

## **China and Regional Security**

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### *Executive Summary*

Recent developments in China's relations with the United States and Japan will have significant impact on the regional security environment and the shaping of regional security architecture in the Asia-Pacific. There will be a continual subtle shift of weight in the region to Northeast Asia from ASEAN. Non-conventional security issues that threaten the security of the state and society are matching in intensity and severity with conventional state-to-state conflicts as a growing part of the security issues for the region. More players want to be relevant to the regional dynamics and processes, but preferred models of regional governance are increasingly elitist. In all of these, China seems to be cautious on major initiatives in the region, want to continue to focus its efforts on great power relations and relations with "surrounding countries." An East Asian community based on Japan-China-South Korean closer relations therefore is more likely to get China's endorsement.

India's relations with China will be crucial for the region. But the lack of trust between the two seems to prevent them from playing a greater role in the region. Forging strategic trust between the two countries requires a clearer definition of each country's interests in the region and acceptance, respect and even support of these core interests by the other side.

### **1. Chinese Partnerships with United States and Japan**

China's relations with the United States and Japan, two principal movers and shapers of the region, have received a significant boost this year. China has been contemplating a "strategic partnership" with Japan for sometime. This partnership may not mean much for China as it has tried to set up some kind of

'strategic' relationship with many countries. Japan resisted the suggestion in the past, particularly under the Koizumi government as this strategic partnership ran uncomfortably with Tokyo's primary efforts then on an upgraded Japan-US alliance. Prime Minister Abe accepted "a strategic partnership of mutual benefits" between Japan and China. But it was not until Prime Minister Hatoyama took power in September this year that one started to see signs of substance to this "strategic partnership." Both Japan and China support the idea of the China-Japan-South Korea closer, and standing-alone cooperation. Prime Minister Hatoyama took Japan's new proposal for regional cooperation – the idea of the East Asian Community, first to the summit in Beijing. Both China and Japan pledged to have broader consultation and coordinated policy on important regional and global issues. It is still too early to see how much support Hatoyama's regional initiative can get from around the region or even within Japan itself, It indicates clearly though Japan has shifted away from its strategy in the past to seek a "normal statehood" through a closer Japan-US alliance. The relationship between Japan and the United States has reached a point where they both see the need to accept the other side's adjustment in its relations with China. Given the persistent efforts by Japan in the past on a Pacific community of regional cooperation, Japan's new proposal signalled a significant readjustment of Japan on regional matters, particularly in its relations with China.

Developments in China's relationship with the United States are even more significant for the region. Since 9/11, the need on both sides to cooperate or even trade off on their core international interests has led them to re-prioritize many issues between them. The initial expedient arrangements however have been further strengthened as China's international interests and capacities continued to grow. Zoelick's "responsible stakeholder" speech in 2005 and Steinberg's "strategic reassurance" speech in September this year marked the shift of US thinking on its relationship with China. In his "strategic reassurance" speech, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg said, "We are ready to accept a growing role for China on the international stage....China too, needs to demonstrate the same commitment to doing its part -- reassuring the United States, its neighbours in Asia, and the rest of the world that we have nothing to fear from a more influential China." The joint statement from Obama's visit to Beijing in November endorsed the idea of the relations built on strategic reassurance and re-positioned the US-China relations as "partnership."

The implications of China's (re)affirmed partnerships with US and Japan for the region are potentially significant. These new relationships will forge a higher level of strategic trust among the three countries, which in turn will provide a less rigid strategic environment. China-Japan-S Korea coordination on regional and international issues can be more accepted by countries such as the United States. Hot spots such as Taiwan, North Korea, and East Sea gas fields are less likely to be played up because of the divisions and distrust among the key parties concerned. US reengagement with Asia can be met with less suspicion and resistance.

## **2. Internal Conflicts**

There are three internal conflicts/tensions in the region that currently concern China more than others in the region: Burma, Pakistan and Afghanistan. In Burma, government forces has conducted a series of campaigns since last year to reinforce national authority over the cease-fire, mostly self governed border areas, with forces when necessarily as happened in Kokang in August. Unlike in the past when China supported the military government, Beijing reacted to the Kokang violence with concerns about the border security and dissatisfaction that the Burmese government failed to consult China on its recent actions. The recent US shift in its approach to Burmese military government signalled a further complication in China's relations with this country, which is crucial for China's future regional strategic landscape.

Across India, the conflicts in Afghanistan and violence and tensions in Pakistan presented a real security challenge for China. China's traditional framework in the region, that supports Pakistan over India, seems to be increasingly inadequate for the new security environment China is facing. India can be a solution to the dilemma, but a high level of distrust between Beijing and Delhi prevents the two countries from seeking strategic cooperation in the region. In the US-China joint statement during Obama's visit, the situation in South Asia was discussed as part of US-China global interests and concerns. This, however, was to be neutralized in Singh's visit to Washington later in the month.

Continual conflicts and tensions in Afghanistan and Pakistan can move China to seek pro-active and more effective ways to secure a stable regional environment for China. Sending Chinese troops to the region as part of UN peace keeping forces is an option. China may not be ready yet for such a significant step in

engaging with the region. China can also support the expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to include South Asia with India as a primary partner. At the movement, the South Asian countries are observers to SCO.

### **3. Non Conventional Security Issues**

While conventional security issues have been gradually contained, non-conventional security issues have increasingly become sources of security concerns for China. For China, there are two different types of non-conventional security issues: transnational non-conventional issues such as energy security, climate change, refugees, money laundry and drug, piracy, poverty, and pandemics; and issues that threaten the security of the state and society: economic security, information security, political insurgences. The first type security issues have motivated China to work with other countries and international organizations to combat these issues. On the second type issues, China tends to further erect barriers of national sovereignty. Non-conventional security issues therefore can be a vehicle for China's more active engagement for multilateral cooperation; they can also be sources of tension between China and other countries. Some of the issues such as energy security and maritime security, can have both implications.

### **4. Regional Security Architecture**

There have been great movements and activities in advancing regional cooperation and integration in the past several years – from the East Asian Summit in 2005 to the East Asian Community of Japan and the Asia-Pacific Community of Australia this year. New developments that have generated these activities and new proposals are US efforts to reengage with Asia; Australia's intentions, under Kevin Rudd's government, to play a greater role in regional governance; India's growing presence in the Asia-Pacific; and the prospect that China and Japan can join hands in leading the process of regional cooperation and consultation.

The renewed interest in regional institutions reflects the shortcomings and inadequacy of the existing platforms for regional cooperation and integration. Ad hoc membership and non-binding commitments seem to be two major

problems across these existing arrangements. Moreover, with the growing willingness to work together on regional matters among the Northeast Asia Three, Japan, China and South Korea, questions arise naturally as to the necessity and effectiveness of regional institutions centred on ASEAN. This is particularly true for regional security institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum. ARF has been mostly focused on dialogue and consultation, and has yet been able to move into the second stage in confidence-building and preventive diplomacy.

Kevin Rudd's Asia-Pacific Community proposal clearly reflects concerns over above problems in regional cooperation. It wants a real regional body that has a broad mandate on security, economic and political matters in the region. It wants a regional body broadly representing major interests and forces in the region. But it also wants an elite group including Australia, United States, China, Japan, India, Indonesia and Russia. Suspicions have naturally arisen from ASEAN and China, or even perhaps the United States. And, of course, this time Japan has its own proposal – the East Asian Community.

Looking at the security environment China is facing, one would clearly see China's priorities in building regional institutions for security. China is committed to building up of SOC that deals with real security concerns across China's northwest borders. If SOC can be extended to South Asia in the future, it will certainly add to the security of China on its southwest borders. The Six Party Talk is generally expected to become a useful platform for security dialogue and confidence building in Northeast Asia. It can go beyond the Korean Peninsula. But its membership is too specific for the Korean nuclear issue and it can be of a limited use for issues such as the East Sea problems between China and Japan, or even potential tensions over the Taiwan Strait. To the south of China on South China Sea disputes, China's main security partner would continue to be ASEAN, while China continues to work out bilateral interim agreements with individual countries concerned for maritime resource management. China's southwest borders, from India to Burma, seem most insecure, with no regional institutions involving China for dialogue and consultation, and confidence building in the region.

It is clear that China's security thinking is far more practical and specific. Its main security concerns have been over major powers, particularly the United States and Japan. Since these concerns are lessened with the upgrading of relationship with the United States and Japan, China's security priority will focus on "surrounding countries." Given the current security conditions on its borders,

India will certainly be a main target for China's efforts in building regional institutions for security dialogue and consultation.

## 5. China-India relations

India-China relations are increasingly important for each other and for the region, but ones that are very uncertain, to say the least, driven by distrust and misperceptions as well as divergent, often misinterpreted interests. The relations are more like the ones between China and the United States and between China and Japan in the past. Can China and India arrive at some form of "strategic reassurance" between themselves? There is nothing impossible in politics. What matters is perhaps what each will and can do for the other's core interests in the region and on the global stage and from there to build "strategic trust." There are some areas that India and China can work to build such strategic trust:

- China and Japan positively engage with India in building an East Asian community. This EAC is comprehensive in its mandate on economic, security and political issues; core countries in its membership; and interested in both global and regional matters.
- India actively engages with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and supports it to be a platform for security issues in South Asia;
- Closer economic cooperation between India and China;
- Greater role together at G20;
- Political commitment to early settlement of the border issues;
- Coordination and consultation on key international issues,

This strategic trust between India and China can potentially deal with some of the key concerns the two countries face in the region. For India, a key issue in its relations with East Asia is it seems unable to find an effective point/platform of engagement with East Asia in its broad "Look East" policy since 1991. This is partly because of the ambiguity and fluidity in the development of the regional institutions. India has been welcome in these regional institutions, existing or proposed, somehow more as a counter balance against China than an important, relevant country that can bring value to the regional institutions. What India itself wants from its regional engagement is not always clear. The same applies to

China. There is no effective institutional platform or partnership for China to manage security problems in the region to its southwest borders.

There should be no illusion that India-China cooperation can bring a grand global leadership. Each has their own global interests and agenda. However, cooperation on regional matters between India and China through an effective regional platform seems to be practical and useful.