

Building Peace and Security in the Asia-Pacific

by Muthiah Alagappa

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It is widely accepted that Asia has become a core world region and is possibly in the making to become the world's core economic region. Its growing economic importance, however, has not been matched by commensurate development in the political and strategic domains. Political development relates to the making of resilient nations and effective states that are deemed legitimate by their respective populations. Here Asia suffers many weaknesses. In fact most of the domestic and international conflicts in Asia are grounded in the contested nature of existing nations and states. Considering them too sensitive, nonnegotiable, and essentially matters of domestic jurisdiction, Asian countries have generally shied away from directly addressing such political issues. Nevertheless political development is an important issue with potential to hobble Asia's rise and possibly lead to the unravelling of several countries with dramatic consequences for Asia's political map.

Although it has not experienced a major international war since 1978 (the 1999 Kargil war was limited in purpose as well as in geographical and military scope), Asia continues to confront numerous internal and international security challenges that could precipitate accidental or purpose-driven international wars. Military confrontations characterize the border situations between North and South Korea, China and Taiwan, and Pakistan and India. There are still many unresolved territorial disputes on land and at sea. Asian countries devote significant financial resources to modernize and build their national military capabilities. They also seek strong alliances and alignment to deter or hedge against potential military aggression all in the name of national security. With seven nuclear weapon states, broadly defined Asia has now become the epicenter of the contemporary nuclear world. In sum, national security continues to be an important concern for many Asian countries including major powers. Simultaneously Asian countries seek to preserve the "long peace" that has characterized the region since 1978. That peace has enabled economic development and domestic stability. Consequently peace and security have become key goals and mantras in the region.

Though widely used, there is little common understanding of the two key concepts of peace and security as well as the inherent tensions in trying to simultaneously realize both goals. At a minimum international peace implies

the absence of war between states. Notwithstanding its shortcomings, peace defined as the absence of war is an important regional goal for now. The outbreak of war can have many negative consequences including setting back economic development and; possibly, political unravelling of several Asian countries.

National security refers to the survival of existing political entities with emphasis on preserving the political and territorial status quo. Though used simultaneously and frequently interchangeably, peace and security are not identical nor necessarily complementary. The demands of peace may undermine the national security of particular countries and vice versa. The goal of preserving territorial and political integrity, for example, can intensify security dilemmas with negative consequences for peace. Likewise the imperatives of peace may argue for peaceful dispute settlement, arms control and disarmament that could work against the imperatives of national security through deterrence, which entails building national military capabilities and engaging in military cooperation with other countries through alliances, alignments, and international military exercises.

Though both are important, building peace and ensuring national security may not sit well together. Simultaneous pursuit of these two goals requires reconciliation of their conflicting demands. There are two possible ways of reconciling competing imperatives. One would be to redefine national security to make it compatible with peace. Security should not be viewed simply as protecting existing political and territorial forms at all cost. Rather security should be defined to accept nonviolent change that is supported by respective populations.

The key referent of security in this new conception is the people (or political community). Political forms and territorial integrity are extensions of the political community. People should figure uppermost in considerations of national security. However, in practice the emphasis has been on preserving the political status quo and the territorial integrity of the state with segments of the people sacrificed in the name of national security. Such perverse inversion is deemed to justify political statements like "we will not compromise even an inch of national territory" and is the root cause of many international and domestic security problems.

In the new conception, national security is not about the uncompromising protection of the political form and territorial integrity at all cost but providing for peaceful change supported by relevant political communities. That thinking accepts change as inevitable but seeks to make it peaceful and orderly through the institution of widely accepted rules, institutions, and processes for resolving differences and disputes. The above redefinition of security would help

reconcile it with the demands of peace. However it requires a mindset change that may not be forthcoming soon.

A second approach would be to carefully balance the competing demands of peace and security through the strategy of deterrence. Deterrence is the strategy of preventing military aggression by threatening retaliation that inflicts unacceptable cost. Nuclear deterrence was the central strategy that prevented war and kept the peace between the two superpowers during the Cold War. By preventing the outbreak of major war, effective deterrence can support both national security and minimalist peace.

However, what constitutes effective deterrence and the morality of resting peace and security on the threat of unacceptable damage are difficult and controversial issues. Care must be taken to ensure that military build-up in the name of deterrence does not aggravate existing security dilemmas. Though not an attractive option, deterrence offers a practical approach to reconciling the conflicting demands of peace and security.

Deterrence is a way station, not an indefinite solution, however. Ultimately, peace must rest on the removal of differences and resolution of disputes. Asian countries must bite the bullet to resolve existing disputes. Presently it is fashionable and statesman-like to support shelving disputes in the hope they can be resolved by wiser future generations. That is a cop-out tantamount to passing the buck and cost to future generations.

Another fashionable cop-out is to argue the case for investment in so-called nontraditional security in the hope that dividends from such undertakings can be deployed to resolve traditional security problems. This too has not born fruit. If Asia is to realize its full potential, it must make a determined effort now to address differences and animosities rooted in suspicion as well as peacefully resolve political and territorial disputes. Asian countries must put people first as the primary security referent and accept nonviolent change even if it implies losses. There will be immediate winners and losers in dispute resolution but ultimately all countries and the region as a whole will benefit from dispute resolution. Peace and stability will become more durable and Asia's continued economic rise would rest on a strong strategic foundation. That requires Asia's leaders and key forums like the East Asian Summit, ASEAN, and the ASEAN Regional Forum to directly address strategic problems and issues rather than shy away from them.

It follows from this discussion that constructing a peace and security architecture in the region is also a complex matter. Fortunately we are not starting from scratch. Several pillars of a regional peace and security architecture already exist in an inchoate fashion. The requirement now is to recognize, integrate, and further develop them. The many regional multilateral forums mostly spearheaded by ASEAN must focus on developing rules and processes for managing and resolving disputes, and a common strategic framework. Dispute resolution (not just management) must become a central goal with firm timeframes.

Leaders must bite the bullet now. Alliances and alignment are not Cold War relics. They continue to have

important roles in contemporary national security strategies. Likewise military modernization is not out of place but it must be accompanied by transparency and be tempered by the considerations relating to effective deterrence and dispute resolution. Dispute resolution and deterrence will be key pillars in the march toward regional peace and security. Scholars, research institutes and so-called think tanks in the region must devote considerable resources and time to the intellectual development of the ideas of dispute resolution and effective deterrence. And policy makers must focus on these twin goals to make the region more secure and peaceful.

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