ASEAN Think Tanks: Facing a Paradigm Shift

By Kwa Chong Guan

SYNOPSIS

The think tanks which focus on the regional security and international relations of ASEAN and the wider Asia Pacific – which formed the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) in 1993 – constitute an epistemic ecosystem which helped put in place a more cooperative security architecture in post-Cold War ASEAN and the wider Asia Pacific. These think tanks now face a paradigm shift as the multilateral cooperative security world they helped construct has crumbled in a series of economic and political crises in the twenty-first century. CSCAP needs to reinvent itself in today's more turbulent, uncertain, and unpredictable world.

COMMENTARY

The leading Southeast Asia strategic studies centres have done much to promote the formation of a regional "cooperative security" architecture in ASEAN after the Cold War. As an "Association of ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Affairs", this group of think tanks reached out to similar think tanks in the Asia Pacific to form a "Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific" in 1993.

This was to widen the conversations about establishing multilateral frameworks and processes for reassurance, and confidence and trust-building to underpin a new era of "cooperative security" for the Asia Pacific. This differs from the European understanding of their regional security as a "collective security" response to the Cold War's "competitive security".

The erosion of the liberal economic order, which underpinned the norms and practice of cooperative security in the Asia Pacific in the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2008 global financial crisis, led the region to emphasise national interests over regional cooperative security priorities.

The 9/11 attacks and their repercussions on transnational terrorist networks in the Asia Pacific, as well as the fallout from the ensuing US intervention in Afghanistan, reinforced the turn to national security concerns. Donald Trump's 2016 election as US president and the UK's Brexit signalled the rise of populism and nationalism and a retreat from global cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the global shift to national concerns.

The world at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century is very different from the post-Cold War world CSCAP was born into and could, with some prediction and confidence, plan for.

Former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's oft-quoted remark that "there are known knowns, things we know that we know; and there are known unknowns, things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns, things we do not know we don't know" sums up the challenge confronting CSCAP and all of us observing the Asia Pacific today.

The world of "known knowns" and "known unknowns" to which we could bring our knowledge to propose practical and actionable policies and best practices to resolve and reduce the "unknowns" has been discomposed.

According to an Oxford University Executive Programme, today we live in a "Turbulent-Uncertain-Novel-Ambiguous" (TUNA) world instead of the more familiar "Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous" (VUCA) world. But either way, our external environment is changing rapidly and unpredictably and is filled with "unknown unknowns", where we understand why things happen only in retrospect.

The challenge for CSCAP is to recognise the predicament of its current paradigm of marshalling the technocratic knowledge of its experts and old hands to recommend solutions to, for example, fix the rules-based order for security cooperation, which has been churned by the tumultuous geopolitical upheavals surging through the region, or to resolve the Myanmar imbroglio.

The problem is not about bringing the technocratic knowledge of CSCAP's old hands to analyse and recommend, for example, some basic rules or principles for some minimal security cooperation in the region. It is more about managing the circulation of knowledge, making sense of it, and understanding what each of us thinks constitutes the most basic rules or principles underlying the international order.

Restated, the "unknown unknowns" of a complex problem, where the precise nature of the problem cannot readily be defined, is not susceptible to linear policy analysis. The priority must be first to probe and make sense of what, for example, constitutes a rules-based order or to define the precise nature of the imbroglio in Myanmar before we can propose any response.

CSCAP, with its ten ASEAN members plus eleven others spanning the Asia Pacific, is well placed to be an epistemic ecosystem for its members to network and share their different sensing of the turbulent geopolitical world we are swirling in. CSCAP needs to be as much a process for sharing current knowledge to understand our TUNA

world as it has been a framework for revising past knowledge to generate actionable policies about issues, as it has done in its policy memorandums.

Further, to the extent that our TUNA world is in large part an outcome of a crisis driven world, from political and diplomatic brinksmanship being practiced in the South China Sea to catastrophic natural disasters, slow-burning fuse crises like water management of the Mekong River, global warming and environmental sustainability, or the long tail consequences of technological and financial failures experienced at the meltdown of the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear reactors and the collapse of Lehman Brothers, respectively, then CSCAP will, one way or another, be caught in crisis management among its member committees.

While CSCAP will not be involved in managing any crisis, it can help its members think about how to manage them. Inasmuch as communications are critical to managing a crisis before it occurs, while it is ongoing, and even after it ends, CSCAP may be obligated to facilitate crisis communication among its members coping with the diverse crises they may be confronting.

Some thirty years ago, CSCAP was set up to help change the regional mindset about security from Cold War competitive security to a cooperative security outlook. CSCAP achieved that transformation by building an epistemic ecosystem about cooperative security.

CSCAP today confronts a paradigm shift, as the cooperative security world it helped to establish is crumbling in an increasingly turbulent and unpredictable crisis-driven world. CSCAP today faces the challenge of socialising the regional mindset to live in a more chaotic world populated not only by improbable, high-impact Black Swan events analysed by Nassim N. Taleb but also probable high-impact Grey Rhino events, which we can see but do nothing about, as Michele Wucker has pointed out.

CSCAP, through its various Study Groups and other meetings, can help its members identify the grey rhinos charging at us and recommend actions to avoid them. CSCAP can also support its members in developing plans to build up resilience to survive unpredictable black swan events. CSCAP interactions can flesh out the characteristics of grey rhinos and prepare its members to encounter black swans, offering early warning for policymakers to be more prepared for crisis management.

Kwa Chong Guan is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Co-Chair of CSCAP Singapore since 1993. He works on a variety of regional security issues at RSIS.