Chapter 8
Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region
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In keeping with the theme of this volume, this chapter examines the evolution and achievements of security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region, with a view to gauging where it might be headed. ‘Security Cooperation’ is, of course, a rather broad term that can be applied to a wide range of activities. The analysis undertaken in this chapter will be limited to regional security institutions and other dialogue channels however, given that it is in relation to these processes that the SDSC has typically made its most visible and important contributions to security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific. The chapter is divided into three main sections. It begins by examining the evolution of regional security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific—a process which really only began in earnest during the 1990s. It then considers the successes and shortcomings of regional security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, including some brief reflections upon the contribution that the SDSC has made toward the furtherance of these endeavours. Finally, the chapter concludes with some observations regarding the main issues and prospects facing regional security cooperation in this part of the world.

Emergence and Evolution of Regional Security Cooperation

Prior to the 1990s, very few channels for regional security dialogue existed in the Asia-Pacific. This was not for want of trying. Several ill-fated efforts were undertaken to establish regional groupings which, over time, provided the basis for a more substantial Asia-Pacific security architecture. These included the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization—an eight member grouping established in 1955 that began to lose members and was finally dissolved in 1977—and both Maphilindo and the Association of Southeast Asia. Likewise, in Northeast Asia, the Asian and Pacific Council—a South Korean initiative established in 1966 and comprising nine member countries—struggled due to the diverging perceptions and interests of its membership, and finally collapsed in 1975. Flowing from this legacy was the more successful sub-regional ASEAN, founded in 1967 and expanded via several avenues, including a major security component—the ASEAN Regional Forum. But even ASEAN’s initial collaborative functions were
essentially economic, political and cultural; and its latest manifestations—ASEAN-plus-three and the East Asia Summit (EAS)—focus more on these issues than on strategy or geopolitics.

As a consequence, bilateral (namely US-led) cooperation tended to be the primary mode of Asia-Pacific security collaboration throughout the Cold War period. This, of course, stands in stark contrast to the situation today. To be sure, America’s Asia-Pacific alliances remain an integral component of the region’s security architecture and—notwithstanding the process of ‘transformation’ which this system of alliances is undergoing to accommodate the dynamics of the post-11 September 2001 strategic environment—some of these relationships (namely the US–Japan and US–Australia alliances) have actually strengthened during the period since the end of the Cold War, contrary to the expectations of conventional theories of alliance politics.3

Because the hierarchical aspects of this system are giving way to more fluid processes of intra-alliance consultations, however, new ‘minilateral’ mechanisms such as the US–Japan–South Korea Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group and the US–Japan–Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue have been formed to address emerging security issues at both the regional and global levels. This ‘expansive bilateralism’ has been supplemented since the early 1990s by a startling growth in regional institutions, arrangements and structures. According to one recent estimate, over 100 such channels now exist at the official (Track 1) level, including such leading regional security institutions as the ARF, the SCO and the EAS which, despite its largely economic focus, still has the potential to emerge over time as an influential East Asian security mechanism.4 More ad hoc, but still substantial, multilateral initiatives have also been employed toward specific issues such as the Four-Power Talks and, later, the Six-Party Talks concerning security on the Korean peninsula. The growth in institutions and dialogues at the unofficial (or Track 2) level has been even more profound, with in excess of 200 such channels now estimated to exist.5 These include the ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies, which was one of the few facilitators of regional security dialogue prior to the 1990s; the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP), arguably the region’s premier second track institution and with whose development the SDSC has been intimately involved; the relatively new Network of East Asian Think Tanks (NEAT), which some analysts regard as a potential (Chinese-led) challenge to more established second track processes such as CSCAP; as well as the annual International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-la Dialogue, which takes place in Singapore and has essentially become a de facto gathering of regional defence ministers.6

Yet, this startling growth in regional security cooperation has been neither steady nor straightforward. The volume of such institutions and activities
plummeted in the immediate aftermath of the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis, for instance, and temporarily lost the attention of policymakers in the process. Still, there can be little disputing the fact that regional security cooperation has since recovered well and, moreover, that the general trend in such activity across the decade and a half since the beginning of the 1990s has been upward. So what explains this recent and, indeed, rather dramatic growth in regional security cooperation? I see at least five factors at play.

First, for a number of reasons it is virtually impossible to overstate the catalytic role played by the ending of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its withdrawal from the region subsequently called into question the future of America’s strategic presence and level of commitment to the Asia-Pacific. At one level, the establishment of highly consensual security mechanisms such as the ARF was intended to serve the dual purpose of ‘tying in’ this regional US presence, while at the same time diluting the influence that the sole superpower would be able to exert in the new strategic environment. Added to this, however, it soon became apparent that many of the features of the Cold War had remained intact in the Asia-Pacific and that inter-state conflict remained a very real possibility here. How the region’s other major powers—namely China, Japan and India—might react to this intriguing set of developments therefore provided a further source of uncertainty. Hence, as Desmond Ball has observed, ‘mechanisms for regionwide dialogue, confidence building, transparency, and cooperation were considered to be essential to the management of this uncertainty’.  

The desire to alleviate regional concerns regarding China’s rise provided a second rationale for the burgeoning in regional security cooperation. One of the primary reasons for establishing the ARF, for instance, was to allow for the greater exposure of decision-makers in Beijing to regional and global norms, with a view to positively influencing the shape of China’s foreign and security policy orientation. Since the late 1990s, however, an interesting feature of China’s apparent embrace of multilateralism has been the extent to which Beijing has become an increasingly direct contributor to the growth in Asia-Pacific security cooperation through the leading role it has played in the establishment of a number of high-profile regional institutions including the Boao Forum for Asia, the SCO, and the NEAT.

Third, at several levels, economic factors also serve to explain the dramatic increase in regional security cooperation. The ‘success’ of regional economic cooperative processes, such as the Pacific Basin Economic Council and the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council, generated calls for this positive experience to be replicated in the security sector. Indeed, the institutional make-up of CSCAP—comprising national committees, a steering committee and several working groups—was modelled directly on the Pacific Economic Cooperation
Council process. For at least two reasons—one positive and one negative—the growing economic weight of a number of actors in the region can also be seen to have contributed directly towards the increase in regional security cooperation. The increasing economic (and strategic) weight of Japan and China, for instance, can be seen as a factor which has contributed towards their growing willingness and ability to play more active and stimulatory roles as institutional contributors and even innovators. As India’s economic and strategic weight also grows, its desire to play a similar leadership role is likely to increase in kind.

At the same time, however, economic growth has afforded many regional governments the option of increasing national defence expenditure. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, this was a source of much concern as regional arms acquisitions burgeoned at alarming rates on the back of the so-called ‘East Asian economic miracle’. Some commentators even went so far as to posit the emergence of a ‘new Asian arms race’. As a consequence, the fact that the Asia-Pacific was looking increasingly ‘ripe for rivalry’ served only to reinforce the urgent need for further security cooperation amongst the countries of this region. The onset of the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis resulted in a temporary slowing of these startling trends in regional arms acquisitions and, as noted previously, took the wind out of Asia-Pacific security cooperation in the process. However, most regional countries have since resumed increasing defence budgets, giving rise to renewed apprehensions that competitive arms processes (if not a regional arms race) are currently re-emerging. As Robert Hartfiel and Brian Job have recently concluded:

> In both Northeast and Southeast Asia, resources are being directed towards externally oriented weapons systems, including submarines, surface ships, fighter aircraft, and missiles of all types. This strongly suggests competitive arms processes that are heavily weighted towards types of weapons that destabilize the military balance. Such a conclusion merits more careful, sober analysis by political decision makers in the region in order to reduce the likelihood of confrontation and conflict.

This finding, while unsettling, could also potentially augur well for regional security cooperation.

Fourth, the continued persistence of traditional security concerns—such as the prospect of a destabilising arms race—has been complicated by the increasing prevalence and potency of a range of non-traditional security challenges including international terrorism, transnational crime, environmental issues and disease-based threats. Moreover, as the continuing North Korean nuclear crisis and plight of a perpetually starving North Korean population demonstrate all too well, there is a growing awareness as to the interdependence between these traditional and non-traditional security agendas—a realisation which has, in turn, fundamentally re-cast the dynamics of regional security cooperation. The
11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States and the onset of the so-called ‘war on terror’ served as a watershed, giving rise to a flurry of regional dialogue activity addressing a range of terrorism and human security issues. The attendant realisation that terrorism and these other transnational security challenges simply could not be tackled on a solely unilateral or even a bilateral basis has subsequently been reinforced by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis of 2003, the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004, and the ongoing regional (and, indeed, global) threat posed by H5N1 Avian Influenza (or ‘bird flu’). By way of example, even in the case of the US-led system of bilateral alliances—so often preoccupied with more traditional security concerns—there is evidence of a shift of focus (albeit intermittent at this stage) toward non-military security challenges, as demonstrated by the relief effort of late 2004 and 2005 following the 26 December 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami.

Finally, while still in a nascent phase of its evolution, the desire to realise the potentially powerful idea of an East Asian community has gone some way towards contributing to the growth in regional security cooperation. At the Track 1 level this has been reflected in the creation of a number of high-profile institutions, including the EAS. It is a trend that is also being mirrored at the Track 2 level, as evidenced over recent years in the establishment of the NEAT and its Japanese competitor, the Council on East Asian Community. By way of example, many if not most regional players will tend to assess regional security cooperation not in terms of its immediate outcomes, but rather as a process through which confidence is built, consensus reached and common regional understandings or ‘norms’ achieved. This is a theme that will be re-visited in the concluding section of this chapter.

Successes and Shortcomings

Before reflecting upon some of the successes and shortcomings which have flowed out of this dramatic burgeoning in regional security cooperation, we must acknowledge that this evaluative task is an inevitably subjective one. As Amitav Acharya has observed: ‘Despite decades of intense debate, international relations theory provides no agreed and definitive way of assessing what constitutes “success” and “effectiveness” in regional organizations. Understanding the effects of Asian institutions on state behavior and regional order depends very much on the analytical lens used.’

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This issue of analytical subjectivity notwithstanding, it is, I believe, possible to identify a number of areas where Asia-Pacific security institutions have unequivocally fallen short. As alluded to previously, no regional security
institution has been able to respond effectively to the major crises that have erupted in the Asia-Pacific during the past decade and a half—the North Korean nuclear crises of 1993–94 and today; the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis; the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis; the crisis in East Timor of 1999 and again of today; the 2003 SARS crisis or the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Partly as a result of the consensual style approach to decision-making which has emerged as the preferred *modus operandi* for most if not all of these regional institutions, they have also tended to move rather slowly toward implementing their stated aims and objectives. In the case of the ARF, for instance, it has experienced real difficulties in progressing from the confidence building phase to the preventive diplomacy phase, contributing toward the perception that it is nothing more than a ‘talk shop’.  

Related to this, many regional institutions have struggled to keep pace with and adapt to their changing security surroundings. For example, the fact that APEC does not presently count India—an increasingly significant regional economic power and security actor—among its members seems incomprehensible. These criticisms notwithstanding—and even if one does not accept the proposition that dialogue and discussion are useful as ends in and of themselves—there are areas where tangible benefits have accrued from the recent growth in Asia-Pacific security cooperation. In my view, first and foremost among these accomplishments has been the engagement (some would say enmeshment) of China in the regional security architecture which has taken place from the mid-1990s onwards. This process has succeeded in significantly dampening regional apprehensions regarding China’s rise. At the same time, however, it is interesting to note that while a primary aim of engaging China through Asia-Pacific multilateralism was to ‘socialise’ it by exposing it to regional and global norms, Beijing has proven rather adept at shaping (or dare I say ‘socialising’) many of the institutions to which it is a party. In the case of CSCAP, for example, China’s deepening involvement has actually allowed it to shape the direction and outlook of this leading Track 2 institution, particularly in relation to the issue of Taiwan.

Second, although Asia-Pacific security institutions haven’t been particularly effective in responding directly to regional crises, they have periodically served as useful venues for the discussion of highly sensitive or controversial issues that might otherwise not have been discussed, or as ‘circuit-breakers’ to stalled diplomatic relationships. The September 1999 APEC Leaders summit, for instance, provided an opportunity for US President Bill Clinton and Chinese President Jiang Zemin to hold their first meeting since the accidental US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade the previous May. The crisis talks held at this meeting—and particularly a forceful speech delivered at the meeting by the then US President Bill Clinton—also appear to have critically influenced Indonesia’s decision to allow a UN force into East Timor. Likewise, the then US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, was able to meet with his North Korean
counterpart on the sidelines of the 2004 ARF meeting, which marked the first high-level contact between the United States and North Korea since Madeleine Albright’s visit to Pyongyang in 2000. More recently, the Chinese and Japanese foreign ministers were able to hold a productive 20 minute meeting in the toilet in the lead-up to the 2006 ARF, helping to arrest somewhat a deepening rift in Sino-Japanese relations. So, it seems fair to conclude that regional security institutions have served as more than mere ‘talks shops’ and that they have produced some tangible successes, albeit highly qualified ones and often only at the margins.

Added to this, the very existence and continued evolution of ASEAN can itself be counted as an important success. It is always important to consider counterfactual scenarios in international politics, and to contemplate what type of Southeast Asia might exist today were it not for the existence of ASEAN. It is certainly no small feat that a ‘shooting war’ amongst its members is today all but unthinkable. As Rodolfo Severino of the Singapore-based Institute of Southeast Asian Studies recently noted:

> The constant interaction and sense of common purpose among the ASEAN members have built mutual confidence and dissipated some of the mutual suspicion that is a legacy of past differences and an outgrowth of current disagreements. … Partly through the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South-east Asia and partly through its own practices, ASEAN has set regional norms for the peaceful relations among states—respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, the peaceful settlement of disputes, non-interference in the internal affairs of nations, decisions by consensus, equality of status, and so on.\(^\text{15}\)

Before moving to conclude with a few observations regarding the main issues and prospects facing security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, it is worth briefly contemplating some of the contributions that the SDSC has made toward the furtherance of security dialogue in this part of the world.

Given the prominence of bilateral (namely US-led) cooperation as the primary mode of Asia-Pacific security collaboration throughout the Cold War period, it is important to acknowledge the substantial contributions that members of the SDSC have made to better understanding and explaining US alliance relationships in this part of the world. Coral Bell has led the way here through her extensive writings on the US–Australia alliance. Indeed, Bell was present at the signing of the ANZUS Treaty in 1951. Her best known work addressing the US–Australia alliance is *Dependent Ally*, which examines this and also Australia’s relationship with the United Kingdom from a historical perspective and which has subsequently been published in three editions.\(^\text{16}\) Her more recent Australian Strategic Policy Institute paper, *Living with Giants: Finding Australia’s place in a more complex world*, traverses similar analytical terrain, but takes a longer term
view as to how Australia might best balance its regional commitments and global alliances in a neighbourhood that will almost inevitably be characterised by an increasingly populous, economically powerful and technologically sophisticated set of societies. Alternatively, from a completely different perspective, Desmond Ball’s path-breaking work on US strategic installations in Australia should also be noted for the impact it has had in terms of markedly expanding the contours of public debate on this subject. Other SDSC members who have made useful intellectual contributions to explaining and better understanding America’s Asia-Pacific alliances include Paul Dibb and Ron Huiskens.

Since the early 1990s, the contribution of SDSC members to the scholarship and actual practice of multilateral security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific has been equally important and influential. We might like to reflect upon the fact, for instance, that three out of the five Australian representatives on the ARF’s register of experts and eminent persons have a very close association with the SDSC—Paul Dibb, Alan Dupont and Hugh White. Paul Dibb has been an active participant in a number of other regional security dialogues, including as Chair of the first security dialogue between China and Australia in 1993 and as Chair of an informal meeting of 18 ARF countries on practical measures for military and security cooperation in 1994. Likewise, in comparison to any other Australian figure, Desmond Ball’s contribution to regional second track diplomacy is unparalleled and, for this reason, he is identified by Brian Job as part of an Asia-Pacific Track 2 elite that also includes the likes of Jusef Wanandi, Carolina Hernandez, Ralph Cossa, Paul Evans and the late Noordin Sopie. A number of others, including Ron Huiskens and Ross Babbage, have been active participants and contributors to the IISS Shangri-la Dialogue. The SDSC itself has produced an impressive number of monographs and papers addressing regional security cooperation. Last, but not least, it has also been directly involved in the training and education of a number of scholars who have gone on to become leading international authorities on regional security cooperation, including David Capie and Herman Kraft.

Where To From Here?

So where to from here? I’d like to conclude this chapter with a few observations regarding the future of security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific. First, while regional security dialogue has now become an established fixture in this part of the world, it seems fair to conclude that its impact is likely to remain relatively limited and largely confined to the margins. Where the most progress is likely to be made is in relation to so-called non-traditional security challenges such as infectious disease, terrorism, transnational crime, energy, and disaster prevention/mitigation. In May 2006, for instance, the inaugural ASEAN Defence Ministers meeting in Kuala Lumpur identified disaster relief cooperation as a priority issue upon which to focus its future work. Likewise, as part of its
transition from confidence building to practical cooperation, Barry Desker has recently called upon the ARF to consider developing further collaborative measures addressing non-traditional security challenges, if only to demonstrate its continuing relevance in an increasingly crowded Asia-Pacific security architecture. Addressing these kinds of trans-border challenges, of course, is appealing not only because they are becoming increasingly pressing and potentially affect the region as a whole, but also because they will often tend not to raise the same level of sensitivity (particularly in relation to issues of sovereignty and non-intervention) that more traditional security issues are apt to generate.

Second, one of the factors most likely to stymie the progress of regional security cooperation stems from the fact that the great powers are increasingly viewing Asia-Pacific security institutions as instruments of competitive influence. China led the way and, in some respects, has stolen the march on the rest of the region’s major players through its leading role in driving forward such processes as the SCO, the Boao Forum and the NEAT. The quite deliberate exclusion of the United States from the EAS, as well as the open bickering between China and Japan which all but derailed the inaugural gathering of this grouping, can be seen as further evidence of this competitive approach to regional institutions. The United States has been surprisingly slow to respond, but there are signs that it is now doing so through its ongoing efforts to inject a greater security focus into APEC, a new US–ASEAN partnership, as well as a renewed commitment to the ARF (as was reflected by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s attendance at the 2006 ARF meeting in the midst of a Middle East crisis). How successful this process of American re-engagement ultimately turns out to be, however, is likely to be heavily conditioned by the reluctance of most Asia-Pacific governments to openly support US-led regional initiatives for fear of antagonising not only China, but also their own domestic constituents.

Third, the growing use of security institutions and activities as instruments of competitive influence is already creating a situation where the nature and scope of their respective agendas are increasingly coinciding—APEC and the EAS being cases in point. This institutional overlap is perhaps also a product of the fact that the sheer volume of security processes in the Asia-Pacific has increased so dramatically over the past decade and a half. As noted previously, however, the fact that this growth has been neither steady nor straightforward does raise the question of whether this upward trend in dialogue activity is going to be sustainable over the longer term. To employ an analogy with which interdependence theorists in international relations would be well acquainted, is there potential for the Asia-Pacific security cooperation to fall victim to an overabundance of transmission belts (at several levels of operation, including inputs from domestic politics that could undermine regional unity) and countervailing norms, leading to the demise (or potentially the demolition) of a
number of its existing institutions? In other words, can there be such a thing as too much security interaction among the countries of any given region which yields greater density but insufficient commonality? If so, how much is too much and what are the policy implications of this?

The answer to this important question is, in turn, likely to be heavily conditioned by a number of factors. The ‘effectiveness’—both perceived and actual—of regional security institutions and activities is likely to play an increasingly important role in determining whether the upward trend in regional security cooperation can continue and, if not, which processes will ultimately perish or prevail. As noted previously, evaluating the ‘success’ or otherwise of any regional security organisation is an inevitably subjective exercise. That said, as the number and range of security institutions and activities in the Asia-Pacific become increasingly diverse, it should in theory become easier to rank the performance of those processes by employing such criteria as membership levels, meeting attendance and frequency, as well as funding and resources. More fundamentally, some broad generalisations could be reached as to which forms of security cooperation are making the most impact on core regional security politics—for example highly institutionalised organisations as opposed to smaller, but potentially more nimble processes or alliance and coalition politics as opposed to ad hoc diplomacy in response to the intensification of regional flashpoints (North Korea or Taiwan) or the multiplicity of human security challenges.

Fourth, while this increasingly competitive approach to regional security institutions appears likely to impede meaningful progress towards an East Asian Community—at least for the foreseeable future—it remains important not to completely dismiss this possibility. To be sure, the EAS remains an embryonic institution. At the same time, it is important to recognise that regionalism is a gradual process which takes time to develop and evolve. This reality was clearly not grasped by sceptics of the inaugural ASEAN Summit of February 1976, for instance, who described that gathering as a ‘hopeless meeting by hopeless cases’. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that there are avenues other than the EAS—namely the ASEAN-plus-three process—through which the powerful idea of an East Asian Community could still be advanced.

In the final analysis, the fact that Australia remains, in the words of the American political scientist Samuel Huntington, a ‘torn country’ that has traditionally tended to face an uphill struggle in its efforts to engage with the Asian region suggests that this latter trend, in particular, is going to require careful monitoring in the years ahead. If history does indeed serve as a reliable guide, then it seems likely that the SDSC will remain at the forefront of this process.
ENDNOTES


10 The Council on East Asian Community was launched in May 2004. Japan’s leading 12 think tanks belong to the Council, which also consists of 15 corporate members and 65 individual members comprising a mixture of scholars, journalists and politicians. Representatives from Government Ministries have joined its activities in the capacity of ‘counsellors’. The founder and president of this new grouping is Kenichi Ito, President of the Japan Forum on International Relations. The Council on East Asian Community is chaired by former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone. It is administered through a secretariat based at the Forum and organises a range of second track activities, including a Japan-ASEAN Dialogue, a Japan-China Dialogue and a Japan-Korea Dialogue. For further reading see Taylor, Milner and Ball, ‘Track 2 Diplomacy in Asia’, pp. 29–30.


12 See, for example, Paul Dibb, ‘A New Defence Policy for a New Strategic Era?’, in (eds) Clive Williams and Brendan Taylor, Countering Terror: New Directions Post ‘911’, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence no. 147, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra, 2003, p. 64.

13 See, for example, Anthony Milner, Region, Security and the Return of History, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2003.


16 Coral Bell, Dependent Ally: A Study in Australian Foreign Policy, 3rd ed, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, 1993.


