

Strategic Views on Asian Regionalism: Survey Results and Analysis by Bates Gill, Michael Green, Kiyoto Tsuji, William Watts

This is the executive summary of a newly released CSIS study of elite opinion in Asia. The full report can be downloaded from the CSIS website www.csis.org/japan/asianarchitecture. It also draws on Asia's New Multilateralism: Competition, Cooperation and the Search for Community, edited by Michael Green and Bates Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

Will Asia's future see increasing economic interdependence and cooperation or growing power rivalry and confrontation? That strategic question will be answered in large measure by the region's ability to construct effective multilateral institutions for integration and cooperation – what is now being called the new Asian “architecture.”

To illuminate the increasingly complex character of Asia's new architecture, and to offer some practical judgments for future U.S. policy, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) initiated a series of studies in 2006 focused on the areas of convergence and divergence in national views of regional institution-building. Building on a conference in 2006 and a major edited volume, CSIS approached the MacArthur Foundation, the *Asahi Shimbun* (Japan), the *JoongAng Ilbo Shinmun* (Korea), and the Opinion Dynamics Corporation to design a survey of strategic elites in Asia that would map aspirations and expectations across the region with respect to Asia's emerging architecture.

Finding one: Expectations of an accelerated power shift to China, but greater trust in the U.S.

The CSIS survey found that a weighted average of 65.5 percent of strategic thinkers across Asia expect China to be the strongest power in Asia in 10 years, compared with only 31 percent for the United States. But China led the list of countries cited as a potential threat to peace and stability in the region in 10 years with a weighted average of 38 percent, compared with 21 percent for North Korea and 12.9 percent for the United States. Moreover, 40 percent of respondents said the U.S. would be the greatest force for peace and stability in the region in 10 years, compared with 26 percent that cited China.

Finding two: Broad support for an “East Asia Community”

A weighted average of 81 percent of strategic elites in Asia expressed support for the concept of building an “East Asia Community” following the example of multilateral cooperation established by Europe. They cited confidence building, conflict prevention, and economic integration as the top goals, but there was also broad consensus that integration in Asia should advance good governance, human rights, and

free and fair elections in the future. Even majorities in China agreed.

Finding three: Far greater confidence in national tools and global institutions than in regional multilateral tools

Despite broad enthusiasm for building regional multilateral institutions and an “East Asia Community,” most respondents – and in particular those from relatively larger powers – expect far greater reliance on military self-sufficiency or bilateral alliances to prevent or to respond to pandemics, humanitarian crises, or terrorism. Respondents also generally expected to have greater trust in global institutions, such as the UN or the WTO or IMF, than in regional institutions. However, there appears to be growing confidence in the potential for regional financial mechanisms, free trade arrangements, energy cooperation, the Six-Party Talks, and the Proliferation Security Initiative.

Finding four: no consensus on membership

While the concept of an “East Asia Community” is strongly favored by regional strategic elites, less clear is which countries should form that community. In considering membership for Australia, the European Union (EU), India, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States, India had the strongest support (80 percent) from the respondents, particularly from Southeast Asians, with the U.S. (79 percent) and Australia (74 percent) also faring well. Russia fared considerably less well, with New Zealand and the EU gaining the least support. Interestingly, 80 percent of Chinese respondents said it was very important or somewhat important to have U.S. participation in East Asia community building.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Demonstrate U.S. support for the broad concept of an Asia community and develop longer-term strategies for institution-building in the region.

This is a clear preference of elites in the region, but the process will take time, and Washington should neither press too hard nor resist the unfolding patterns of cooperation. Strategic elites from the major powers – including China – see U.S. participation as important. The lack of consensus regarding the substance of East Asian integration and the final membership suggests that no regional power will be able to exclude the United States unless it chooses to be excluded itself. The United States can engage the region on future architecture from a position of patience, confidence and generally shared visions for the future. But the United States must also have a longer-term strategic vision for building effective multilateral cooperation that is well coordinated with like-minded states and based on an appreciation of how best to integrate China.

Asia strategy should begin with a focus on allies.

This survey demonstrates continued concern in Japan and Korea in particular about their security environment – including potential threats from both China and North Korea – and these allies’ strong expectation that the United States will continue to be the main source of dissuasion, deterrence and defense. Neither Japan nor Korea demonstrated much confidence in the efficacy of multilateral security mechanisms, and the Japanese lack of confidence in the Six-Party Talks was particularly striking. U.S. strategy for building broader multilateral cooperation and expanded bilateral cooperation with China has to begin with continual shoring-up of its allies’ confidence in its commitment to their security.

Strengthen policies and actions that further engage and embed China in regional networks of shared norms and interests.

The surveyed elites clearly see China emerging as the most important country in the region, but with mixed feelings about what that will portend. Regional elites appear to recognize the need to engage China and not contain it, but are nevertheless concerned about China’s intentions in the next decade. This strongly suggests Washington can find common ground with regional leaders through policies supporting the role of institutions in Asia that can help foster a future China that contributes positively to the region’s growth and stability, while Beijing itself becomes more firmly committed to those goals as an interest China shares with its regional partners.

Invest in building a more robust regional energy agenda.

The survey demonstrated a strong consensus that energy is a key area for cooperation. The United States should work for a more robust regional agenda on energy, both within existing forums like APEC and the Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate (AP-7), and perhaps also through the establishment of new organizations that would coordinate on peaceful energy cooperation.

Continue to expand engagement with regional militaries, both through alliance relations and through other military-to-military ties.

The survey demonstrated a broad comfort-level across the region with the goal of mutual confidence-building, even as many respondents – particularly from major powers – continued to see their national militaries or alliances as the primary source of security in the region. The United States stood out as the most optimistic with respect to the utility of developing shared military capacity for disaster or humanitarian relief, and U.S. military planners will have to be sensitive to this gap. But this gap also suggests that the United States will have to continue leading in the development of regional cooperation and capacity-building for responding to humanitarian disasters.

Recognize the continued importance of such global institutions as the United Nations, the Bretton Woods system, and the World Trade Organization for addressing regional challenges.

Preventing pandemics, strengthening human relief organizations, improving disaster response, and stemming the

effects of climate change may prove “safe” areas for cooperation, but regional institutions are not seen as the most effective mechanisms to deliver on these needs. In the near- to medium-term, regional efforts will have to supplement broader international organizations such as the WHO, bilateral or multilateral initiatives, and national capabilities. The United States should support global institutions in their work to build regional cooperative capacity to address regional problems.

Continue support and encouragement of emergent norms of good governance, accountability, transparency, and democracy in the region, tempered by a clear understanding of the sensitivity of the issue across the region.

There is remarkable support for the steady spread of universal values of good governance, accountability, transparency, and democracy. However, even among democracies in the region, this issue is fraught with sensitivities and concerns about noninterference in internal affairs. Moreover, regional institutions are not yet seen as effective or preferred vehicles for the further introduction and promotion of these values in the region. The United States and Japan can work together to build on this general support, both within individual countries and by helping regional institutions such as ASEAN to improve their capacity to address these issues. Washington should be sensitive to always working with an Asian partner in taking these steps. Starting with areas such as good governance – which enjoy widespread support – will be more appreciated in the region.

Encourage Japan to take a proactive stance on security issues.

Another striking takeaway from the survey is the lack of regional threat perception regarding Japan. That result should be reassuring to Japanese officials and a source of encouragement for Japan to consider utilizing its highly capable Self-Defense Forces to contribute to internationally sanctioned missions for humanitarian relief, counter-piracy, or reconstruction. The very low expectations that Japan would be the most powerful country in Asia in 10 years only reinforces the need for Japanese strategic thinkers to utilize all of the positive attributes of their national power.

Work to strengthen relations with Thailand. The survey reflects a deterioration of support for the United States among strategic elites in Thailand. This may arise from a number of factors including the perceived role of the United States in recent political developments in Thailand and the ongoing development of stronger ties between Beijing and Bangkok. While a downturn in perceptions vis-à-vis the United States in Southeast Asia has been noted in a number of studies and surveys in recent years, the signals detected in this survey are cause for further concern in Washington. The new administration should give additional focus to rebuilding U.S.-Thai alliance relations.