

# **Peace and Security in the Asia-Pacific: A View from Indonesia**

Shafiah Fifi Muhibat

Researcher, Department of International Relations,  
Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Indonesia

## **I. Introduction**

There have been significant changes in the Asia-Pacific since the last decade, including in terms of the interactions among the states and the approaches to security cooperation and regional order. The rise of China and India, the shift of attention of the United States to other parts of the world, and various other imminent security issues have all contributed to these changes in the regional security architecture.

Since the 1980s, the general condition of the region can be characterised as stable and dynamic. Nonetheless, the current changes—particularly those that bring about a new regional order in East Asia—will significantly impact the future of the region. Each state in the region has its own security interest, and how these changes impact them also varies. However, peace and security in the Asia-Pacific is imperative to enable sound development in all states in the region, which is naturally in the interest of all states.

When the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was established in the 1990s, there were high hopes that this forum for security cooperation would bring stability and guarantee peace in the region. The involvement of the major states in the forum was seen as a strong espousal towards the creation of a peaceful and secure Asia-Pacific. However, since entering the new millennium, major changes occurred in the region. While the old threats and challenges remain unsolved, new ones emerged, creating a much more complex regional setting. The great powers in the region may see the new

regional setting as a ground for competition; however, the middle powers are those that are trapped at the midpoint while on tenterhooks that the new setting does not bring about negative impacts for their domestic development.

This paper aims to analyse, from the perspective of Indonesia as a stakeholder in the regional security in the Asia-Pacific, what these changes imply in terms of regional and national security.

## **II. The Role of the United States in the Asia-Pacific**

The Asia-Pacific region has always been vital to U.S. security concerns and vice-versa. For the United States, the quest for a dominant role in the Asia-Pacific goes along with its strategy of hegemony that specifically privileges the United States in the role of principal guarantor of regional order in the Asia-Pacific (Mastanduno 2003). On the other hand, the Asia-Pacific depends on the existence of U.S. presence in the region, which is widely regarded as crucial to regional stability and security. It has been widely understood that the operational security doctrine of ASEAN, and perhaps operable in greater Asia Pacific, “has depended on a supporting pattern of power in which the United States has played the critical balancing point” (Leifer 1996: 15).

Within this decade, however, we have seen a lesser-if not a decline of-attention of the United States in this region, as it has generally shifted towards the Middle East. The decreasing role of the United States was somewhat responded by the regional states with a number of policies that tend to diminish it even more, for example the inception of the East Asian Summit that excludes the United States. All in all, the current policies of the United States towards Asia exhibit neglect. This is of course a worrying trend, as the role of the United States is still an absolute requirement in the Asia-Pacific in the context of maintaining stability and security.

Since 9/11, one sees a Washington that is increasingly preoccupied with the war in Iraq. Iraq is indeed the main priority for U.S. foreign policy,

which puts Asia down on the list (Michael Shiffer quoted in Abdul Khalik 2007). This is unlikely to change, at least until a new administration comes to power. Hence, although most regional states continue to welcome the positive role that the U.S. can play in promoting regional security, some are beginning to hedge against what they perceive as an increasingly distracted and insufficiently engaged American power (Vaughn 2007: 5).

There have been impressions that the United States view ARF as an overly-extended yet underperforming talkshop that does not merit significant bolstering, despite its being the only region-wide security institution that it is included, as expressed by many U.S. officials (Hartcher 1999). With such perception, it has been rather difficult to see greater relevance of the functions of the ARF to the region's security. The existence of ARF continues to lose its relevance to most of its members.

On the other hand, the region also has another forum for cooperation, which is the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). APEC has been one multilateral effort that is still regarded as significant by the U.S. government in recent years, as it is considered "by far the most robust, multilateral grouping in Asia." (Vaughn 2005: 3) Since the early 2000, APEC was driven into involving issues other than economic cooperation (i.e. security issues) in their agenda, mostly driven by the U.S. interest in its war against terrorism. This tendency has invited disapproval from some of the members due to concerns that APEC may lose its original purposes and functions to promote economic cooperation and development in the region. On the other hand, the inclusion of issues of terrorism into APEC's agenda may diminish the relevance of the ARF even more.

The U.S. attempts to mobilise the organisation for security purposes may have been counterproductive, since the hesitance of the United States in its policies towards Asia has led Asian states to consider new arrangements for ensuring security. The Asians, on the other hand, felt the sense of demotion in APEC's utility, particularly after the meeting seemed to have been overshadowed by the December 2005 East Asian Summit (EAS)

meeting in Malaysia. The Asian states have indeed viewed the shift of attention in APEC meetings to discuss security issues as negative. There have been calls to avoid such shift of attention, as Asian governments urged APEC to leave security concerns to ARF and return to its original purpose of promoting economic growth in the Asia-Pacific.

In recent years, the challenge for U.S. policy in Asia has been convincing the states in the region that U.S. would remain engaged although shifting strategic focus to other parts of the world. Ambivalence over Washington's larger role vis-à-vis Asia prevails, as the only U.S. attention in the Asia-Pacific are North Korea and Pakistan. The question is thus how the United States would develop and implement security arrangements in the Asia-Pacific to handle both the ongoing and emerging challenges.

If the decreasing trend of the U.S. role in the region continues, there are concerns that it would negatively impact on the regional stability. It is mostly vital that the presence of the United States in the region remains, to serve at least as a balancing force. The states in the region share interests in security and peaceful development, hence wish for a regional stability guarantee that would support their efforts towards their respective domestic development.

The existence of various frameworks of regional cooperation is a positive development, in the context that they show the eagerness of the states in the region to peacefully work together, including in settling disputes. Those framework that exclude the United States should not be regarded as efforts to eliminate the U.S. presence, or to start rivalry against the role of the United States in the region. Instead, these frameworks of cooperation can provide the means for confidence building measures between the states in the region. In this regard, it must be noted that the role of the United States is still critical in defining the future development of the region. To be able to cope with new strategic developments in the region, movements towards regionalism and regional institutions building could essentially serve to complement the role of the United States, instead of

replacing it.

### **III. The Rise of Regional Powers**

The dominant way of thinking about international relations throughout the Asia Pacific region is in balance-of-power terms (Blair and Hanley 2001: 8). In this regard, major regional powers continue to become rivals, as they seek to balance each other. Efforts to cooperate in a multilateral sense indeed exist, but do not hinder the tendency of rivalry between the regional powers.

Geopolitically, a rising China and India, along side with Japan, are rivalling for power and influence in East Asia, which has thus far been dominated by the presence of the United States. The rise of new regional powers has been of central attention in discussions on the current regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific. The ever increasing role and involvement of China and India is said to impact greatly on many aspects of interaction in the region, in particular economy, politics and security. The aforementioned great powers are dissatisfied with their current international statuses and seek greater roles in regional security. Rivalries exist within the Asia-Pacific, and there are centres of power that tend to compete. There are cases of historical distrust, followed by antagonism, which so far result in the immature habit of regional cooperation.

What is more interesting to further question is the significance of China's growing influence in the region, particularly among its Southeast Asian counterparts, with regards to its age-old U.S. leadership role in the region. As if coincident with the decline in U.S. interest, China has been increasing attention to Southeast Asia. Beijing has moved with keenness to take advantage of the openings that the United States has left in the region. China's attempts to increase its role in the Asia-Pacific could be clearly seen from its move towards Southeast Asia. Chinese policies features economic incentives and goodwill measures, along with a strong diplomatic effort, focusing on building trade relations, encouraging confidence-building measures, and offering development assistance without conditions.

China perceives that multilateralism in East Asia is beneficial towards promoting its regional goals. Consequently, China has been showing strong support for various regional organisations, including the East Asian Summit, and to some extent has assumed a leadership role in ARF. China's vigorous and broad-based engagement with Southeast Asia offers a sharp contrast to the narrow focus of post-9/11 U.S. policy on combating terrorism.

As a result, China's relationship with Southeast Asia has undergone a significant shift. As recently as the 1990s, Beijing was viewed mostly with fear and suspicion. Now the relationship reflects increasing cooperation and growing confidence. All of these changes translate to the shift of the power architecture in East Asia, which impacts more broadly on the Asia-Pacific. Regional states' proximity to China and rapidly expanding trade with China are—when combined with perceptions of American inattention—shifting regional states' perceptions of the long term role of the United States (Vaughn 2007: 5).

Another potential source of instability with regards to the rise of China in the region is the fragile relations between China and Japan, as the relationship was at its lowest (Strategic Developments in Wanandi 2007: 1). Tensions related to historical problems, a sense of rivalry for future leadership of East Asia, and boundary problems in the East China Sea pose serious threat to the bilateral relations between the two countries. The rivalry between China and Japan, particularly in their quest for a greater role in the East Asian region, may create uncertainties in terms of how they would react to each other's policies. More interestingly, the rivalry has changed the pattern of the great power relations in the region. The triangular relation between the U.S., China, and Japan is viewed varyingly by the three states.

As for India, it is simultaneously emerging as a great power whose profile globally and in East Asia is on the rise. India clearly has moved onto the central stage; however, the nagging issue of the U.S.-India nuclear energy deal prevails and trade issues stand to move into the spot light as the

U.S. election draws closer.

With the rise of these regional powers, new approaches to regional security must be done. The fundamental security challenge in the region in this context is then to transform the balance-of-power approach into an approach of closer cooperation between the major powers. Instead of rivalling for greater power, it would be preferable if the relationship between the major powers could be transformed into a web of regional relationships and capabilities that reinforce security for individual states and developing habits of regional cooperation.<sup>1</sup>

It is still difficult to foretell the nature of the emerging regional order in the complex architecture of the Asia-Pacific with the simultaneous rise and strength of so many great powers at one time. It must be noted that each of the emerging powers face potential self-limiting factors, while at the same time the other countries in the region, mostly middle power states, are effectively spectators in this game. Hence, how to successfully manage their co-existence remains a question.

As such, it is in the interest of the middle power states in the region that all regional states create an order that ensures peace and prosperity. As these middle powers concentrate on their respective domestic development, the rise of these big powers are both a concern and a positive sign of regional development. An optimistic view may be more of a benefit of these states, while hoping that the security architecture in the region does not let them down.

#### **IV. Imminent Security Issues**

Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula will remain as significant security issues in the region. For one, developments in Taiwan are continuously unpredictable. Domestic political development facing the coming election creates a somewhat uncertain ambiance, particularly regarding Taiwan's next move in dealing with China.

---

<sup>1</sup> For more elaboration on this see Blair and Henley (2001).

Interaction between China and Taiwan is expanding rapidly, as direct connections through transportation and tourism have been growing. However, the fact that there has not been any direct talk between the two parties could result in great tensions. Indeed, the Taiwan issue is not just a problem of China, or the U.S. with regards to its role in East Asia. Taiwan has been a key factor shaping China's overall foreign policy and the China's internal political development, which affects the future of China, East Asia, and the Asia-Pacific.

At present, the political situation across the Strait makes the prospects for negotiating military confidence building measures look bleak, but unilateral and bilateral steps could be taken to reduce the possibility of miscalculation and begin the process of trust building (Glaser 2007). Beijing's political rivalry with Taipei should stimulate, rather than stifle, China's democratisation, as Chinese nationalism could become a powerful driving force to constrain the rising Chinese power and reorient it toward democracy and peace (Wang 2007). In this regard, it would serve both's interest if Taiwan could act as a catalyst for China, because only with a democratic, free, and peaceful China can Taiwan story securely continue (Wang 2007).

Moreover, the cross-Strait relation also complicates that balance of power situation in the region. Any changes in the status quo of the Taiwan issue would likely draw both the U.S. and Japan into a confrontation with China. Firstly, the U.S. remains committed to the defence of Taiwan, and would likely remain to be so. Secondly, the bilateral security alliance between Tokyo and Washington also drags Japan into the clash. In other words, either a declaration of independence by Taiwan or a military takeover by China over Taiwan would result in a similar fashion, which would be a great shock to regional stability.

In the same manner, the problem of nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula is still a potential flash point in the Asia-Pacific. The development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles by North Korea not only poses a



serious threat to peace and security in the region, but also raises vital issues from the standpoint of the regional effort of the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The 2006 North Korea nuclear test served as North Korea's bargaining chip in its nuclear diplomacy. It has to be admitted, though, that the resumption of the Six-Party Talk and its recent positive results point to the possibility of the establishment of a new grouping that also takes up concerns other than nuclear issue in the area at stake. The official document titled "Initial Actions for the Implementation of the September 19 Joint Statement" was saluted as a momentous breakthrough for the diplomatic resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. The document lays out the initial concrete measures for the implementation of the September 2005 accord pledged to dismantle North Korea's entire nuclear programme. The latest document was released on October 3, 2007, which is a joint statement by the Six-Party Talks participants, which provided another measure to capping North Korea's nuclear weapons inventory.

However, seeing past experiences, the implementation of these agreements has been difficult. It always largely depends on whether Pyongyang is willing under any circumstance to give up its nuclear weapons capability. The reality is, the current domestic political situation in North Korea does not signal any possibility that North Korea would do so, as the government needs the military to control and sustain the regime while at the same time the military is believed to have been backing up the nuclear programme (Lee 2007). This has repeatedly hindered efforts to implement past agreements.

Moreover, the United States and North Korea seem to have a totally different definition of the concept of denuclearisation. As the U.S. tries to solve the problem as soon as possible with their comprehensive and swift approach, North Korea will do its best to drag out the process by opting for a gradual approach (Lee 2007). Hence, the future of the Korean issue is still a big question mark.

A stable and non-nuclear Korean Peninsula is the desired outcome of these efforts. Several strategies must be pursued simultaneously to ensure any prospect of success. The emphasis must be put on the improvement of the relation between North and South while advancing multilateral efforts to resolve the nuclear issue. Multilateral efforts are important in the approach to keep all parties involved in a positive manner.

Seeing the current developments of these two issues, it will be most challenging to analyse how the shift in the U.S. involvement in the region and the rise of new regional powers will contribute to the settlement of both Taiwan and Korean issues. Nonetheless, both issues must be separated from the great power rivalry in the region.

## **V. Indonesia's Security Interests**

As Southeast Asian states are dominantly developing countries, regional stability is the main factor that enables the states to concentrate on domestic development. Hence, all states rely on the major powers to establish regional governance that provide security and peace in the Asia-Pacific. This is the main expectation of Indonesia as a middle power and a stakeholder in the region in viewing the regional security.

The presence of the United States is indeed significant to provide stability guarantee. Indonesia is an obvious beneficiary of a deeper engagement of the United States in the region. However, it must be admitted that it is difficult to envisage any substantial change in the U.S. policies toward Asia, at least until a new administration comes to power. Only then can Asia probably become more of a focus for the United States.

The following are a few points that describe Indonesia's interests with regards to the current changes and development in the region. Firstly, the rise of new regional powers has resulted in a sort of competition for greater role and influence in the region. To prevent the building of coalitions against each other, or even the perception of that, there is a necessity to cease programmes of reinforcing defence alliance and security arrangements that

support such perception. It would greatly benefit the other regional states and the region as a whole if the competition could be transformed into constructive initiatives by the competing powers to enhance the regional security. Competition should instead be built around the elements of diplomacy, economic cooperation and development assistance.

Secondly, it is in Indonesia's interests that the status quo in the cross-Straits relations between China and Taiwan prevails. As has been explained earlier, either a declaration of independence by Taiwan or a military takeover by China over Taiwan would result in a similar fashion, which is a great shock to the regional stability.

Thirdly, it is also in Indonesia's interests that the multilateral efforts are maintained and promoted to resolve the problems in the Korean Peninsula, which at the end is expected to end with a positive outcome: a stable and non-nuclear Korean Peninsula. In this regard, it only seems plausible that the major powers continue their involvement in the issue, and use their influence to bring about stability in the region.

Fourthly, Indonesia views that the current frameworks of regional cooperation can still benefit the region in a greater way. Hence, there is a need to further develop and fully utilise such cooperation to eliminate major power rivalry and stimulate collective action among all members of the region.

## **VI. Conclusion**

An optimistic viewpoint of the region suggests that all the problems mentioned in this paper will one way or the other be solved in the future because there are mechanisms within the Asia-Pacific region that provide a capability to do so. Nonetheless, the shift of focus of the United States from Asia, the rise of regional powers, and other imminent security issues would bring about strategic implications for major powers relations in the Asia-Pacific, especially in the patterns of balance of power among them.

As the region goes through this transition, these changes could lead to

the emergence of unprecedented challenges to the region. As difficult as it is to predict what the transition period would result in, it is the hope of the middle powers in the region that stability and peace in the region remains intact.

## References

- Abdul Khalik. 2007. United States Told to Step up Its Engagement in Southeast Asia. *The Jakarta Post*, March 9.
- Blair, Dennis C. and John T. Hanley, Jr. 2001. From Wheels to Webs: Reconstructing Asia-Pacific Security Arrangements. *The Washington Quarterly*, 24(1): 7-17.
- Glaser, Bonnie S. 2007. Whither Taiwan and Cross-Strait Relations in 2007? *PacNet Newsletter*, No. 2. <http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/pac0702.pdf>
- Hartcher, Peter. 1999. Who Will Keep the Peace in Asia When the US Leaves. *Australian Financial Review*, September 11: 19.
- Lee, Seo-Hang. 2007. The Korean Peninsula: Sustaining Momentum after the February 13, 2007 Six-Party Agreement. Paper presented at the 21st Asia-Pacific Roundtable, Kuala Lumpur, June 5-7.
- Leifer, Michael. 1996. *The ASEAN Regional Forum: Extending ASEAN's Model of Regional Security (Adelphi Paper 302)*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Mastanduno, Michael. 2003. Incomplete Hegemony: The United States and Security Order in Asia. Pp. 141-156 in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Vaughn, Bruce. 2005. East Asian Summit: Issues for Congress (CRS Report for Congress, December 9). <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/58236.pdf>

- \_\_\_\_\_. 2007. U.S. Strategic and Defense Relationships in the Asia-Pacific Region (CRC Report for Congress, January 22). <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33821.pdf>
- Wanandi, Jusuf. 2007. Strategic Developments in the Asia Pacific and Their Impact on Future Economic Dynamism of the Region. In Jun Tsunekawa, ed., *Regional Order in East Asia: ASEAN and Japan Perspective*. Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies.
- Wang, Fei-Ling. 2007. Taiwan: A Key to China's Rise and Transformation. Foreign Policy in Focus (FPiF) Commentary, December 21. <http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/3817>