

Between Deterrence and Cooperative Security: The Southeast Asian Experience

Chin Kin Wah
National University of Singapore

Deterrence and Cooperative security appear on the surface to be two incompatible concepts. As an art of political dissuasion (or persuading an opponent not to initiate a specific action because the perceived benefits do not justify the estimated costs and risks) based on the unpredictability of a response, military deterrence (whether conventional or nuclear) acquires credibility through demonstrable military capabilities and a belief on the part of the target state, in the political will to invoke such capabilities, should it (the target state) initiate that particular action which the other side wishes to prevent. The unpredictability of a response to an action being contemplated by the other side is also predicated upon a certain degree of opacity to reduce the likelihood of a pre-emptive strike. Alliances as bi-lateral or multilateral mechanisms for augmenting national military capability in the face of an identifiable external threat or enemy, can be the most visible expression of a deterrent function. Alliances by nature are exclusive in their membership — their catch phrase being “security against” a common foe.

Cooperative security on the other hand, to paraphrase David Dewitt, emphasizes reassurance rather than deterrence; favours non-military solutions to military ones (whether the latter be the threat or actual use of force); places a premium on confidence-building and transparency instead of opacity and unpredictability; assumes the greater value of openness and trust; and highlights the importance of conscious cultivation of the habit of dialogue — its catch phrase being “security with” rather than “security against”. Such are the characteristics that mark out this neo-liberal security paradigm.

Despite the seeming incompatibility between these two concepts, deterrence and cooperative security can be reconciled if the successful outcome of deterrence is a more stable and predictable security environment or a more stable balance of power situation marked by an absence of conflict which in turn makes it possible for cooperative security to be attempted. [The problem with this proposition is that it is difficult to prove the successful operation of deterrence in any situation but particularly in the post-Cold War situation of general peace in the Asia Pacific, beyond saying that deterrence breaks down when violent conflict or war breaks out.] Conversely, one can more readily see that confidence-building and a certain measure of transparency serves to moderate the starkness of a security policy based on deterrence alone which (if it were also made dependent on a continuing upgrading of arms and being constantly ahead of rivals in the

military equation) could actually produce an undesirable security dilemma for that state caught up in a unilateral search for security.

The Southeast Asian Experience:

The post-World War II record of Southeast Asian security practice shows that both realist (deterrent centric) and neo-liberal (confidence-centric) paradigms have been at work in the region. Certain Southeast Asian states, such as Singapore and Malaysia have sought security through both deterrence and reassurance policies at the same time. Traditionally however, many Southeast Asian states have sought national security through a combination of economic development policies, modest national defence outlays and alignment or alliance with external powers. Isolationism sought by Burma in the 1960's was a rare option while neutralism (attempted precariously by Laos and Cambodia during certain phases of the Cold War) was constantly tested by external forces. The Southeast Asian experience with alliances during the Cold War had also been a checkered one. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO, now defunct) contained only two regional allies (Thailand and the Philippines) and failed to deter either the external communist threat (in Indochina) or armed insurgency and Communist subversion elsewhere. During the Vietnam war North Vietnam benefited from alignment with both China and the Soviet Union and during the third Indochina war, Hanoi sought military alliance with Moscow in anticipation of punitive Chinese reaction to its overthrow of Beijing's regional ally, the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. In insular Southeast Asia, a different type of Commonwealth-based alliance system (the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement involving Britain, Australia and New Zealand in the defence of the Malaysian region which then included Singapore) held the ring successfully against Indonesia's policy of Confrontation but was re-structured — following the end of Confrontation and Britain's military disengagement from the region — into a loose Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) which exists to this day as the only multilateral defence system in Southeast Asia involving both regional and extra-regional states despite the ups and downs in Malaysia-Singapore relations.

The establishment of ASEAN in 1967 was in retrospect a regional attempt (which has proven to be very successful) at conciliation and confidence building in the aftermath of the ending of Confrontation, the separation under acrimonious circumstances, of Singapore from Malaysia and the down-turn in Malaysia-Philippines relations over the latter's claim to the Malaysian state of Sabah. Over the years, the habit of dialogue and cooperation underpinned by the "ASEAN way" of avoiding confrontation and seeking consensus through consultation, led to the embracing of a code of seemingly conduct in the form of the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). Today ASEAN has

expanded to include 9 out of the 10 states of Southeast Asia with the exception of Cambodia which remains excluded for the time being largely on account of its unresolved domestic political problems.

It is a hallmark of ASEAN pragmatism that it has been able to accommodate both its aspiration for a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) declared since 1971 and the existence of local bases (in Thailand, the Philippines as well as Singapore) which hosted variously the American as well as Commonwealth military presence. Although these "foreign" bases no longer exist (the watchword today being "places" or facilities rather than "bases"), the external security affiliations have been re-worked into less obtrusive defence networks. Interesting, the FPDA in as far as it continues to accommodate Malaysia and Singapore whose relations have been testy at times, also fulfills a confidence-building function between the two local powers which still see a utility in this multilateral arrangement even in the post-Cold War era.

While the end of the Cold War has seen a further dissipation of regional antagonisms, regional uncertainties remain. Conflicting territorial claims over the South China Sea have drawn attention to the area as a potential flash-point. Until the recent unleashing of the regional economic crisis, many ASEAN countries have also embarked on costly arms modernization programmes. National defence and attempted deterrence continue to characterize the mainstream regional approach to external security. At the same time, the regional economic crisis has drawn attention to the likely emergence of new non-conventional sources of insecurity such as refugee flows, illegal immigration, regime de-stabilization, socio-economic turbulence and (as in the case of Indonesia) of state disintegration with adverse implications for the security of sea lines of communication that traverse the archipelagic waters. Such threats call for concerted response rather than unilateral self-help policies.

A complementary current is reflected in the emergence of cooperative security efforts involving regional and extra-regional states which culminated in 1994 in the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Such security efforts as reflected in its agenda of confidence-building, preventive-diplomacy and eventually even conflict resolution (in its third phase), are not envisaged by a sufficiently pragmatic ASEAN core, as an alternative but rather as a supplement or complement to, the policies of conventional deterrence and national defence. Essentially, the ARF is a Forum (adapting by extension, the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference framework) that enables the smaller regional states of ASEAN to engage the major powers in security dialogue with a view towards managing and bringing about a more stable and "balanced" security environment. It also assumes an adaptation of the ASEAN model of pragmatism, habit of seemly behaviour and conflict avoidance in intra-mural relations to the wider Asia-Pacific Arena. Critics of the ARF have pointed to its inability to move beyond what is still an essentially talk-shop

phase, and that the extension of the ASEAN *modus operandi* across the Asia-Pacific does not adequately serve the needs of Northeast Asia in particular. Desmond Ball for example, has noted a disjunction between “the impetus and modalities for cooperation ...coming mainly from Southeast Asia” and “the great weight of the emergent regional security concerns... coming from Northeast Asia.” If the ARF is to remain ASEAN-driven and if it is to relate effectively to Northeast Asia, a number of problems would need to be addressed.

Relating to the Northeast Asian Situation:

During the Cold War period, ASEAN had been slow to establish dialogue relationships with countries in Northeast Asia and in the Indian sub-continent for fear of being embroiled in the conflicts of these sub-regions. Japan was the first Northeast Asian state (even ahead of the United States) to be given dialogue status in ASEAN in 1976, in recognition largely of its economic clout and importance to the economic development of the ASEAN region. Fifteen years would pass before the next Northeast Asian state, namely South Korea, was granted (in 1991), similar dialogue-partner status in ASEAN. By facilitating the establishment, and in turn becoming the core of, the Asia-Pacific wide ARF, ASEAN in effect acknowledged the security interdependence of Northeast and Southeast Asia.

However, there is a persisting doubt among certain non-ASEAN members of the ARF that the regional forum is either paying insufficient attention, or is not really that relevant, to the concerns and needs of Northeast Asia. This perception is reinforced by the observation that less than 20% of the current membership of the Forum is made up of countries from Northeast Asia; that North Korea which is a major source of security anxiety in Northeast Asia, is not in the ARF; that the rotating chairmanship of the ARF is exclusively in ASEAN hands; that the ARF agenda is still heavily focused on issues that are more directly affecting ASEAN; that ASEAN itself (particularly the very core of ASEAN comprising Indonesia and Malaysia) is consumed with and distracted by the financial and economic crisis (and the attendant political and security fallout which the ARF itself is unable to address) which has considerably diminished its clout, credibility and international standing; that smaller and more focused multilateral frameworks such as the four-party security dialogue on Northeast Asia (involving China, Japan, South Korea, and the US) or the proposed tri-lateral dialogue (compared by some scholars to the “concert of powers”) on security involving China, the US and Japan, may be more appropriate and manageable frameworks for considering and eventually even managing, Northeast Asian security problems. This kind of development could conceivably sideline the ARF with respect to the most serious conventional military threats in the Asia-Pacific.

Already, it has not escaped notice that the Clinton-Jiang summit of July 1998 made no reference at all to the ARF.

Be that as it may, it remains that the ARF is the only mega-regional forum in the Asia-Pacific region that engages practically all the erstwhile protagonists on both sides of the old Cold War divide, in the enterprise of cooperative security. Although barely into its fifth year the ARF has embraced the gradualistic, consensus-seeking *modus operandi* that characterize the “ASEAN way” of conflict avoidance and management of intra-mural relations. In Southeast Asia, the process of regional conciliation is more or less (with the current exception of Cambodia) complete with practically the whole of Southeast Asia identified with ASEAN. Their ground rules of seemingly behaviour as enshrined in the TAC (to which all ASEAN members subscribe and which itself could provide a basis to an Asia-Pacific wide Concord) are no less pertinent to a Northeast Asia where relationships, particularly in the Korean peninsula — where one and a half million armed personnel are ranged on either side of the DMZ — are marked by greater volatility and hark back to the Cold War. Similarly, ASEAN’s successful accommodation of both deterrence and confidence-building as well as cooperative security can hold out certain lessons for Northeast Asia. For ASEAN, the ARF provides hopefully, a multilateral framework for the management of more stable relationships between regional and extra-regional powers. While a continuing stable balance of power and influence underpinned by prevailing alliance structures, has certainly made possible the process of dialogue and furtherance of confidence-building, the latter process, by facilitating transparency measures also helps to moderate the otherwise sharp edges of a policy based on deterrence alone. Be that as it may, for the ARF to be effectively pertinent to Northeast Asia and for ASEAN itself to remain at least a, if not **the**, main driving force of the ARF to which it has given its name, several measures would need to be considered:

1. Besides re-establishing its credibility and coherence by setting its own house in order through economic reform and serious efforts at regional economic cooperation, ASEAN must set a clear example of its ability to move from conflict containment or conflict concealment to conflict settlement of long-standing residual territorial claims such as those over Pedra Branca/Pulau Batu Putih (between Singapore and Malaysia) and Ligitan-Sipadan (between Malaysia and Indonesia) by judicial recourse through the ICJ or, as in the previously vexing case of the Philippines claim on Sabah, through political settlement. ASEAN’s lead by example-setting could point the way hopefully, to long-term settlement of overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea and elsewhere in Northeast Asia.

2. While long-term resolution of territorial disputes will be handled essentially on a bilateral basis, multilateral approaches towards preventive diplomacy in disputed areas which are conflict-prone should be worked at to avoid Mischief-Reef like incidents from escalating into clashes at sea. So far the ARF has not really been able to move beyond the talk-shop phase to the next stage of preventive diplomacy as envisaged in the 1995 ARF concept paper although conceptually, certain aspects of confidence building do overlap with aspects of preventive diplomacy.

3. While clearly, multilateral frameworks for cooperative security are not substitutes for existing alliances in the Asia-Pacific region (despite claims in certain quarters that American-centric alliance structures, as remnants of the Cold War era, are best supplanted in a post Cold War milieu) they can facilitate the clarification of alliance intentions and role re-definitions within alliances (such as the revisions in the US-Japan defence guidelines) which are in various stages of transitions. Such clarifications and efforts at confidence-building can be pursued multilaterally through the ARF intersessional group on CBMs (which like the other intersessional groups are co-chaired by both ASEAN and non-ASEAN members) or through unilateral efforts at transparency as exemplified in the publication of Defence White Papers.

4. For the ASEAN-driven ARF to be made more relevant to the needs and interests of Northeast Asia, ASEAN should share the chairmanship of the annual ARF meeting, currently held by the incumbent chairman of the ASEAN Standing Committee, with a non-ASEAN member which would of course include the Northeast Asian members. More importantly, North Korea should at least be granted observer status in the ARF as a prelude to its being made a full member if confidence-building in the Korean peninsula were to be brought within the ambit of the ARF.

5. There are many areas relating to capacity-building within the ARF that should be addressed if the Forum is to play a more effective role even as a talk-shop. Capacity-building becomes more critical if the ARF were to relate more effectively to Northeast Asian needs as well as sustaining an agenda in preventive diplomacy. For a start, the ARF will need to enhance its coordinating function by establishing at least a small secretariat or unit wherever it may be sited. A linkage could also be institutionalized with the track 2 (non-governmental) CSCAP, which does include North Korea and can be the intellectual engine that drives the cooperative security process along.

6. The security practice of many ASEAN states reflects a comprehensive security outlook which goes beyond conventional military concerns. Such an outlook is in turn a

reflection of their traditional concern with internal social and political threats rather than external military threats. Although Japan's security mindset also expresses itself in a comprehensive security outlook, it is also more externally directed focusing on security of raw material and energy supplies, of markets and life-lines of trade and communication. However, in the post Cold War milieu, other "soft security" concerns — from illegal movements of labour, transnational crime, drug trafficking, threats to the environment, threats to economic security, etc. — have added to the litany of comprehensive security concerns which at the functional level will require multilateral efforts on the part of both sub-regions to address effectively. At track 2, the Working Group on Comprehensive (and Cooperative) Security mirrors a common concern that cuts across sub-regions in the Asia-Pacific. The ARF however is still largely focused on conventional military issues.

7. In considering the security interdependence between Northeast and Southeast Asia, as well as the practical linkages if at all between bilateral defence arrangements that are based on deterrent assumptions on the one hand and cooperative security on the other, it may be useful to explore the extent to which arrangements which are overtly focused on Northeast Asia, may nevertheless have relevance for Southeast Asia as well. We may need to explore as a case in point, whether certain aspects of the revised Guidelines for US - Japan Defence Cooperation may have a bearing on the Southeast Asia region. After all the Guidelines recognize *inter alia*, "the importance and significance of security dialogues and defense exchanges in the region, as well as international arms control and disarmament". The two governments have also expressed a commitment to cooperate closely on UN peacekeeping operations and international humanitarian and emergency relief operations. However, given the Japanese preference for a situational rather than geographic definition of the reach of these Guidelines (in view of expressed Chinese sensitivities over Taiwan), there is a persisting ambiguity over the meaning of "the region" or "the Far East". With reference to Southeast Asia, the ambiguity surfaced in the wake of the domestic political turmoil and civil unrest in Indonesia following the economic crisis which began to unfold with mounting fury since July 1997. In May 1998, the AFP reported that Taku Yamaski, Chairman of the LDP Policy Research Council, had warned the visiting Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Economics and Finance, that, "If Indonesia's economic and political unrest affects safe navigation of the Malacca Straits, we may have to discuss the possibility that a geographic scope of the guidelines would extend to the straits." The position of the Government however remains unclear. It was equally unclear whether the dispatch by Japan of the six C-130 military transport aircraft to Singapore and the deployment of two coastguard vessels near Indonesia in the same month in anticipation of the evacuation of Japanese nationals in Indonesia were undertaken in the context of the revised Guidelines. These ambiguities may also reflect

lingering domestic Japanese sensitivities but they point nevertheless to the need to clarify the relationship between existing bilateral security arrangements and concerns pertaining to multilateral cooperative security.

To be sure, given the immense diversity of security interests, not all of which are compatible, in the Asia-Pacific, different states will have different political and security objectives within mega-regional frameworks for cooperative security. Some will see in multilateralism, an opportunity to dilute the utility or question the relevance of deterrent-based bilateral defence arrangements while others will envisage an emerging post Cold War security architecture in the Asia-Pacific in terms of multi-layered cake encompassing bi-lateral alliances, sub-regional forums, unobtrusive multilateral security arrangements and mega-regional forums such as the ARF and even APEC which will have to increasingly take account of the economic security needs of the region. One hopeful sign is that the prevailing disposition towards regional peace and stability will persist into the dawning of the 21st Century. This continuing window of opportunity should be exploited to the maximum to ensure that the positive and hopeful trends are even more entrenched.