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Shaping Northeast Asia's Security Dynamics: Charting an East Asian Community

By Marty Natalegawa

SYNOPSIS

Peace and security dynamics in Northeast Asia are entering a crucial phase. Amidst overwhelming tendency towards greater fragmentation, fragile and tentative steps towards positive management of relations between China, Japan and Republic of Korea are evident as illustrated by the 27 May 2024 summit between their leaders. Having initiated the ASEAN Plus Three process, ASEAN has a strong interest in promoting the emergence of regionalism in Northeast Asia.

COMMENTARY

Northeast Asia Security Dynamics: Division and Fragmentation

Northeast Asia's security dynamics matter. Almost without interruption, throughout the decades following the Second World War, Northeast Asia's security dynamics have been one of mutual distrust, animosity, tensions, competition and fragmentation between countries of the sub-region. Even at the best of times, uncertainties prevail – a sub-region sitting on a powder keg, ready to go off at any moment from a deliberate act of aggression or a miscalculation.

An open conflict in Northeast Asia – however constituted at its earliest stages – risks cascading into a catastrophic and unthinkable nuclear war and would seriously impair the economies of China, Japan and Republic of Korea (ROK) whose roles in the health of the global economy are vital.

Indeed, few regions in the world today can surpass the complex security dynamics in Northeast Asia. Here, national, bilateral, trilateral, regional and beyond-the-region negative security dynamics prevail, feeding off each other and resulting in less security for all.

The ever-uncertain conditions in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) spurred on by the idiosyncrasies of its leader, carry a heightened premium as the country has armed itself with nuclear weapons and medium and long-range ballistic missile capabilities. Relations between the two Koreas – vacillating between occasional faint hopes for *rapprochement* and the more common acidic mutual recriminations – weigh heavily on circumspection and restraint as conflict between them risks triggering beyond-the-region alliance commitments.

Japan too has serious security concerns *vis a vis* the DPRK, as the latter's frequent ballistic missile tests are a reminder of. Furthermore, the issue of abduction of Japanese citizens continues to be a source of strain.

Relations between the United States' stalwart allies, Japan and the ROK, despite significant recent improvements, remain difficult under the weight of history and territorial disputes.

Territorial disputes also mark Japan's relations with Russia while challenging China-Japan relations encapsulate practically all the complex facets of the sub-region. Not least, the United States' alliance commitments and interests constitute overarching realities.

Southeast Asia's Security Dynamics: From Trust-deficit to Strategic Trust

Significantly, at one time, such tenuous security conditions also marred the geopolitical landscape of another sub-region of East Asia, namely, Southeast Asia. This sub-region too was once marked by open conflicts – intra Southeast Asia as well as those involving and magnified by extra-regional powers. Tensions and animosity permeated amid the trust-deficit.

Yet, countries of Southeast Asia took ownership of the situation confronting them and actively pursued regional cooperation. Through ASEAN – despite all its shortcomings – any idea or thought of an open conflict between its member states has become unthinkable. Strategic trust developed to bring about a political-security community.

Widening Southeast Asia's Experience

Indeed, at the height of ASEAN cooperation, ASEAN became a *net-contributor* to the wider region's security. As a member state, Indonesia purposefully and deliberately widened ASEAN's security perspective beyond Southeast Asia, to the region's north (Northeast Asia), east (the Pacific) and west (Indian Ocean).

For Jakarta, this security perspective lies behind several ASEAN-led processes such as the ASEAN-Dialogue Partners cooperation, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), all of which have a decidedly extra regional footprint, far predating the now popular term "Indo-Pacific".

These efforts to widen ASEAN's security concerns – and especially to extrapolate Southeast Asia's positive experience to the other sub-regions of East Asia, Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific – were anchored in the belief that peace and security is

indivisible. Ultimately, Southeast Asia's peace, security and prosperity cannot exist in a vacuum, disconnected from the wider neighbouring sub-regions. Jakarta has long believed that peace and stability in Northeast Asia, more than in any other sub-region, is a *sine qua non* for sustained peace and stability in East Asia, running from north to south.

Southeast Asia – Northeast Asia

Indeed, one of the least recognised contributions by ASEAN to East Asia's peace and security was its initiation of the ASEAN+3 process with China, Japan and ROK in December 1997. Thanks to ASEAN, dialogue and cooperation between the three giants of Northeast Asia – independent of ASEAN – tentatively followed.

Given the existing and deeply ingrained issues, it was not surprising that dialogue among the three did not readily take hold and have been fragile and tenuous at best. Stand-alone cooperation among the three have been more the exception rather than the rule, often falling victim to the vagaries of the state of their bilateral ties.

Hence, the importance of the 27 May 2024 trilateral summit in Seoul between Chinese Premier Li Qiang, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol after a four-year hiatus. As countries whose combined economies make up about 25 per cent of the global GDP, the restarting of FTA negotiations between them – building on the existing commitments within the RCEP – cannot be treated lightly.

The three countries chose to tread carefully on political-security matters, they identified more functional areas for cooperation, such as people-to-people exchanges, sustainable development, economic cooperation, public health, science and technology, digital transformation and disaster relief, and agreed to cooperate on these subjects and to meet regularly. However, these commitments cannot be dismissed out of hand as they may help establish the habit of cooperation between the three, even on political-security issues.

Not least, the trilateral summit was significant as it took place within the general climate of geopolitical fragmentation and division, as witnessed by the growth of minilateral and bilateral alignments – such as the US-Japan-ROK trilateral pact, the ever-closer DPRK-Russia and China-Russia ties – that portend a more complex, or even divided Northeast Asia security equation.

ASEAN'S Support

Given the dynamic-changing potential of the recently renewed China-Japan-ROK trilateral process – after all, combined with the ASEAN Community in Southeast Asia and the ASEAN+3 process, this can be viewed as an important pathway to a future East Asian community – the lack of ASEAN collective and public expression of support and encouragement was glaring.

Amid the ever-deepening and widening geopolitical divisions in the region, it is well perhaps for ASEAN to seize on what scant and fragile spirit of cooperative partnership

that emerge; to help shape a negative security dynamic to a positive one and to promote strategic stability in East Asia.

We should demonstrate, much like how Southeast Asia has been shaped through ASEAN, that it is not beyond Northeast Asia to gently begin the process of regional cooperation to widen the ASEAN community to an East Asia community.

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