

An Orderly, Pacific Asia— Or Asia-Pacific Powder Keg?

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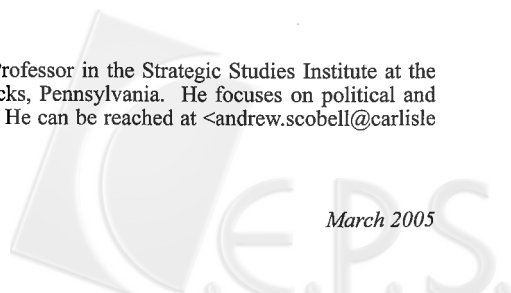
Muthiah Alagappa's edited volume, *Asian Security Order*, is an extremely impressive effort at a comprehensive study of the region. It represents a coherent, authoritative, and theoretically informed treatment by leading specialists. Nevertheless, I quibble with the contributors' conception of geography, framework of analysis, appraisal of the existing security environment, and forecast of future change. These four differences are addressed below.

Asia or Asia-Pacific?

The editor and contributors have chosen to use the term "Asia" in lieu of "Asia-Pacific" (pp. xii-xiii, 25-27). This former conception excludes countries beyond the Asian continent and relegates the United States to the periphery. While "[t]he United States is not an Asian power" (Alagappa, p. 27), it clearly is an Asia-Pacific power. What the contributors have thus done is to define the United States as an outsider. Moreover, while not denying the reality of U.S. hegemony, and recognizing the key role that the United States plays in providing stability in the region, the volume tends to downplay the significance and durability of Washington's influence and interests.

Conceptual clarity and definitional specificity are necessary for rigorous argumentation. Fortright confessions and explicit assumptions are also important. Alagappa confesses that Sino-centrism was a key con-

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tributing factor behind the decision to adopt the geographic concept of "Asia" instead of "Asia-Pacific" (pp. 25-27). I confess that my own outlook is colored by my geographic location (being in the Washington, D.C. orbit), professional responsibilities, and policy orientation (as a faculty member at the U.S. Army War College). Certainly, as Avery Goldstein observes in his chapter on balance of power, in terms of geography and other dimensions, the United States is somewhat removed from the Asian landmass (p. 181). The United States is, however, the dominant sea power—and one of the perils in using the term "Asia" is that the focus can tend to be continental while the maritime dimension can receive short shrift. This volume seeks to avoid this pitfall by including a solid chapter on maritime security (written by Jean-Marc Blanchard).

The irony is that Asia is an artificial construct to begin with—a concept that did not exist until invented by the Europeans. Furthermore, the precise boundaries of Asia are fuzzy and vague. Where, for example, does Asia end and Europe begin? In addition, while concepts and parameters need to be defined, the danger of such a geographical frame of reference is that it can obscure the fact that the Asian continent is very much embedded in the larger world. The forces of globalization have increasingly enmeshed the continent into a world system in which disentangling Asia from the Pacific is virtually impossible. This point becomes evident when one reads Brian Job's contribution on Track II diplomacy and Ming Wan's chapter on economic interdependence, because both authors repeatedly use the term "Asia-Pacific."

Ordered States or Pivotal States?

The contributors to this volume use the conceptual framework of "security order." They define Asian Security Order in the following statement: "interaction among Asian states is, for the most part, rule-governed...." (Alagappa, p. 17). However, rather than attribute this to "normative-contractual" factors (pp. 17, ff.), I would suggest that this interaction is primarily "instrumental," especially for the critical country of China. If "instrumentalism" holds sway, then, as Alagappa notes: "National identity, power, and interests are the dominant considerations" (p. 41). Certainly

this seems true in the case of China. I have written elsewhere about the importance of strategic culture to Chinese political and military elites.¹ The deeply held image of a distinctive and uniquely Chinese strategic tradition influences how the country's leaders conceive China's identity, understand power, and define China's interests. Chinese leaders, I argue, firmly believe that they possess an idealist strategic culture, but this outlook tends to manifest itself in Realpolitik terms.

Again, I must confess my U.S. policy-oriented perspective. From where I sit, an alternate conception for approaching regional security—viewing the regional landscape in terms of "pivotal states"—seems most useful. Building on the work of Robert Chase, Emily Hill, and Paul Kennedy,² I would argue for the need to recognize that some states are clearly much more important than others. There are certain states in each region or sub-region of the world that are pivotal for security and stability. These can be divided into what I call either "linchpin" or "powder keg" states. The former consist of established and staunch democracies while the latter consist of "volatile countries upon which the stability of the region or sub-region hinge."³ Linchpin states include South Korea, Japan, and Australia, which tend to be favorably disposed toward the United States; powder keg states include North Korea, Indonesia, and Pakistan—many of which tend to be suspicious of, if not ambivalent about, the United States.

The most important country is China: its geographic location and size means that what happens there will affect the entire Asia-Pacific. Perhaps the most pressing question is whether China will turn out to be a linchpin or powder keg state. China can certainly turn out to be a force for positive change and stability in the Asia-Pacific—if Beijing remains engaged, as

¹Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²Robert Chase, Emily Hill, and Paul Kennedy, *The Pivotal States: A New Framework for U.S. Policy in the Developing World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

³Andrew Scobell, *U.S. Army and the Asia-Pacific* (Carlisle Barracks, Penn.: U.S. Army War College, 2001), 19.

Chinese are fond of saying, in a "peaceful rise." Yet Beijing might also turn out to be a powder keg. China can disrupt the region, for instance, by growing strong but not in a peaceable manner. If beset by internal problems that spiral out of control, moreover, a weakened China could also destabilize the entire region (Swamy and Gershman, p. 509). Since the United States has limited resources and a shortish attention span, Washington ought to place policy priority on the powder keg states.

Pacific Asia or the Most Dangerous Place?

The contributors present an overall upbeat view of Asia's security environment. Certainly they provide evidence for this interpretation; given the host of real challenges, however, the tone seems excessively optimistic. Transnational challenges—such as ethnic conflict, terrorism, crime, AIDS, SARS, and pollution—seem daunting. The contributors to this volume do not deny the existence of such problems or the severity of the security challenges; rather, they simply choose to accentuate the positive. Alagappa contends that the book tackles a "puzzle": "The existence [in the region] of stability and predictability despite serious security challenges..." (p. x). While one could grudgingly agree that at least superficially the region's security environment can be characterized as "stable" (p. xi, ff), this stability does seem fragile.

Proliferation presents a particular challenge, especially nuclear proliferation. According to Paul Bracken, the world has entered the "Second Nuclear Age," the epicenter of which is the Asia-Pacific. Whatever date one selects—1964 (China's first nuclear test), 1974 (India's first "peaceful" nuclear test), or 1998 (the series of nuclear tests by India and Pakistan), the region is certainly front and center.⁴ Moreover, the world's emerging nuclear powers—North Korea and Iran—both reside in the Asia-Pacific neighborhood. For a number of reasons, the Second Nuclear Age provides much greater cause for alarm than the first. The nuclear balance is no

⁴Paul Bracken, *Fire in the East: The Rise of Asian Military Power and the Second Nuclear Age* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999); and Paul Bracken, "The Structure of the Second Nuclear Age," *Orbis* 47 (Summer 2003): 400-401.

longer simply bipolar, Bracken observes, and the calculations for nuclear states are more complex because it is an "n-player game."⁵

Then there are what *Asian Security Order* contributors define as the "persistence of acute identity conflicts" (p. 101), otherwise known as "flashpoints." These conflicts are the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, and the Vale of Kashmir. Any one of these flashpoints can lay claim to be the world's most dangerous place.⁶ It is misleading to dub these flashpoints "acute," however, since this word implies a great sense of urgency. In fact, these conflicts, which fluctuate in intensity, are enduring; it seems more appropriate to label them "chronic." These conflicts appear to defy resolution. They persist over extended periods of time as tensions repeatedly escalate and deescalate—each flashpoint is marred by serial wars or crises.⁷ Admittedly, there has been no "major war" since 1979 (p. x). However, although the 1999 Kargil conflict may not constitute a "full-scale war" in Alagappa's eyes (p. 3), the label of war is appropriate if one applies the standard definition of one thousand casualties.⁸ Moreover, it is true that in recent decades "the use of force has been limited and in the main confined to coercive diplomacy and noncritical areas" (p. 22). However, as Michael Mastanduno observes in his chapter: "Although neither side expected full-scale war, the potential for these two nuclear powers [India and Pakistan] to stumble into one was not insignificant" (p. 155). Any crises in South Asia, the Taiwan Strait, or Korean Peninsula could through either misperception or blunder escalate into war. As Alagappa astutely observes, while stability is a common desire, "countries differ on what constitutes [this] stability" (p. 86).

⁵Bracken, "The Structure of the Second Nuclear Age," 403-5.

⁶Andrew Scobell, "Flashpoint Asia: The Most Dangerous Place?" *Parameters* 21 (Summer 2001): 129-33.

⁷On India-Pakistan, for example, see Sumit Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions Since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press/Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center, 2001).

⁸See S. Paul Kapur, "The Kargil Conflict and Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia" (Paper presented at the conference on "South Asia's Nuclear Future," held at Stanford University, June 3-5, 2004).

Change: Gradual or Rapid?

Though often tumultuous and/or rapid, change in the Asia-Pacific can be smooth or gradual. Transformations tend to alternate between smooth and tumultuous, rapid and gradual. Can Asian security order, in the words of T.V. Paul and John Hall, "accommodate change without violence" (Mastanduno, p. 142)? While I am cautiously optimistic in the long run, there is likely to be turmoil along the way. Forecasting that the "present security order is likely to persist for another decade or two and possibly longer" (Alagappa, p. 22), seems overly confident. The adjectives used to describe likely change by the contributors are "predictable" and "gradual." Both words seem far too hopeful. First of all, unforeseen events will inevitably surprise us: hopefully there will be pleasant ones but invariably there will be some of the unpleasant variety. Moreover, unexpected but agreeable changes can have tumultuous impact—as could the unification of Korea, for example, even if it should occur peacefully. Changes happen quickly: wars break out suddenly and progress quickly with rapid reverses (e.g., Korea in 1950), and countries disintegrate and regimes unravel with lightening speed (e.g., the Soviet Union).

Three key upcoming changes are likely, involving the nature and scope of the U.S. role, adjustments in the region's security architecture, and the dissipation of existing threats and the emergence of new ones. In terms of the first, the U.S. role seems destined to weaken gradually over the long term as the roles played by such states as India and China increase. The United States is a significant force in the Asia-Pacific, however, and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. Inevitably the U.S. role will decline somewhat as other states in the region become more powerful. Nevertheless, the smaller countries of the region will seek U.S. involvement to balance against the influence of larger powers like China and India. A key problem will be sustaining U.S. interest in the region. Indeed, Washington often seems to suffer from a form of attention deficit disorder and often has great difficulty remaining focused and engaged in any country or region for much longer than a few weeks, months, or—at most—years. As Michael Mastanduno notes: an important "challenge" is "to maintain domestic support for political and economic strategies to sustain [U.S.]

hegemony [in the Asia-Pacific]" (p. 161).

The second change under way is a gradual shift from bilateral to multilateral emphasis and from military alliances to security communities. The current security architecture is dominated by U.S. bilateral alliances, but multilateral cooperative security organizations have a firm foothold in some regions and are emerging in others. The ASEAN Regional Forum has become a significant fixture in East Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has developed as a noteworthy entity in Central Asia, and the Six-Party Talks have the potential to evolve from a narrow focus on North Korea to a larger multilateral mechanism for addressing Northeast Asian security. Bilateral relationships will remain important and alliances will continue to be significant: the security relationships between Washington and Tokyo, between Washington and Seoul, and between Washington and Canberra are likely to endure for the foreseeable future.

Third, existing security threats will subside and new threats will emerge. It is very possible that North Korea will implode within the next quarter century and that the peninsula will unify. It is also conceivable that tension across the Taiwan Strait will make substantial progress toward resolving itself over the same period of time. This is not to say that one or more of these flashpoints might not erupt. Careful management should, however, ensure that escalation is averted. New, unanticipated threats are also likely to emerge and Asia-Pacific countries will scramble to deal with them as best they can.
