

Chapter 2

Asia's Security and the Prospects of Multilateralism: Australian Perspectives

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Introduction

Australia is a prosperous democracy, whose people inhabit an island-continent with vast natural resources. Its population is small relative to its territorial holdings. It has a dominant Anglo-Celtic culture, but is found at the foot of East Asia. It has a highly sophisticated and capable defence force, but one whose size reflects its demographic base. Most crucially, Australia's economic dynamism depends on integration into the global economy. These attributes give Australia a distinctive perspective on regional security and international relations more generally. It has a strong sense of insecurity embedded in its strategic culture, a function of its history as a small British colony a long way from its metropolitan protector.¹ However, since federation in 1901, Australia has only once faced any meaningful threat to its core security interests, from Japan in the Second World War. This long-term security is in part due to the physical isolation of Australia's centres of wealth from threats, but in part also because Australia has enjoyed the good fortune of having a close fit between its strategic and economic interests. With its relatively small population, Australian prosperity has always depended on international trade and investment. After British decline, Australia quickly forged an alliance relationship with the US, an agreement that proved a shrewd investment, given the way in which the US chose to provide an ongoing military commitment to East Asia which buttressed regional security and underwrite the structures of the international economy. Historically, Australia has not had to face the unpleasant circumstances in which its economic and security interests diverged.

Like all other East Asian states, Australia has profited from a stable and relatively

¹ Anthony Bourke, *Fear of Security: Australia's Invasion Anxiety*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 2nd.

predictable security environment since the late 1970s. As a result of the dramatic changes in the region, most notably China's economic rise, the contours of the regional security setting are changing. For a relatively small power whose welfare is dependent on international economic exchange, this flux presents a profound set of challenges. The nature of the security challenges, the ways in which states and peoples' interests are intertwined, the overlay of rivalry and historical grievance, and the speed with which power and influence are being transformed and redistributed seems to demand some important changes in the way states and peoples advance their security interests. The purpose of this paper is to analyse Australia's security outlook during this period of change, and the ways in which multilateral processes can help Australia navigate this new world. I argue that at present, Australia has a relatively optimistic assessment of the risks posed by the changing security setting, but nonetheless is seeking insurance from these risks through both traditional military means, as well as through diplomatic engagement. Australia does not think multilateral mechanisms are likely to contribute significantly to its security interests in the short to medium term. This is both because of the specific problems of Asian multilateral mechanisms and the structural limits to what multilateralism can achieve in the region. Reform and restructuring are needed if multilateral processes are going to be able to substantively improve Australia's security environment and that of the region as a whole.

Australia's Security Outlook

The left-of-centre ALP government was in power between November 2007 and September 2013. While in office, it issued four major policy documents articulating various strands of thought relating to Australia's security outlook. In 2009, it issued a Defence White Paper, the first since 2000, controversial because it singled out China as a strategic risk. It also described a regional environment that was increasingly risk prone, and in response it set out an ambitious plan to expand Australia's capacity to project force and contribute to regional contingencies.² The views in the paper were closely linked to those of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, and the drafting of the paper

² Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030 Defence White Paper*, 2009, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, <http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper2009/>.

was subject to considerable dispute within government.³ In 2010 Rudd was dumped as leader by the ALP, and replaced by Julia Gillard. Following Rudd's removal, the government developed three big-picture statements that together provide a clear indication of Australia's sense of its security interests and broader strategic environment and which explicitly sought to distance itself from the strategic outlook of Rudd's time in office. The first was the *Australia and the Asian Century White Paper*, issued in October 2012. The paper presented a wide ranging analysis of the implications of Asia's rise for all aspects of Australian society, and was produced by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. The second was *Strong and Secure: A Strategy for Australia's National Security*, released in March 2013, intended as a follow up to 2008's inaugural 'National Security Statement' and was also produced by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. The third part of the 'trilogy' of international policy statements was the 2013 Defence White Paper, which sought to replace what was thought by many in government as the unnecessarily inflammatory 2009 Defence White Paper. As the final document makes clear, the three are intended to be read as complementary and comprehensive statements about the government's international policy outlook.⁴ Although they were the product of the Labor government, they are not especially partisan documents. They were heavily shaped by the bureaucracy, and as such, reflect a broader-ranging consensus about many aspects of Australia's security policy.

There are six particularly notable features of Australia's official security outlook that are expressed in these documents. First, Australia sees the contours of its international security environment as being shaped most profoundly by the nature of the major powers' bilateral relations. How, Japan, China, the US, and to a lesser extent India, manage their respective relationships will be the most important component part of the regional security setting. In particular, it recognizes the fundamental importance of Sino-American relations for Australia and the region more generally. In contrast to the views of government during the Rudd period, in these documents Australia has deliberately adopted an optimistic assessment of the prospects of this relationship. As the 2013 Defence White Paper puts it, Australia thinks that the US and China are most likely going to be 'able to maintain a

³ Patrick Walters, 'Defence Department Defies Kevin Rudd on White Paper' *The Australian* 14 November 2008.

⁴ Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, April 2013, <http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper2013/>, para 1.3.

constructive relationship encompassing both competition and cooperation.’⁵ On this most crucial of relationships, the official government line is that the many common interests shared by Washington and Beijing are likely to overcome their points of conflict and rivalry and will contain less rational influences on policy formulation such as nationalism, honour, or a sense of wounded pride.

Second, the broader security setting in the region is becoming more challenging and much more complex than in the past. Overt competition among states and peoples is likely to be a key feature of Asia’s international landscape, one in which the range of actors able to influence Australian security interests are increasing. As a result, Australia will become more vulnerable than in the past. Yet notwithstanding what is clearly a more dynamic and risky security setting, as the National Security Statement puts it, ‘the outlook for Australia’s national security over the next decade is largely positive.’⁶ Australia sees the chances of a major power war as remote, that cooperation among states is likely to ameliorate the major threats and challenges, and that even though more states will have larger arsenals than in the past, the risk of arms races and destabilising military competition is low. Beyond these broadly optimistic interpretations of the tenor of the region’s security relations, the third common element of the official security outlook is the strong sense that Australia’s security concerns are shaped by a much wider array of forces than traditional state-based military threats. The official documents reflect what could be described as a ‘holistic’ understanding of Australia’s security interests. In particular, the government pays attention to the broad way in which economic factors are likely to shape its security. Australia is mindful of the way economic shocks have accelerated the strategic transformation of Asia and created a more contested regional order, but it is also aware of the way economic underdevelopment creates a permissive environment for ‘non-traditional’ security challenges to thrive. Alongside economic concerns, other forces that are singled out include environmental challenges, relating particularly to questions of environmental degradation, resource competition and climate change, the growing role of non-state actors and the impact of weak and fragile states. Thus, at least in its official statements, Australia presents a very ‘twenty-first’ century understanding of the sources of insecurity which it faces.

Fourth, in each of these documents, the government has progressively elaborated

⁵ Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper* 2013, para 2.19.

⁶ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Strong and Secure: A Strategy for Australia’s National Security*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2013, p. 27.

a novel sense of its strategic geography. Since at least the early 1990s, Australia has used the idea of the Asia-Pacific to describe the region in which it is located and in which it has the most at stake. This construct was intended to encapsulate the strategic coherence of Asian states and societies located on the Pacific littoral and their connection to states located elsewhere on the Pacific Rim, principally, the US, Australia, NZ, and Canada. In contrast, starting as a thought box in the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper,⁷ then being progressively rolled out, Australia now articulates the idea of the 'Indo-Pacific' as its principal area of concern. Although noted as 'still an emerging system,'⁸ the language used by government has become increasingly positive. For Australia, the Indo-Pacific designates the complex array of trading, investment, security, and cultural linkages that connect the Indian and Pacific Oceans through strategic arc of Southeast Asia. It is an avowedly maritime construct, but one which, the 2013 Defence White Paper makes plain, is of pre-eminent importance: 'Australia's security environment will be significantly influenced by how the Indo-Pacific and its architecture evolves.'⁹ This changing sense of strategic geography is of note for several reasons. First, Australia sees as central to its security outlook the way in which the linkages between the Indian Ocean and the Asian littoral of the Pacific play out. Second, and more importantly, it signals that Australia thinks that strategic weight is shifting southward from its longer run location in Northeast Asia closer to its core interests.¹⁰ Thus for Australia, Southeast Asia is taking on a much more important place in its understanding of its security setting. The change in geopolitical construct, even if still only in its early phases, relates to the fifth feature of these official documents; that is, the simple but repeated observation that Australia's security environment is very different from its recent past. It is shaped by more actors than in the past. Power relativities, and indeed the very nature of power itself, are changing, the array of forces challenging core security interests is wider, more dynamic and hard to control than in the past, and that this environment will make it more difficult for Australian to achieve its preferred policy outcomes.

⁷ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, <http://asiancentury.dpmc.gov.au/white-paper>, p. 74.

⁸ Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper* 2013, para 2.6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ There is a debate about the concept, see Harry White, 'Indo-Pacific: Listing Our Interests Not Making Strategy' *ASPI Strategist*, 20 August 2013, <http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indo-pacific-listing-our-interests-not-making-strategy/>, Nick Bisley and Andrew Phillips, 'A Rebalance to Where? US Strategic Geography in Asia' in *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 55.5, 2013, pp. 95-114.

Yet the final common thread in the three policy documents seems to fly somewhat in the face of this pervasive sense of change. In spite of much time and energy devoted to setting out the many important new features of the region, the big policy settings that the government has adopted or has indicated that it will adopt are very much in keeping with the policy settings established since the normalization of Sino-American relations. Australia continues to see the US alliance as the cornerstone of its defence and security policy, that the American strategy of primacy in the region (however conceived) is best not only for Australia's interests, but for the region more generally. The government has articulated this in rather fulsome terms at almost every official opportunity.¹¹ Australia will also continue to spend a relatively large amount of money to defend its interest in a traditional sense. Although the ADF has increasingly been used to participate in PKOs and other unconventional operations, the doctrine, structure, and acquisition programs of the Australian military is still driven primarily by the requirements to defend Australia from attack. Even though the 2013 Defence White Paper sought to hose down concerns about China and present a more benign interpretation of the region's current and future setting, it endorsed essentially the same ambitious and controversial acquisition program set out in the 2009 paper. This entails significantly expanding Australia's submarine fleet, purchasing three squadrons of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters by 2020 and two large air warfare destroyers, among other notable plans. As in the past, Australia will also invest in what it calls 'strategic' bilateral relationships, and will continue to play an important role in multilateral processes. Thus there are somewhat discordant messages being sent out. On the one hand, Australia's security environment is changing dramatically and very rapidly. On the other, the same basic policy tools that it has been using in the past are the most appropriate mechanisms for the future, both in their broad purpose and in their relative importance to one another.

When trying to ascertain just what Australia thinks about its security, it is important to recognize the gaps that exist between what is said in official documents—declaratory policy—and what decision-makers actually think. Government is far from monolithic, and people in different parts of the policy machinery can and do take divergent views on issues. Moreover, there can often be sharp distinctions

¹¹ Notable examples beyond these documents include the Australia-US Ministerial Meetings 2012 and 2011 Communiqués, and PM Gillard's speech to the joint sitting of the Houses of Congress in March 2011. For more on this see Nick Bisley, "An ally for all the years to come: Why Australia is not a conflicted American ally" in *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 67.4, 2013, pp. 403-18.

between what is written down for public consumption and the actual policy position. For perfectly understandable reasons, governments are often far more diplomatic in declaratory policy statements than they may be in reality. Due to the confidential nature of this material, it is impossible to say precisely where the gaps exist between what is said and what is in fact thought by government at present. Nonetheless, it is clear that within government, both amongst the bureaucracy and the elected officials, there are diverse opinions about the region's security setting. These range from views that are more optimistic than those incorporated in the policy 'trilogy,' to much more pessimistic assessments of what is likely and for which Australia should be prepared.¹² Scholars of a more realist orientation remind us that it is perhaps wisest not to judge states by what they say, but by what they do. With that in mind, we see in Australia's spending on defence and security matters a clear indication that policy planning is organized around a somewhat more pessimistic assessment of the region and its propensity for competition and conflict, than that set out in official statements. This gets to an important aspect of the official perspective that is often underplayed. The three international policy documents of the Gillard government had a range of purposes, but central to all of them was diplomatic signalling. Each statement was intended to speak to multiple audiences—for example, to the domestic polity to set out the government's priorities; and to the bureaucracy to provide a framework for priorities in resource allocation—and an important target for these policies are states and peoples abroad. The very deliberate downplaying of the China threat in the 2013 Defence White Paper was fundamentally a diplomatic gambit, and not a genuine strategic commitment. In so doing, Australia is seeking to contribute to diplomatic efforts to de-escalate nascent tensions and rivalry that have been evident in the region between 2009 and 2012. Australia's 2009 White Paper, China's more assertive posture toward its interests in the South and East China Sea, and the American rebalance are just some examples of moves that have generated a destabilizing set of reactions. The optimism of the 2013 paper was in part an effort to help wind back this sense of risk. Australia's official policy declarations themselves are an element of the complex interactions that show a region in a period of strategic flux and uncertainty.

Outside of government circles, academics, analysts and commentators have been debating Australia's broader security circumstances in earnest since around

¹² As revealed by a Wikileaks cable release Kevin Rudd's views were much more pessimistic than government policy, Daniel Flitton, 'Rudd Butt of Wikileaks Expose' in *The Age* 6 December 2010.

2009.¹³ It is striking how late Australian debate about its security future, in the light of China's rise and perceptions of the waning of American primacy, has come to the fore, given how dependent on external circumstances Australia is and how long running China's rise has been. Within this broader debate, argument about how Australia might navigate this changing strategic setting can be grouped into four main schools of thought. There is a broadly liberal school which sees the underlying shared interests of the main players, as well as the region's many middle ranging powers, as likely to prevail over the cross-cutting forces that generate a more competitive and dangerous region. The second argues that shared interests alone are unlikely to be enough to constrain the more atavistic tendencies of states and peoples, and that the major powers, and others, need to be bound into institutions and other multilateral processes that shape their preferences and constrain state behaviour. The third grouping is more pessimistic still, and adds to the efforts to bind states to rules and institutions the need to develop greater military capacity to hedge against the chances that the region becomes more competitive and conflict prone. The final approach sees the region as experiencing a profound transformation in the distribution of power and influence which will require a radical change in approach from all the region's key players to maintain the peace, both from the big states like the US, China and Japan, and the lesser powers such as Australia, South Korea, Vietnam and Indonesia. In such circumstances Australia would be required to make major adjustments to the key mechanisms that have driven its security policy to date.¹⁴

Australian public opinion has not been systematically polled about attitudes toward security over a long period of time. Regular polling only began in 2005 with the first of what have become annual polls run by the Sydney-based Lowy Institute for International Policy. To date this polling has shown a general increase in the public support for the US alliance and a cooling in attitudes toward China. Attitudes about risks in the international security environment are very mixed and seem to be prone to what might be called seasonal variation depending on the prominent issue of the day.¹⁵

¹³ For an overview see Carlyle A. Thayer, 'China's Rise and the Passing of US Primacy: Australia Debates its Future' in *Asia Policy* No. 12, 2011, pp. 20-27.

¹⁴ For further detail on these schools of thought see Nick Bisley, 'Between Beijing and Washington: Australia and Middle Power Dilemmas in a Changing Asia' in *Asian Survey* forthcoming 2014.

¹⁵ For details on the Lowy Institute polls see: <http://lowyinstitute.org/programs-and-projects/programs/polling>.

Australia has four principal security interests: the defence of its territorial integrity and security of its political, economic and social system; the maintenance of regional stability and the existing strategic balance; ensuring that the key arteries of the regional and global economy, principally Asia's SLOCs, remain open and uncontested; and that transnational forces such as criminal and terrorist networks, infectious diseases and environment degradation, do not threaten the well-being of Australia's society and economy. Australia's official security outlook perceives little challenge over the foreseeable future on the first of these interests. But the changes in the region pose a range of challenges to the remaining three interests. Perhaps the most significant of these is the way in which the shifting power relativities are threatening the existing strategic balance. In its official pronouncements Australia evinces a belief that although the region has become more complex and more competitive it thinks that that the worst outcomes are unlikely. The shared interests of Asia's states and societies, and in particular the US and China, will act as a check on the more dangerous aspects of state behaviour and are likely to foster an environment in which both competitive and cooperative aspects coexist uneasily. Yet notwithstanding this broadly optimistic public assessment, there is evidence of a gloomier outlook within government. In its defence spending and in opinion expressed by some political and bureaucratic figures there is a sense that Australia is beginning to prepare for a more combustible regional security setting. It is seeking to increase its capacity to project force, to ensure its air and naval superiority and its ability to contribute to maritime contingencies a long way from its territorial waters. Australia may be cautiously optimistic about the future, but there is considerably more caution about than may appear on the surface.

On 7 September, the conservative Coalition government was returned to power on the back of securing a significant majority in the House of Representatives. Given how little time it has been in government it is too early to make firm conclusions about the extent to which it will deviate in substance from the approach sketched out above. However, a few preliminary observations are possible. The government led by Prime Minister Abbott has indicated that it will take many of its policy cues from the Howard government and it is likely to adhere to the pragmatic conservative tradition in Australian foreign policy.¹⁶ It is likely to continue to publically declare a positive interpretation of the region's security outlook and has already shown

¹⁶ On this and the Howard government's policy more generally see Michael Wesley, *The Howard Paradox: Australian Diplomacy in Asia* Sydney: ABC Books, 2007.

that it will continue to repeat the platitude that Australia does not have to choose between Washington and Beijing, but it is likely to see competition as having a greater probability than the ALP and to speak more openly about this possibility. This is not because of an instinctive ideological mistrust of China. Instead it is due both to the conservative disposition to be more pessimistic and also the influence of key governmental advisers. The most important staff in the PM's office, most notably Andrew Shearer the senior adviser on national security, are reasonably hawkish on China. The PM is inexperienced and not especially interested in foreign and defence policy and thus likely to rely on his advisers to a significant degree. The government is also likely to move away from the public commitment to a 'holistic' understanding of the sources of insecurity that was a key part of the ALP's security outlook. But beyond these areas, it is reasonable to conclude that there is going to be a significant degree of continuity in security outlook and policy. In part this derives from the fact that this is a policy realm that is responsive to circumstance beyond Australia's control and partly because there is, in spite of electoral politics, a good degree of common policy ground between Australia's two sides of politics.

Security Multilateralism: The Australian Perspective

Australia has traditionally been a keen supporter of multilateralism in general, and Asia's cooperative endeavours in particular. It was a foundation member of APEC, it is a dialogue partner of ASEAN, it is a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus process (ADMM+), it sends a large and high level delegation to the Shangri-La Dialogue, and has a Trilateral Security arrangement with Japan and the US among its many regional relationships. It has led or been an early adopter of many mechanisms and institutions. Even though its recent efforts to forge a new mechanism failed, then-PM Rudd's ill-fated Asia-Pacific Community (APC), the effort is illustrative of the broader interest in regional multilateralism that has long existed in Canberra.

In Asia, security multilateralism is a relatively new phenomenon. Up until the mid 1990s there were no formal multilateral processes that were dedicated to or which even addressed security concerns. With the creation of the ARF, Asian states began a relatively rapid experiment with security cooperation leading to an

explosion of institutions, processes and acronyms.¹⁷ Indeed where Asia was once notable for its absence of multilateral mechanisms it is this proliferation that is now striking. Yet in spite of, or indeed in part because of this expansion in processes, multilateral security cooperation in Asia has a relatively light impact on state policy choices. Indeed while there are some clear contributions multilateralism has made, helping to make China's rise less destabilizing than it has been, improving lines of communication and contributing to crisis management, security cooperation in Asia has had a relatively modest impact on the broader security environment.¹⁸

In its public diplomacy Australia has signalled a strong commitment to security multilateralism. This was particularly strong under the ALP government but it was an important element of the Howard government as well and is likely to be a key part of the Abbott government's approach. Yet behind the scenes one sees a more sanguine view about the contribution that such processes can make either to Australia's particular interests or the region more generally. Indeed even in its public documents, where commitment to security multilateralism is at its strongest, a phlegmatic attitude is on display: 'Regional forums and multilateralism have proven well worth nurturing, even if they remain a modest supplement to long-practised bilateral statecraft.'¹⁹ The National Security Statement echoes this sense noting that changes in the region and the world more generally have made 'multilateralism more important, but also more difficult.'²⁰ Australia's current disposition with regard to security multilateralism is to present an optimistic public face. Australian policy makers think that increased and more effective cooperation is possible, but at present and in the near-term future it is something that supports or adds marginally to the main business of security policy which is conducted either bilaterally or unilaterally.

But even with this constrained set of expectations, Australia recognizes the value of multilateral efforts and in particular sees them providing three main benefits: influence; communication; and crisis management opportunities. Among the range of factors which have prompted Asian states to experiment with security cooperation is the strong sense that the region is experiencing a period of strategic transformation. The regional security order has been stable since Sino-American

¹⁷ See Nick Bisley, *Building Asia's Security*, London: Routledge and IISS, 2009, Adelphi No. 408.

¹⁸ For more on this see Michael J. Green and Bates Gill (eds), *Asia's New Multilateralism: Cooperation, Competition and the Search for Community*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

¹⁹ Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper* 2013, para 2.9.

²⁰ Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Strong and Secure*, p. 34.

normalization. But with China's rise and America's strategic challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan, the region is experiencing change. Interest in security cooperation is sparked by the desire to manage this process and Australia sees in its participation in groupings like the ARF, EAS and ADMM+ not only forums that advance its interests but a broader opportunity to exert influence in a region that has a number of very substantial powers. Since the First World War, Australia has been acutely sensitive that its security fate is largely shaped by forces beyond its control and it has been and will continue to be active in trying to gain influence wherever it is thought to be available. In Asia's security multilateralism it sees an ideal opportunity to do just that. Australia, like many states in the region, recognizes the inherent problems of misperception and miscommunication that is inherent in security policy. Asia is beset with historical animosities, territorial disputes and growing uncertainty. Multilateral mechanisms provide the opportunity to improve information flows, reduce the prospects and consequence of miscommunication and generate regular lines of contact so as to build a basic sense of trust among the region's states. Australia sees the vital need to increase this scarce commodity and even with its obvious shortcomings Asia's multilateral processes are valued for what they contribute. Finally, while many decry Asia's multilateral bodies as talk shops (former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans famously describe APEC as a 'A Perfect Excuse to Chat'), these regular meetings of leaders and ministers have been important venues in which crisis management has occurred. The terms of the UN intervention in Timor Leste where thrashed out at the APEC summit in 1999, the 2001 meeting of that body also allowed the US and PRC to soothe their relations after the EP-3 incident of April that year, while the Shangri-La Dialogue provided opportunity to show ROK-Japan-US solidarity in the face of North Korea's 2009 nuclear test. Asia's summit season is valued for many reasons in Australia but its utility as a crisis management device should not be overlooked.

Australia is an extremely active participant in Asia's multilateral processes for these three reasons. But it is relatively clear-eyed about the problems of multilateralism in the region and recognizes the limited ability of these approaches to constrain great power rivalry, significantly improve trust or transform the dynamics of high stakes issues such as the status of Taiwan. But it does see multilateralism as serving both its specific interests and to the region more generally. In particular it sees two relatively new bodies, the EAS and ADMM+ as able to deliver most meaningfully on the three benefits noted above as well as to make further inroads into improving

the region's security setting. The Australian government has chosen to represent the failings of the APC process as having prompted an energizing of the EAS and indeed it has even been touted as the reason why Russia and the United States both opted to sign the TAC and join the ASEAN-centred body. While this is self-serving diplomatic spin—Russia and the US joined for quite different reasons neither of which had much to do with Australian leadership—nonetheless Australia sees in the summit something with very considerable potential. The EAS brings together all of the region's major powers—the US, China, India, Japan and Russia—alongside important middle ranking powers such as South Korea, Indonesia and Australia plus all the ASEAN states and does so at the highest level. As a leaders' led process it has the profile and diplomatic weight to address the region's toughest challenges, at least in theory. Third, it is a body that has a remit that crosses the full sweep of policy. It is not narrowly circumscribed to discuss economic matters, as is APEC, nor only dedicated to security concerns as is the ARF. It has an open remit and can therefore have the potential to drive cooperation in the kind of 'whole of government' approach which many security challenges demand and which is a particular interest of Australian governments. With the sixteen members, its policy reach and weight, the EAS is seen by Canberra as the principal focal point for its regional multilateral efforts.

The creation of the ADMM+ process, which was first prefigured in a 2007 ASEAN concept paper and held its first ministerial level meeting in October 2010, was an important development both for ASEAN and regional security. Its formation was due in no small part to the recognition that the ARF was falling short on its potential and that more generally ASEAN was going to have to take steps to ensure it retained what it considers to be its place in the 'driving seat' of regional collaborative measures. ASEAN processes had been rightly criticised for failing to deliver concretely on its potential,²¹ in response it established a range of new 'communities' to drive greater cooperation and to ensure the interests of ASEAN members did not wander. ASEAN has long recognized that its broader security interests are shaped principally by major forces that emanate from beyond Southeast Asia, most notably the major power relations of Northeast and South Asia. In the past this led to the creation of the ARF and more recently to the extension of the ADMM

²¹ For example, David Martin Jones and Michael L.R. Smith, 'Making Process, Not Progress: ASEAN and the Evolving East Asian Regional Order' in *International Security*, 32.1, 2007, pp. 148-184.

process to the principal eight non-ASEAN members.²² For Australia, ADMM+ is not only a means to increase its influence, improve communication and help manage crises, it is also a mechanism that is specifically dedicated to increasing substantive cooperation among the armed forces and defence ministries of the region. By being functionally concentrated on defence matters the mechanism has considerable appeal and for many observers this increases its prospects to deliver benefits which will then yield further investment and begin virtuous circles of further investment and greater returns. Its mirror membership of the EAS also provides the possibility for more effective divisions of labour and opportunities to capitalize on diplomatic momentum. As a result of this the ADMM+ is seen by Australian policy makers to have considerable potential. Australia also highly values the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) run annually by the London-based IISS. For Australia this mechanism has two particular points of attraction. First, it is narrowly focused on defence and security concerns over its 12 year history. The SLD is not tied to any efforts to build a community or broader set of interests and is thus capable of maintaining focus on defence matters. The fact that it is run by a think-tank also means that it is not bound to any particular national or institutional perspective, thus giving the forum a degree of strategically useful neutrality and is able to avoid the need to produce ‘deliverables’ for participants. Although critics in China have suggested that the IISS takes a broadly pro-American worldview. Second, for a country like Australia where every trip by ministers and officials is a long one, the SLD provides an excellent opportunity to meet bilaterally with other participants on the sidelines of the main event. Thus Australia can get a significant policy return both in multilateral and bilateral strategic relations from participation in the dialogue. As the SLD gets bigger and garners ever wider attention — at the 2013 meeting the EU’s foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton spoke in plenary session, as did the French, British and Canadian Defence Ministers — this benefit will continue to attract Australia and others and serve as a useful point of contrast with the ADMM+ process.²³ When the latter was first established some wondered whether there would be sufficient interest to sustain both processes. The answer so far has been a resounding yes.

As with many states in the region, Australia is investing heavily in what it calls

²² ADMM+ membership mirrors that of the EAS, that is the ASEAN members plus US, Russia, China, India, South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

²³ For details on the 2013 meeting see the Conference Report available at: <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/conference%20proceedings/sections/shangri-la-aa36/the-shangri-la-dialogue-2013-395b>.

defence engagement. This is the vast range of linkages between defence forces and defence civilians that are cooperative or collaborative in nature. Its aim is to increase Australia's strategic influence in the region through military-military links and also to try to improve the region's strategic setting by fostering a sense of common cause and trust-building among defence forces and civilians. Illustrative of this current priority, an entire chapter of the 2013 Defence White Paper is dedicated to defence engagement.²⁴ Operating in both bilateral and multilateral contexts, it entails a wide range of activity from high level dialogues to staff training college exchanges and is a dynamic feature of policy. In many cases it links the traditionally discrete spheres of diplomacy, development and defence to advance things like good governance and the rule of law. Although in recent times there has been an emphasis on Australia's immediate neighbourhood the reach of defence engagement and the sheer scale of activity is striking.²⁵ Yet as some have pointed out defence engagement lacks a coherent strategic purpose and its connections to the many other parts of Australian security and defence policy do not appear to have been clearly thought through.²⁶ This reflects not only miscommunication and bureaucratic politics but also the sense of geopolitical change in the region. Turbulence, transformation and uncertainty are prompting states to experiment with a range of policy options. Some have argued that the mix of collaborative and cooperative approaches reflects a considered policy of hedging in times of uncertainty.²⁷ This may be a generous interpretation of what is going on. Australian policy exhibits less a considered effort to mitigate risk than a series of bets about how security goals may be achieved in an environment that is almost entirely unique. Australia has confidence in its bilateral relationship with the US but realizes that this can only serve certain purposes and is not without its costs. As a result it is busy experimenting with a range of mechanisms, some of which are longstanding and others, like defence engagement, are relatively new.

The experiment with defence engagement has been prompted is in part by experience in PKOs and other non-traditional military deployments such as

²⁴ Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper* 2013, Chapter 6, pp. 55-70.

²⁵ For an exhaustive overview of Australia's defence engagement see Sam Bateman, Anthony Bergin and Hayley Channer, *Terms of Engagement: Australia's Regional Defence Diplomacy* Canberra: ASPI, 2013.

²⁶ See Brendan Taylor, 'Australia's Defence Diplomacy: Presumptive Engagement Revisited' in Sarah Teo and Mushahid Ali (eds) *Strategic Engagement in the Asia-Pacific: The Future of the ADMM+* Singapore: RSIS Policy Report, August 2013, http://www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/policy_report/Strategic-Engagement-in-the-Asia-Pacific.pdf.

²⁷ E.g. Evan Medeiros, 'Strategic Hedging and the Future of the Asia-Pacific' in *Washington Quarterly* 29.1, 2006, pp. 145-67.

RAMSI, but it is also encouraged by Australia's limited expectations of multilateral security mechanisms. As currently configured Australia does not expect multilateral processes to deliver much more than they presently do. So what would need to change for Australia to think that multilateral means could work better for Australia and the region? In broad terms there are four changes that collectively would make these mechanisms more effective in driving security collaboration and generating a more cooperative setting in the region. First, the region needs fewer multilateral mechanisms. Not only does the multitude of mechanisms spread bureaucratic and diplomatic resources very thinly, it has created the curious situation in which forums that are ostensibly about cooperation become venues for competition. In the mid-2000s this was evident in the jostling over whether APEC, EAS or ASEAN+3 would become the region's premier multilateral body. Such a range of entities also provides those who wish to slow down or block collaboration increased opportunity so to do. Fewer entities would provide a greater prospect for cooperation. Second, the region's many multilateral processes need to be reformed so as to focus much more clearly on concrete collaborative endeavours. That Asia's many meetings are little more than a talk fest is a criticism that has long been made but which retains a degree of salience. In particular many of them have overlapping memberships, work programs and operating procedures creating a good degree of duplication, an uncertain administrative division of labour and further dilution of impact. Some kind of rationalization whereby members knew which entity was best to address a specific concern is needed.

Beyond these more reformist changes to the existing security 'architecture,' there are two broader changes that would improve the prospects of multilateralism delivering on its promise. One of the great criticisms of many of Asia's regional bodies is the often glacial speed with which they move. They can take an inordinate amount of time to respond to even uncontroversial issues. The ARF has still not formally moved past the first stage of its three step 'model for evolution' adopted in 1995. And notwithstanding much of the professed interest in the ADMM+ process, when it was first established it was planned that it would meet only every three years. This has been revised to a biannual meeting, but it is hardly the stuff that inspires any significant development in security cooperation. Thus the first attribute that processes need to develop is to become more nimble and to gain greater levels of flexibility. The need to be able to react quickly to events, to be adjust to changing circumstances and adaptable to new challenges as they emerge is vital to being able to appeal to

states in the current climate. In May 2009, after considerable diplomatic haggling and extensive planning the ARF held its first ever operational activity, the Voluntary Demonstration of Response on Disaster Relief, in the Philippines. Four months later Typhoon Ketsana hit the Southern Philippines, not far from where the exercise was held. Yet the ARF was in no way capable of responding even though it had trained for precisely this circumstance. Instead disaster relief was run by individual states aided NGOs. This experience was repeated again in 2013 with typhoon Haiyan. The lack of agility and responsiveness of many mechanisms means that for Australia and others there is little real incentive to invest more in the ARF or to expect multilateral processes to deliver to a greater degree than at present. Finally, and perhaps most radically, Asia's multilateral security entities could deliver more if they began to engage more meaningfully with non-state actors. Asian regionalism has historically been an exercise in collaboration to provide international circumstances conducive to state- and nation-building programs. As a result international processes have a strongly statist quality. Yet many of the security challenges that the region faces, and which are the focus of so many discussions, require coordination between state and non-state forces. Whether to manage the spread of infectious diseases, cope with the security consequences of climate change, control and regulate population flows or transnational crime, states and institutions will need the help of firms, NGOs, and even private security contractors to achieve the kinds of outcomes they desire. Thinking of ways in which non-state actors can be integrated into existing processes provides a novel way in which multilateralism in Asia to begin to do new and more substantive things.

Conclusion

Australia knows that even with the best of reforms there will be much in the region with which multilateralism cannot help. The Sino-American relationship will only ever be influenced in very limited ways by what goes on in multilateral venues. Equally, other significant security challenges will not be able to be accommodated due to the preferences of the major powers, most obviously the status of Taiwan. Yet multilateral mechanisms can and must do more. Even with their very real shortcomings the Six Party talks have made a crucial contribution to regional security and remain an important means for managing the DPRK. Notwithstanding difficulties to date, the South China Sea dispute is another area in which multilateral processes

may yet make a difference. Most importantly, multilateral mechanisms provide the best way in which the region can collectively create the foundations of a new security order. The order that was established in the mid 1970s, and which provided the foundations of Asia's current economic dynamism, is fraying. In response we see an odd combination of clinging to old approaches while experimenting with new ones. These efforts are ad hoc, uncoordinated and lacking a larger sense of strategic purpose. Multilateral mechanisms hold out the promise for the region to be able to construct a new and more workable security order that better reflects the changing regional power balance, the shifting patterns of wealth and the transformation in the expectations and hopes of Asia's many peoples. This vital task may not be front of mind at present but it must become so in the future in Canberra and in capitals across the region.

What does Australia think is needed to keep Asia stable, peaceful and prosperous in the future? From official sources, both private and public, one can discern a number of features on which Australia thinks regional security depends over the longer run. The first is a stable regional balance of power in which Australia is well placed. Specifically, Australia understands this to mean the perpetuation of the long-running circumstances of American regional primacy. The second is a clear and accepted set of 'rules of the road' that is adhered to by all. The great success of the post 1972 period was that no state significantly deviated from the basic rules of the game established by the Sino-American rapprochement. Many feel that China's more assertive turn in its recent regional dealings represents an effort to test those rules and to begin to bend or transform them. Australia is not well-disposed to such change. Third, Australia seeks a region in which there is a broad ranging consensus about the character of the regional order and its underlying purpose. In the past Australia has benefitted from the US-dominated setting because of the acceptance, tacit and begrudging as it often was, of all the key powers. Where there is discontent, contestation is not far away. For a second order power such circumstances are to be avoided. Finally, Australia thinks that security in the region can be improved through an open economic order. Australia believes that the security benefits of economic interdependence are substantive; crucial to regional peace and security is regional prosperity built on a liberal economic order. In short, Australia essentially wants the existing regional setting to remain in place over the longer run.

What is not clear is whether Australia is right to think that these forces will be as security-inducing in the future as they have been in the past. There is certainly some

evidence to suggest that American efforts to retain primacy are likely to create a more contested and less contented region. Also, it is by no means certain that greater prosperity and interdependence will necessarily produce a greater sense of security. Sino-Japanese relations are a disturbing example of how excellent economic relations can have little effect on political and strategic affairs. Indeed, we have seen in the region the ways in which prosperity not only fans nationalist sentiment, it provides material wherewithal to turn this into assertive foreign and defence policy postures. In short, Australia's perspectives of what will suit the region and perceptions of others in the region are not necessarily aligned to the extent to which many imagine. Much clearer thought needs to be paid in Canberra, and elsewhere, as to whether it is right to adopt the somewhat complacent mindset that what has worked in the past will forever produce the security goods in the future.