



Asia and the United States' Security Anxieties —Mind the Gap

by Ronald Montaperto and Satu Limaye

Asia is anxious. It perceives its anxieties are not shared by the United States. The United States rarely notices the "anxiety asymmetry." Both sides should "mind the gap." Untended differences will complicate policy coordination and increase mutual disenchantment. While the people of Asia do not speak with one name, impressions from a recent three-week visit across the region suggest that, as a whole, Asia and the United States are out of sync.

The United States and Asia differ on the source of security anxiety. Asia's unfinished nation- and state-building tasks, jarringly exacerbated by the region's 1997 financial crisis, make social and economic management top priorities. The Bush administration, by contrast, emphasizes military threats from rogue states or newly risen powers. Military modernization and restructuring, including the deployment of missile defenses, are meant to soothe these apprehensions. It is Asia's rather than the United States' security discourse that is more mindful of emerging challenges. Asia hopes, if not expects, the U.S. to adjust its approach and address the region's real, not imagined needs.

One of these real, immediate needs is Indonesia. As one Japanese analyst counseled her U.S. counterpart, "you've got time to deal with China, Indonesia must be dealt with now." Neighboring countries worry that refugees will clamber toward their shores. Asia regards the U.S. as relatively unmindful of the wider implications of Indonesia's potential collapse, and obsessed with the military's human rights abuses. Some in Asia, while abhorring the excesses of Indonesia's military (and militias), emphasize engagement with an institution offering a semblance of support for stability. Hints that Washington is about to re-engage the TNI are welcome, but Asians offer few concrete suggestions for a meaningful U.S. role in a scenario of Indonesian collapse.

Asia worries that if Indonesia, ASEAN's anchor, does not hold ASEAN may drift. ASEAN's self-esteem is already low. ASEAN's expansion is seen to have undermined consensus. Founding member-states speak of their countries' need to "leap-frog" Southeast Asia. One official confessed to "soul-searching" about ASEAN's future. Though almost no Asian blames the U.S. for ASEAN's problems, there is dismay at Washington's perceived lack of attention. During Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's mid-June visit to the U.S., he appealed for more U.S. focus on ASEAN. What the U.S. can and should do is not, however, clear. ASEAN's problems speak to a wider truth: the sense that the region's security and political arrangements have never been so in flux. This is one impetus to the interest in tinkering with the regional security, political and economic architecture, including through new multilateral experiments.

Amongst Asia's myriad multilateral initiatives, ASEAN Plus Three (APT) elicits the most excitement. Despite vague, labored explanations of its utility, Asians regard it as affording them "space" to maneuver and an assertion of "being a player, an organizer." That the APT provides a venue that brings together, for the first time, leaders of South Korea, Japan, and China is viewed as historically significant. Americans should not dismiss such sentiments by judging APT only on concrete results. As it is, Asians worry that the U.S. is edging towards unilateralism. At best, U.S. interest in multilateralism is seen as thin; at worst as manipulative. The "security communities" proposal (now renamed enhanced regional cooperation) is suspect as being a revamped "hub and spokes" arrangement aimed at China. For now, multilateralism in Asia, unlike in Europe, is as much an expression of aspiration as a mechanism to achieve specific ends.

A "wildcard" unnerving Asians is the United States-China relationship. Regional countries do not want to choose between two potential antagonists. None can afford the economic dislocations and domestic disturbances of serious, sustained tension. Even close friends of the U.S. hint that U.S.-PRC strains are not entirely the fault of China. Others say the U.S. is "making the waves" with its security communities proposal, moves to strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance, and efforts to build missile defenses. Japan worries both about a rising (but not already risen) China and a China that cannot extricate itself from its own "accumulated, internal contradictions." One prominent Japanese analyst proposes that the U.S. and Japan develop a "shared image" of China and treat it as a problem, not a threat. Most Asians want to embed China in regional cooperative frameworks including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the APT while keeping close military and political cooperation with the U.S.

Asia is quite clear about its problems, but vague about their solutions, including the role of the U.S. The U.S. appears certain of threats to it and the fix for them, but pays too little heed to the gap with Asia. These asymmetries are dangerous to sound U.S.-Asia ties. Soothing the imbalanced, differing anxieties between the U.S. and Asia will require regular, empathetic conversation as a first step to action.

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