to identify three potential outcomes for what is in store for the future of the region: a) China wins, b) the US wins or c) there is a shared power arrangement with some kind of “utopian” multilateral organisation in force. However, ‘none of this is going to happen because reality is more complex’. From Professor Bisley’s perspective, the most likely outcome is that the key players in the region (the US and China) will clearly set out their goals. China will continue its strategy of eroding the US’s influence in the region without jumping into an open conflict with them, ‘which would be disastrous’. It will continue to test its boundaries and the American influence in the region. Furthermore, China will take steps through institutional channels that are conducive to its interests. On the other hand, the US will continue to assert its military presence in the region, which it will organise through bilateral arrangements. There are already signs of Japan’s support for this strategy, and according to Professor Bisley, ‘India will be a pivotal player to these power interactions’. This will create a context in which both China and the US are very uneasy with each other. For Professor Bisley, the main stumbling block in the bridging of relations is that neither party can see the world from each other’s perspective. Therefore, in conclusion, ‘strategic uncertainty is here to stay for the next 20 years’.

Session 2: The EU’s Role in Asia’s Evolving Regional Order

Having explored the changing nature of the security order in East Asia, the second session moved to focus on the European Union’s role in and responses to the strategic situation. With a new leadership taking hold in Brussels, there is a great deal of speculation about the future. Many policymakers seem to be wondering why they should pay attention to the Asia-Pacific region, when there are so many problems within Europe itself and the immediate neighbourhood poses so many more. But it is important to remember that this region represents 40% of global population, 57% of the global economy, and 48% of global trade. By virtue of those figures alone, the region is key for Europe, never mind the rapid rise in the Chinese middle class that is expected to take place by 2030. Of course, many of the current conflicts within the region are not necessarily new or unique:
disagreements between China and the US very closely mirror the discord between Hugo Grotius and John Selden hundreds of years ago over the opening or closing of the seas. One of the first tasks is to get European audiences to truly understand the region and its importance. To do so, using the analogy of the Mediterranean is helpful. Though the scale is certainly different, the importance of trade in the two regions is very similar. Using this analogy, there are a few different scenarios that can emerge. The first is bipolarity, such as in the time of the Roman-Carthaginian rivalry, while the “Roman Lake” era is a good example of hegemony. The maritime republics of Italy were instead a multipolar system. This last was a very bloody period, and clearly did not work out for the best. Currently, China is pursuing a system of benign acquiescence, wherein they continue to advance again and again in the hope that the rest of the region and world will decide it is futile to resist and simply allow China to become a hegemon. Of course, there is also the possibility of war, but hopefully it will not come to that.

*Why and how Europe should get involved*

Now, given that Europe understands the Asia-Pacific, what role can it play there? First of all, again, the region, especially the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea, is extremely important to European export and import activities. The 2010 crisis between Japan and China and the subsequent interruption of rare earth exports was felt dramatically by European companies, which helped wake them up to how important trade in the region truly is for them. In addition, the EU is China’s largest trading partner, and the EU is the largest foreign investor in ASEAN. The EU also makes a great deal of money selling weapons and dual-use goods to Asia. All these factors have ramifications in Europe’s dealings with the regions, and should play a role in how Europe chooses to move forward. The US’s pivot to Asia also has ramifications for the transatlantic relationship. The US acknowledges the importance of recent events in Eastern Europe, but its long-term strategic focus is still on Asia. The Ukraine crisis is certainly important. But it is not a core interest for the US, and it is a core interest for Europe. This should prompt some thoughts about European commitments and security interests. As Daniel Russel explained recently, perhaps because the US is helping Europe in the Ukraine crisis, Europe should reciprocate by helping the US in Asia. Whether that ends up happening remains to be seen. But because both the US and EU are major global players, both politically and economically, and have the power to set norms of international behaviour, they both have a role to play in Asia. Many Chinese analysts feel that China has been ignored, and that it should be a rule-maker rather than a rule-taker. The US and EU would both be affected by such an evolution and should examine it closely.

Again, Europe’s focus has been largely on Europe since the financial crisis, in a manifestation of so-called “strategic marginalisation.” But maritime security is something that affects the whole world, crossing borders and boundaries, especially since upwards of 90% of products are traded by sea, and that number is rising. Europe cannot afford to ignore problems of maritime security, so it should make a concerted effort to have more of a strategic voice in the Asia-Pacific region, if only to safeguard its own immediate interests. As Walker wrote, there are a few different directions Europe could pursue to that end. It could continue not to see itself as a full partner, remaining a freerider on the coattails of US regional security policy. Or, more unlikely, it could position itself as an independent security actor in the region. Of course, another route would be to avoid military
presence and instead become more economically involved. Passing TTIP would strengthen the transatlantic alliance and send signals of solidarity. The EU is also a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), while the US is not. This affords another opportunity to play an important role. Overall the best tools Europe has at its disposal are the soft-power and economic tools, which it should use to force China to show that it can act as a responsible member of the international community. Interdependence, as was shown in World War I, is not enough to stop war, but using a variety of economic and norms-based methods to influence change can be.

Insecurity and strategic uncertainty in the Asia-Pacific region are in part caused by actors not knowing what others want and plan to do. The EU is a part of this, as their strategic goals are also not well defined and communicated. As said above, the EU’s role will not be so much in the area of hard security, especially given the oversaturation of such in Asia at present. Instead, the EU should focus on insisting upon certain principles, especially the rule of law. Recently, there has been some demonstration by nations in the region that they welcome the EU’s activities in this area. Of course, Europe needs to make a concerted effort not to be hypocritical and to maintain credibility by insisting upon rule of law within its own borders as well.

Finally, one of the things that the EU could do in addition to strengthening its involvement in East Asia is to focus on the regions that are located in between Europe and East Asia. This could be a logical response to the growth of Asia Pacific mechanisms, which often exclude the EU, and to the strengthening of Chinese economic and diplomatic influence throughout Asia up to eastern Europe. To use ASEM a basis for increased multilateral cooperation, in which the EU and China work side by side rather than as competitors, for the whole Eurasian region could contribute to eventually making the EU more relevant also for trans-Pacific relations.

The role of global and regional governance structures

As Asia continues to develop, will it do so as an evolution of the present system, or under a new order altogether? The current order has allowed the situation to come to where it is, and countries like China were able to develop under it. But China is one of the biggest advocates for changing the system, and rightly so. The West often does not respond adequately to China’s wishes, but a step like giving China greater voting rights in the IMF would be favourable. Similarly, there is the question of the new development banks, for instance the BRICS development bank—are they meant as an addition to the current institutions, or as replacements? One big discussion that must be addressed is the foundations of international law upon which interactions and responses are based. There are arguments that UNCLOS is too new and cannot be applied, but if some actors follow certain rules and others follow others, is it because of a misunderstanding of international law or a rejection of it? In this area, the EU certainly has a great deal of experience to bring to the table. Of course this would carry with it its own frictions in Asia. The European system—not just the EU but the Council of Europe, the OSCE, NATO, etc.—is built on multilateralism. But the Asian system is based much more around a system of alliances, especially bilateral relations, such as Europe saw in the 19th century. There is also a contrary action and movement toward trilateralism, such as in the Japan-India-US relations or the US-Australia-Japan relations, which seeks to avoid some of the disastrous consequences of a mainly bilateral system. But given these parameters, Europe could do a lot by
bringing multilateralism, and the stronger rule of law that comes with it, more firmly into the system in Asia, such as it has been trying to do by cooperating intensively with ASEAN.

The visibility of European actions in the region

Part of the problem with Europe’s reputation in Asia is the idea that they are not acting in the region at all. But this is more an issue of visibility and public relations than an issue of action. Much of the influence and activity that Europe has in the region is indirect. Europe has given money to the International Maritime Organisation in order to help fight piracy. It has given money, mainly through the United Nations, to stop the growing and the transfer of drugs in places like Afghanistan. It has established centres around the Pacific to work on issues like piracy and maritime security. The issue of maritime security has been especially important, with papers and working groups pursuing a comprehensive approach to the problem. But because these activities are indirect, no one hears about them, and so no one knows how engaged Europe truly is in the region. In Myanmar, a task force has been established to bring together not just bureaucrats but businesspeople and various experts as well. There is also the Peace Institute, which works to bring peaceful solutions between tribal groups. The issue with many of these efforts is that they do not make headlines as well as hard-power, military activities can. But concentrating on the areas where Europe has expertise could bring some future recognition. Europe could help find an international nuclear deal with Iran, which would certainly bring some publicity. And if that were to happen, a closer look might be possible at relations with North Korea. Already South Korea has great interest in learning about the best practices Europe has discovered for increasing regional peace, trust, and confidence building.

Conclusions

The main approach Europe should be taking, in order to achieve these goals, is to remain consistent and insistent on points of order and rule of law. Recently, the Foreign Affairs Council had its first meeting since the ascension of the new EU leadership. One of the conclusions of the meeting was as follows: “The Council furthermore reiterates the urgent need of enabling the EU and its Member States to assume increased responsibilities to act as a security provider at the international level and in particular in the Neighbourhood, thereby also enhancing their own security and their global strategic role by responding to these challenges together.” This, if it remains the overall work programme for the next five years, will be a great boon to Europe both within and without.

The views expressed in this paper are the speakers’ own, and do not necessarily reflect those of the organisers or any other institutions with which the speakers are associated.

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