

**Toward a Unified Asian Regional Order** by Yan-Ying Huang and Daniel H. Katz

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The Asia-Pacific region is at a turning point. After several decades of robust economic growth in Southeast and Northeast Asia, the region is home to many of the largest and most dynamic economies in the world. This increased economic power has driven the growth of military capabilities in a region dotted with flashpoints that could spark interstate conflict. All countries in the region are attempting to redefine their relationships along political, economic, and security dimensions in an increasingly contested regional landscape. Although a consensus exists about the need to maintain a peaceful and stable Asia, a binding, overarching institutional framework does not yet exist that can manage the region's many challenges. Whether Asia will prosper or fall victim to interstate conflict depends at least in part on the evolution of effective, successful multilateral institutions.

What is driving this redefinition of Asian regional dynamics? The 2008 global financial crisis led to the perception among some that a power transition was underway. The robust performance of the Chinese economy contrasted with the sluggish US economy, seemingly validated this perception. However, a US recovery – combined with slowing Chinese growth – may be changing the outlook.

Increased trade flows between Asia and its neighbors are critical to development and prosperity. Countries are searching for an acceptable trade architecture by which to realize their national visions. The negotiations of two large-scale regional free trade agreements, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), are underway. The absences of China from the TPP and the US from the RCEP create doubts about the ultimate efficacy of either framework. Notwithstanding, countries acknowledge that progress must be made on regional trade. Thus, convergence between TPP and RCEP would best serve the interests of all countries in the region. Competitive trade architectures will be counterproductive. In particular, passage of TPP and RCEP should not become a proxy for US-China economic competition. As the world's two largest economies with high interdependency, the US and China must work together to forge an effective regional trade architecture.

Energy and fisheries resources are vital economic assets. Competition, rather than cooperation, now defines Asian regional interactions over finite stocks of oil, gas, and fish. A zero-sum conception of resources in, and under, the ocean will likewise divide, rather than unite, the countries of Asia. Science diplomacy has and can mitigate tensions over scarce resources by introducing collaborative and fact-based policies on issues that are too often politicized. If countries realize that their collective interests are better served by collaboration, clashes at sea over resource exploitation will decrease.

The biggest challenge to a unified regional order in Asia is political and security divisions. Longstanding issues such as instability on the Korean Peninsula plague regional governments. North Korea continues to pursue nuclear weapon capabilities, despite decades of pressure to denuclearize. Neither incentives nor pressure have deterred Pyongyang from this effort, which is a source of great concern to the entire world. The Six-Party Talks (6PT) process remains stalled, leaving few institutional avenues to address the issue. Reviving the 6PT process and negotiating a durable, peaceful solution for the Korean Peninsula would greatly increase regional stability. South Korea's 'trustpolitik' strategy under President Park and China's approach to North Korea are signs of a renewed seriousness about resolving the nuclear issue.

Historical and territorial disputes are perhaps the greatest threat to a peaceful, stable Asia. Claims of sovereignty and ownership of territories in the East and South China Seas are unlikely to be resolved in the short-term. Nonetheless, stakeholders realize that efforts to overcome differences must be made despite disagreements. In this spirit, multilateral Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations play an important role in bringing countries together. Cooperation on HADR responses can bind ASEAN more closely and serve as a useful confidence-building measure (CBM) that encourages trust and decreases tensions. While collective HADR responses will not eliminate traditional security competition, habits of cooperation can spill over into other areas.

Countries are investing considerable effort and time in trying to build a more coherent regional order. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has existed for several decades and it is now complemented by the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Since the economic, political and security realities that informed the immediate post-Cold War period may no longer apply, yet more institutions may be required to manage an increasingly complex region. Functional cooperation in HADR and maritime security may yield incremental advances that blunt security dilemma dynamics. Nontraditional security cooperation in general, whether in the form of science diplomacy or HADR coordination, can help build the

foundations of an inclusive, stable regional security order underpinned by norms and adherence to international law.

Countries of the region know that a peaceful and prosperous future cannot be assumed. Proactive institutional efforts to bring the region together will be vital to ensuring that this future is realized. In the absence of cooperation, arms races and competition may define interstate relations. The region and the world would be far worse off as a result. The vital task for the region remains the construction and cultivation of durable institutions that will best serve their peoples' interests.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*