

Asia in the “New American Moment”

by Amitav Acharya

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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s “new American moment in international relations” speech, delivered to the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington D.C. on Sept. 8, will be widely discussed and debated. Although the speech did not concern Asia only, it does signal important changes in the way the United States looks at Asia, especially its regional architecture.

One unusual aspect of the speech was the amount of space devoted to regions and regional organizations in general. Declaring that “Few, if any, of today’s challenges can be understood or solved without working through a regional context,” Clinton mentioned region (including “region,” “regional,” “regionally,” “regions,” etc.) no less than 24 times. There is an entire section on “Strengthening Regional Architecture” (excluding discussion of NATO, which is under a separate section on alliances, although NATO is basically a regional organization), and this discussion is longer than that on “Global Institutions in the 21st Century.” And in discussing the role of emerging powers, Clinton warns: “Countries like China and Brazil have their own notions about what regional institutions should look like, and they are busy pursuing those ideas.” This is another reason for the US to “remain robustly engaged and to help chart the way forward” in shaping regional architecture. This is a logic that applies especially to Asia today.

Moreover, the regional architecture section of her speech is broad and not Eurocentric. If anything, it is Asia-centric. The EU is mentioned in the speech four times (NATO also four times) compared to seven references to Asia-Pacific institutions, (including three references to ASEAN, two to the East Asia Summit, and one reference each to APEC and the Trans-Pacific Partnership).

This is not to say that the Obama administration is rooting for Asian regional multilateral institutions at the expense of the United States’ bilateral alliances. Clinton acknowledges that “The Asia-Pacific has few robust institutions to foster effective cooperation, build trust, and reduce the friction of competition.” But she adds, “So with our partners, we began working to build a more coherent regional architecture that will strengthen both economic and political ties.”

More important, the Clinton speech, which reiterates themes she touched on in her East-West Center speech in Hawaii in January, does clarify thinking about regional architecture in Asia. The US would actively pursue both

bilateralism and multilateralism; the view that they might be mutually exclusive, questionable as it was before, is even more so now.

Both the Kevin Rudd proposal for an Asia-Pacific Community and the Hatoyama proposal for an East Asian Community, which dominated debate about regional architecture this time last year, now seem history, despite the fact that Rudd is now Australia’s foreign minister and may even have a free hand in running foreign policy under Julia Gillard, who is said to be more focused on domestic issues. Clinton clarified that the US would continue to value APEC, but supplement it with the TPP: they would be the leading vehicles for US multilateral economic and trade engagement in Asia. If so, then the East Asia Summit (EAS) becomes the main forum for multilateral security engagement with Asia. Although the US (along with Russia) does not formally join the EAS until 2011, Clinton will represent the US at the 2010 EAS to be held in Hanoi in October. Clinton sets an ambitious goal for the EAS: the US will be “encouraging its development into a foundational security and political institution for the region, capable of resolving disputes and preventing them before they arise.” But this is bound to concern China, which opposed similar efforts to introduce preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution through the ASEAN Regional Forum a decade ago.

With the demise of the Rudd proposal, the idea of an Asia-Pacific concert of powers might seem dead; could others fill the role? Instead of a core multilateral group comprising big players like China, Japan, India, and the US, and lesser ones like Australia, Indonesia, and South Korea, might we see a group of “mid-size powers” playing an active role in the development of regional architecture? The three most obvious mid-size countries (read powers) would be South Korea, Indonesia and (you guessed it) Australia. To some extent this makes sense: mid-size powers may be less controversial as chaperons of regional architecture than major powers like the US, China, Japan, and India. They are likely to play their role in different but complimentary ways – South Korea through the G20, where it is emerging as an influential member, Indonesia through ASEAN (hopefully the idea of a post-ASEAN foreign policy for Jakarta has been laid to rest), and Australia as a bridge between the West and Asia, with a demonstrated capacity for practical regional action.

The idea of a G2 persists as well. The idea of a G2 does not necessarily amount to strategic bipolarity or a Sino-US condominium, as some have assumed, but is an acknowledgement of the central importance of Sino-US relations and the need for these two states to manage their bilateral trade and security relations peacefully (rather than having sole responsibility of managing affairs of the entire region).

Finally, while the Clinton speech implies that the “new American moment” would have a strong element of multilateralism in pursuit of global and regional governance, this is not because such a stance flows naturally from the “declining hegemony” of the US, but because it would be consistent with Washington’s strategic and normative purpose.

Incidentally, the idea of a US “decline,” already dismissed in Washington, is losing currency in Asia, including in China. Of greater concern for Asia is the other “d” word: US disengagement. But like decline, rumors of US disengagement from Asia (now or in the foreseeable future) have been highly exaggerated. The Clinton speech should put them to rest. If anything, the Obama administration is reinforcing its bilateral military and strategic engagement with a healthy dose of multilateralism, without necessarily dictating the agenda of multilateral institutions.

Events surrounding the just-concluded US-ASEAN summit demonstrated that ASEAN countries want the US to remain in the region, and even have a voice in the South China Sea conflict, whether Beijing likes it or not. At the same time, by not mentioning the South China Sea by name, but by stressing maritime security and freedom of navigation, the summit clearly indicated that ASEAN does not want the US voice to be at the expense of their neighborly relations with China. By going along with this desire, Washington showed a mature and helpful hand. If recent US statements on the South China Sea succeed in prodding China and ASEAN to renew efforts to conclude the long-overdue code of conduct in the South China Sea, then that would be a worthy achievement of US diplomacy.