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China's Revisionist Nuclear Policies: Challenges for ROK-US Security Cooperation

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Abstract

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is increasing and diversifying its nuclear arsenal while rejecting legally binding verified constraints on its buildup. If Beijing continues to combine expansion and opacity, prospects for further comprehensive nuclear arms control are dim. China's nuclear buildup is also undermining the foundations of regional deterrence, especially in Asia, by amplifying questions about US extended security guarantees. In particular, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and other countries have become more interested in acquiring enhanced US security assurances, national nuclear deterrents, and other strategic options. Beijing's cooperation with Western countries on horizontal proliferation issues, such as the North Korean nuclear file, has also been declining, while its ties with another revisionist nuclear power, Russia, have compounded these problems. Chinese and Russian diplomats have colluded against US and ROK efforts to reign in Pyongyang's destabilizing nuclear and missile programs. These extended deterrence challenges have elevated South Koreans' interest in acquiring an independent nuclear force, which would be undesirable from the perspective of promoting a stronger rules-based international order. Achieving the goal of minimizing the growth of PRC nuclear capabilities while maximizing Chinese nuclear transparency will probably require offering China incentives in other areas. South Korea and the United States will also need to take additional steps to maintain the vitality of nonproliferation regimes, strategic stability, and their combined defenses.

Keywords: nuclear weapons, deterrence, China, alliances, arms control

Introduction

In selecting his hometown of Hiroshima as the site of the annual Group of Seven (G7) summit in May 2023, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida realized his goal of focusing international attention on nuclear weapons issues. For the first time at a G7 summit, the leaders of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union issued a separate statement on nuclear issues. Their “G7 Leaders’ Hiroshima Vision on Nuclear Disarmament” affirmed the goal of attaining “a world without nuclear weapons,” provided no state’s security would be diminished in the process and was “achieved through a realistic, pragmatic and responsible approach.” As in the past, these Western leaders denounced Moscow’s “irresponsible nuclear rhetoric” throughout the war in Ukraine along with its “undermining of arms control regimes,” including suspending the implementation of the Russian-US New START Treaty and actions contravening the “Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races” adopted at the January 2022 Group of Twenty (G20) summit in Bali. More unusually, they also explicitly warned of “China’s accelerating build-up of its nuclear arsenal without transparency nor meaningful dialogue,” which the G7 governments said “poses a concern to global and regional stability.” They called on China to share data about the size of its nuclear arsenal and join other countries in “declar[ing] and maintain[ing] voluntary moratoria on the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons” (The White House 2023a).

The G7’s atypical focus on Chinese nuclear issues this year is understandable. The revisionist nuclear policies of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) are eroding core pillars of nuclear nonproliferation and global security. The PRC is increasing and diversifying its nuclear arsenal while rejecting legally binding verified constraints on its buildup, fueling a vertical nuclear arms race. PRC leaders have yet to explain the reasons behind their nuclear buildup—or its endpoint. If Beijing continues to combine nuclear expansion and opacity, prospects for further comprehensive

arms control are dim. China's buildup is also undermining the foundations of regional deterrence, especially in Northeast Asia, by calling into further question US extended security guarantees. In particular, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and other countries have become more interested in acquiring enhanced US security guarantees, national nuclear deterrents, and other strategic options. Chinese actions have also furthered the proliferation of nuclear capabilities to other countries. Beijing's cooperation with Western countries on horizontal proliferation issues, such as the North Korean nuclear file, has also been declining. PRC diplomats have resisted US and ROK demands to pressure Pyongyang into reigning in its destabilizing nuclear and missile programs. South Korea and the United States will need to take important steps to maintain the vitality of nonproliferation regimes, strategic stability, and their combined defense capabilities despite China's revisionist nuclear policies.

This article first discusses the massive scale of China's projected nuclear buildup and its adverse implications for regional and global security. The second section focuses on the negative dynamics Chinese nuclear policies are having on the North Korea nuclear problem. The next part assesses how the growing ties between China and Russia are worsening regional security dynamics. Additional implications for the ROK-US alliance are then discussed. The concluding section offers recommendations for how the United States and South Korea can best manage these challenges.

China's Nuclear Buildup

The next decade could see the People's Liberation Army (PLA) achieve rough equivalence with Russia and the United States in terms of deployed nuclear capacity. At the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, China possessed an estimated 20 long-range missiles, with approximately 200 nuclear warheads, sufficient for a limited strike against a handful of strategic targets in North America. Today, the PLA has around twice as

many warheads, elevating China's nuclear stockpile well above the estimated number fielded by Britain, France, India, Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea. Only Russia and the United States have larger quantities of warheads and land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) (Kristensen et al. 2023). The New START agreement prohibits both countries from substantially increasing these totals, whereas China, as it is not party to any strategic arms reduction treaty, is, in international legal terms, unrestricted in sizing its nuclear arsenal.

Indeed, the PRC looks to be realizing longstanding expectations that it would someday “sprint to parity” with the United States (and Russia) in terms of nuclear weapons (Costlow 2023; Geller 2023). The PLA is constructing three new massive missile silo fields deep within China's interior (Kristensen and Korda 2012). If Beijing seeks to maximize its nuclear capabilities against the United States, it could station up to 300 ICBMs, each carrying several warheads, in these fields alone, while keeping its existing arsenal of missiles in deeply buried silos or on protected road-mobile vehicles in other parts of China. Even if many of these silos are left empty as the missiles shuttle between them, the number of potential targets for US and allied planners would increase enormously from today's levels. The US Department of Defense projects that the PLA could field some 1,500 deliverable nuclear warheads on these and other missiles by 2035 (US Department of Defense 2022, 94). Meanwhile, China's ICBMs and other long-range missiles are becoming increasingly capable, due to upgraded propulsion, guidance, stealth, and penetration technologies. In a few more years, China is likely to possess more nuclear-capable hypersonic glide vehicles—an area where the PLA has advanced faster than the Pentagon (Bipindra 2023). These missile-launched glide vehicles can maneuver as they fly through the upper atmosphere, making their trajectories more unpredictable and these targets substantially more difficult to intercept (Vergun 2023a).

To supplement these ground-based missiles, the PLA Navy (PLAN) fields several second-generation Jin-class Type 094 and 094A nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), with intercontinental-range

Julang-2 and Julang-3 (“Big Wave”) submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) (The Korea Times 2021). The PLAN is also continuing work on its more advanced third-generation Type 096 SSBN (Funaiolo, Bermudez Jr., and Hart 2021). Additionally, the PLA Air Force is developing more advanced long-range strategic bombers, including upgraded H-6N planes with nuclear-armed air-launched ballistic missiles (Allen 2023). Due to the PLA’s increasing ability to support long-range command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities with space satellites and other sensors, China could soon attain a prompt global strike capacity that, until now, only the United States has possessed due to the Pentagon’s worldwide network of military bases and forces. Augmented by China’s powerful conventional, cyber, counterspace, and other capabilities, it is understandable that many experts believe the world will eventually enter an unprecedented era of three great nuclear powers (Litwak 2023).

Chinese leaders refuse to discuss the reasons behind their buildup, how large it will become, what factors could influence its progression, and how it will be postured. This buildup breaks with decades of PRC practice whereby Beijing seemed content with a minimum nuclear deterrent, sufficient to prevent adversaries from calculating that they could attack China without suffering unacceptable destruction in return. Both military and political considerations could be driving the buildup. PLA analysts may assess that past and potential improvements in US missile defense and conventional precision systems, Beijing’s deteriorating relationships with Western countries, the PLA’s requirement to deter foreign military intervention in a near-term regional conflict, aspirations to undermine the credibility of US extended security guarantees to Asian allies and partners, and a desire (as stated by President Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders) to solidify the PRC’s status as a great military power in the future require a stronger PLA nuclear arsenal (Xuanzun 2022). The PRC is likely considering how to utilize nuclear capabilities to deter and, if necessary, defeat the United States and its allies in battle, elevate China’s global status, and enhance Beijing’s leverage for extracting Western concessions

on other issues. In other words, Chinese leaders may calculate that possessing the world's most powerful nuclear arsenal would provide their regime with the most reliable security against possible external threats.

Regardless of the reasons behind China's nuclear buildup, its adverse impact on international and regional security could prove substantial. In particular, the rapid and unconstrained enhancement of the PLA's nuclear forces will negatively affect strategic predictability, decrease crisis stability, and weaken restraints on nuclear proliferation. For instance, PRC leaders may believe that their growing nuclear capabilities could provide a more secure shield behind which to threaten and coerce US allies and partners in Asia, calculating that brandishing the PLA's nuclear forces would deter US military intervention on their behalf. PRC policymakers may hope that such a situation could induce Asian nations to doubt US pledges to protect them and conclude they had to accommodate Beijing's regional hegemony.

The Chinese government has proven to be a challenging arms control partner. Instead of joining international negotiations and treaties or addressing the reasons and planned magnitude of the PLA's nuclear buildup, PRC representatives highlight their support for universalizing China's "no-first-use" declaratory policy, ending nuclear-sharing arrangements and the stationing of nuclear weapons in foreign countries, and pursuing a gradual "step-by-step approach to advance nuclear disarmament process" (Geng 2023). They also insist that, "[c]ountries with the largest nuclear arsenals [i.e., the United States and Russia] must continue to fulfill their special and primary responsibilities for nuclear disarmament, effectively implement the New START Treaty, and further significantly and substantially reduce their nuclear arsenals in a verifiable, irreversible and legally binding manner." Conversely, "[r]equiring countries with vast difference in nuclear strategies, nuclear policies and numbers of nuclear weapons [i.e., China] to undertake the same nuclear disarmament obligations is against the historical and realistic logic, and will surely lead the international nuclear disarmament process to a dead end" (Li 2023).

PRC diplomats have occasionally and partially engaged with some US-led initiatives, such as Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament and the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification, which assess and highlight the complex challenges associated with eliminating all nuclear weapons. But they have also expressed skepticism about engaging in more comprehensive strategic arms control verification with the United States, fearing that Washington could exploit such measures to uncover PLA military secrets (Zhao 2022). In assessing whether to participate in potential verification arrangements, Chinese experts likely calculate that they can reject such opportunities while still benefitting from the more open defense information environments of Western countries. In contrast to China's opacity, Western democracies make substantial public data available on their military policies, programs, and expenditures. Engaging with Chinese experts or NGOs on arms control on other issues has also become increasingly difficult due to tightening PRC restrictions on their foreign activities.

Proliferation Problems

Chinese exertions to keep North Korea and other countries from pursuing nuclear weapons have waned in recent years. Only a decade ago, the Chinese government supported multiple mandatory United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions against Pyongyang in response to North Korea's research, development, and testing of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. PRC policymakers have reasons to oppose North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons: a general aversion to nuclear proliferation, an effort to demonstrate Beijing's credentials as a responsible stakeholder, and a stratagem to keep the United States and its allies from adopting sanctions or military measures outside of the framework of the UNSC. Chinese officials continue to publicly express opposition to North Korea obtaining nuclear weapons and refuse to recognize the country as a legitimate, or even de facto, nuclear weapons state.

In recent years, however, China, South Korea, and the United States have proved unable to separate the North Korean nuclear question from their growing disagreements over other issues. The PRC no longer supports the application of additional proliferation-related sanctions on North Korea despite Pyongyang's numerous violations of UNSC resolutions, which Beijing previously backed, meant to prohibit such missile and nuclear activities. Using Beijing's UN veto and other tools, PRC diplomats shield the DPRK regime against sanctions and other coercive actions that they describe as counterproductive. PRC representatives also accuse ROK-US military exercises and other regional military measures of exacerbating Pyongyang's feeling of alienation and intransigent behavior. Chinese officials instead favor a measure-for-measure process in which Western countries offer Pyongyang sanctions relief, diplomatic outreach, and security assurances (including a reduced US military presence in South Korea) in return for North Korean concessions on its nuclear and missile programs. Such a cooperative framework conforms to the stated Chinese preference for so-called "win-win" solutions to multilateral security challenges. Even so, the ROK, US, and Japanese governments have demonstrated little enthusiasm for restarting these talks or providing substantial sanctions relief to North Korea until Pyongyang meets its nonproliferation obligations. Additionally, reports of PRC entities circumventing North Korean sanctions have increased, with Chinese actors allegedly engaging in illicit commercial exchanges with North Korean entities (Nakashima, Cadell, and Sijabat 2023). Whether due to lax sanctions enforcement or deliberate covert collusion, these activities provide Pyongyang with monetary and other benefits to advance its nuclear program. Conversely, the Chinese government applied an extensive array of diplomatic threats and sanctions to deter South Korea from deploying the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile defense system (BMD) on the Korean Peninsula. The PRC organized consumer boycotts of South Korean products, limited tourist and cultural exchanges with South Korea, and increased paramilitary incursions into South Korean waters. While this pressure succeeded in

temporarily delaying the deployment of the THAAD system, Beijing's actions ultimately backfired (Mitchum 2021). The PRC gave the impression of trying to control South Korea's defense decisions and weaken the ROK-US alliance by leveraging Chinese-South Korean economic and security issues. The ROK government is currently strengthening defense ties with Washington and expanding its missile defense capabilities.

As China's ties with Pyongyang have improved and those with the United States and its allies have deteriorated, PRC policymakers seem to increasingly value North Korea as a strategic buffer and security distraction for the United States, Japan, and South Korea (Snyder and Byun 2023). An unspoken Chinese presumption is that punitive measures against the DPRK may prompt regime change, which in turn would harm China's regional economic and security interests due to a new, post-Kim regime in Pyongyang, or a unified Korean state that would likely choose to distance itself from Beijing and align with Washington. Furthermore, Pyongyang's provocations make Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo rely more on Beijing to restrain the North. China can exploit this negotiating leverage to extract concessions regarding Korean and other issues.

Sino-Russian Proliferation Partnership

The current leaders of Russia share their PRC counterparts' ambition of displacing the existing international order, whose rules, norms, principles, and institutions, in their view, fail to recognize their status and national interests. Their leaderships' shared security concerns, converging global perceptions, and harmonious expansionist ambitions have placed them in direct opposition to the rules-based international order supported by the United States and South Korea. Russian and Chinese leaders share a common worldview fueled by perceived Western betrayal, believing that the United States and its allies exploited their weaknesses to establish an exclusionary world order favoring the West. Moscow and Beijing view

nuclear capabilities and threats as critical instruments in challenging the pillars of this world order (i.e., the US alliance network). Making nuclear threats exploits allies' fears of both entrapment (e.g., Washington's drawing these allies into conflicts) and abandonment (e.g., Washington's not defending these allies in a crisis) (Snyder 1984).

The Russian government has increasingly tolerated, and in some cases abetted, the PRC's nuclear revisionism. A few years ago, Moscow dropped earlier demands that China, along with other nuclear-weapon states, participate in future strategic arms reduction talks. Instead, Russian officials indicated that they were prepared to renew the New START agreement with or without Beijing's participation. The Russian government has also offered China assistance in developing its ballistic missile early warning system, thus giving the PLA more time to respond to a potential attack. Furthermore, Russia is providing fuel for China's new CFR-600 fast breeder reactors, whose operation produces fissile material, precisely the resource the PRC requires in order to overcome a major bottleneck in rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal (Vergun 2023).

Chinese and Russian officials have also aligned their criticism of Western strategic policies, attacking the United States and its allies for deploying advanced missile defenses, adopting nonproliferation sanctions outside of the UNSC, exchanging nuclear technologies, deploying US nuclear weapons and nuclear-capable delivery systems to non-US territories, and allegedly seeking to militarize outer space against Beijing and Moscow. Chinese and Russian officials have proposed joint peace treaties and other initiatives that would limit US and allied security cooperation in outer space, missile defenses, and on the Korean Peninsula. Regarding the latter, PRC and Russian officials call for mutual reductions in North Korean and ROK-US military activities, leading eventually to a Korean peace regime in which Beijing and Moscow play major roles. Pending the realization of this peace plan, Russian diplomats join their Chinese counterparts in resisting coercive measures against Pyongyang. They both perceive benefits in sustaining Pyongyang's anti-Western orientation as a vehicle for their international security ambitions. North Korea has provided

military supplies (including munitions) to the Russian military, which have purportedly been used in Ukraine, and the North's economic ties have been growing with both China and Russia as all three states collaborate to evade sanctions. PRC and Russian officials oppose Western governments' extraterritorial measures that penalize their firms for committing actions that are not illegal according to Chinese, Russian, or traditional international law. They perceive these as infringements on their sovereignty. Even so, media reports claim that Chinese and Russian entities are inadequately enforcing even UNSC-approved nonproliferation sanctions, indicating either weak national enforcement or deliberate circumvention. The increasing Russian support for the DPRK provides additional cover for China's softer policy toward Pyongyang. Not only does the Russian delegation to the UN Security Council join their PRC counterparts in shielding the North from additional sanctions, but Russian entities also circumvent these sanctions through illegal transactions with the DPRK (Rinna 2022). In addition to sharing China's desire to use North Korea as a buffer and strategic distraction, the Russian government also looks to the North as a source of munitions and other support for Russian military operations in Ukraine (Kube 2022). Some analysts claim that Russia has assisted the DPRK in developing more effective strategic missiles, including possibly advanced ICBMs with enhanced means of overcoming missile defenses, toward this end (Postol 2023).¹

The US Response

US national security leaders have become increasingly anxious about China's nuclear intentions during the past few years. The Pentagon began highlighting the PLA's growing arsenal during the Trump administration, which identified China rather than Russia or terrorism as the "pacing

¹ Some experts challenge Postol's assessment that Russia provided direct support to North Korea's ICBM program. For a summary of the debate on the degree of Russian missile assistance to the DPRK, see: Ward, Berg, and Bazail-Eimil 2023.

threat” guiding long-term US military planning (Cameron 2023). The Biden administration has amplified these concerns, as have both Democratic and Republican members of Congress. The Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act, supported by both US political parties, instructed the US Strategic Command to report to Congress on the PLA’s growing number of nuclear warheads, ICBMs, and their launchers (Hadley 2023).

Unlike the Trump administration, which unsuccessfully tried to coerce Beijing and Moscow into engaging in trilateral strategic arms reduction talks, the Biden administration has instead pursued the more modest objective of enticing the PRC to engage in operational arms control aimed at enhancing transparency regarding China’s nuclear goals and activities along with risk-reduction measures such as crisis communication mechanisms. Thus far, Chinese diplomats have refused to directly engage in such talks with the United States—and have only indirectly addressed risk reduction efforts within the P5 Process, an informal discussion group of the five nuclear powers recognized by the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) (Xinhua 2022). The area which has seen the largest degree of Sino-Western cooperation on nuclear issues has been shared opposition to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which the nuclear weapons possessor states consider unrealistic for demanding the immediate ban on the possession, manufacture, research, and development of nuclear weapons without strong enforcement measures. China’s refusal to even discuss important nuclear issues—such as its current weapons programs, its future plans, or the security of its growing fissile material stockpile—has increased bipartisan US support for modernizing the US nuclear arsenal to include next-generation delivery systems for all air, sea, and ground legs of the nuclear triad—the B-21 Raider strategic bomber, the Columbia-class strategic submarine, and the LGM-35 Sentinel ICBM.

Implications

The PLA nuclear buildup reflects the heightened great power competition between China and the United States in recent years. Scholars adhering to the realist school of international relations had long anticipated that tensions between a rising Chinese superpower and the established global hegemon, the United States, would increase—and strived to prevent those tensions from degrading into war (Allison 2017). Rising great powers routinely try to leverage their expanding economic and military capabilities into transformed international structures more to their liking, while the existing hegemon tries to sustain those global norms, rules, and institutions that embody their interests and values (Organski 1968; Gilpin 1983; Kroenig 2020). Nuclear weapons have become a preeminent tool of modern great powers. Realists would anticipate that the logic of the security dilemma would lead China, for both defensive and offensive reasons, to try to negate, circumvent, or match US military power, including US nuclear capabilities (Christensen 1999). Accepting long-term US superiority could leave the PRC vulnerable to US nuclear escalation and coercion, while hobbling China's ambitions to replace the United States as the most powerful country in Asia.

China's nuclear buildup, its waning opposition to North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, and other disruptive policies are increasing prospects for global and Asian arms races, requiring US military strategists to deter multiple nuclear powers simultaneously, and consider if PRC policymakers will feel more emboldened as the PLA's nuclear deterrent strengthens (Montgomery and Yoshihara 2023). Cold War arms control regimes limiting only two countries (the United States and Russia) and one type of strategic weaponry (nuclear-armed missiles) have decreased in value. Whereas the United States and the Soviet Union enjoyed a joint monopoly over the most advanced weapons during the Cold War, today many more countries possess a wider range of strategic technologies, including cyber weaponry, counterspace systems, autonomous robots, and high-precision counterforce delivery systems (Weitz 2020).

The Russia-Ukraine war has likely incentivized other countries to seek their own nuclear arsenals by emphasizing that the vague security assurances Nuclear-Weapon States (NWS) make to other countries are inferior to direct or extended deterrence guarantees underpinned by nuclear weapons. In addition to the standard negative security assurances offered by the NWS—not to use, or threaten to use, nuclear weapons against the non-nuclear-weapon states that comply with their nuclear nonproliferation obligations—the five NWS, including China and Russia, gave Ukraine supplementary security assurances in exchange for relinquishing the nuclear assets it inherited from the Soviet Union and joining the NPT as a non-NWS. Yet, not only did Russia attack Ukraine, but Russian leaders have made frequent nuclear-backed threats during the war in an effort, partly successful, to limit Western assistance to Ukraine. In particular, fears of provoking Russian nuclear escalation have constrained the types of weapons NATO members have been willing to provide Ukraine. The visibility of Ukraine’s vulnerability to external threats due to its lack of nuclear weapons likely makes Pyongyang more reluctant to relinquish its nuclear arsenal in exchange for similar international security guarantees (Kim 2022).

The Russia-Ukraine war, along with China’s and North Korea’s nuclear buildups, have also amplified long-standing ROK and Japanese concerns about the credibility of US extended nuclear security guarantees. South Korean and Japanese policymakers may calculate that the United States will be less inclined to use its nuclear forces to counter Chinese, Russian, or North Korean military threats if the latter states can more assuredly carry out nuclear strikes against US forces in the Indo-Pacific region or on the US mainland. As a result, Japanese and especially South Korean interest in pursuing national nuclear options have increased (Richey 2023). This could include acquiring independent nuclear deterrents, stationing US nuclear delivery systems on their territories, or having greater access to US decisions regarding the possible deployment of US nuclear weapons to defend them. At the same time, seeking their own nuclear weapons could antagonize the United States and others,

expose them to economic sanctions, damage their international reputation, legitimize Pyongyang's possession of its own nuclear weapons, and deepen first-strike incentives in a crisis (Klingner 2022).

Chinese policies are also making it more difficult for South Korea to pursue a balanced foreign policy between Washington and Beijing. President Yoon Suk-yeol, who came to power in May 2022, has emphasized the PRC's responsibility, as a member state of the UNSC, to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue (Smith, J. Kim, and S. Kim 2022). Despite Chinese protests, Yoon has been strengthening South Korea's missile defenses and aligning the ROK's security policies more closely with those of the United States and Japan than his predecessor, Moon Jae-in (May 2017-May 2022). According to opinion polls, many South Koreans have expressed anxiety about China's growing regional influence and supported Yoon's more explicit comments about needing stronger nuclear security guarantees from the United States. In an interview with the *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper, Yoon stated that the traditional view of extended deterrence—"that the United States will take care of everything, so South Korea should not worry about it"—was outdated (Gallo 2023). Some South Korean experts have called for the ROK's participation in US nuclear exercises and the establishment of a permanent binational structure that would formalize South Korea's participation in US nuclear planning and strategic deployments related to Korean contingencies (Park 2022). The Biden administration has resisted initiatives that US officials believe could violate US and ROK nonproliferation commitments, undermine calls for making the Korean Peninsula nuclear free, and encourage other US allies to demand similar nuclear cooperation. Nonetheless, US officials recognize that growing Chinese, Russian, and North Korean threats are challenging US pledges to defend South Korea. Boosting the credibility of US security guarantees to Asian allies has therefore been a priority of the Biden administration (The Korea Herald 2022).

Nuclear issues took centerstage during Yoon's state visit to the United States at the end of April 2023, which commemorated the 70th anniversary of the ROK-US mutual defense alliance. In the ROK-US "Washington

Declaration” on this issue, Yoon’s government duly expressed “full confidence in US extended deterrence commitments” and reaffirmed the ROK policy of nuclear abstention. In turn, the Biden administration pledged to deliver a decisive riposte to any DPRK nuclear assault, highlight US strategic assets deployed to South Korea, enhance discussions on extended deterrence, and “make every effort to consult with the ROK on any possible nuclear weapons employment on the Korean Peninsula.” The two countries established a Nuclear Consultative Group to exchange perceptions on DPRK nuclear threats, agreed to convene a regular interagency table-top simulation involving the new ROK Strategic Command and the US-ROK Combined Forces Command that would wargame nuclear contingencies, and compose a work plan to “enable joint execution and planning for ROK conventional support to US nuclear operations in a contingency” (The White House 2023). As expected, the Chinese government attacked the Yoon-Biden summit, even though South Korea pledged not to develop nuclear weapons in exchange for the enhanced ROK-US reassurance and deterrence measures (Lee 2023). Though the Declaration and successful visit decreased concerns about US-ROK nuclear differences, China’s nuclear buildup could intensify them again.

Recommendations

China’s refusal to join Russia and the United States in negotiating legally binding limits on its nuclear forces is jeopardizing strategic arms control. As an influential non-nuclear weapons state with outstanding nonproliferation credentials, South Korea can make a welcome contribution to sustaining the arms control by pressing Beijing—through bilateral and multilateral channels—to participate in negotiations designed to secure firm and verifiable caps on China’s strategic inventory. Some of these calls should be public to leverage South Koreans’ influence over global public opinion (Keck 2023). Whereas PRC experts readily dismiss US arms

control proposals as instruments of containment and mechanisms to preserve US military primacy, ROK experts and diplomats might receive a more receptive hearing. Without such limits on Chinese nuclear forces, the United States will invariably take measures to avert a PRC “sprint to parity” or even superiority (Roberts et al. 2023). The challenge of making US deterrence guarantees more credible has already driven US policymakers to consider options for returning warheads earlier downloaded from US ICBMs and SLBMs after 2026, when the New START limits expire, as well as building more of these strategic delivery vehicles in following years. Unconstrained PLA nuclear expansion will also increase pressure on South Korea, Japan, and other countries to pursue national nuclear forces.

If ROK and US officials more consistently press Chinese officials on contested nuclear issues such as China’s nuclear buildup, its declining cooperation regarding North Korea, and the need to enhance nuclear security and safety, they could heighten the priority PRC leaders place on these issues. The highest ROK-US priority should be minimizing the growth of PRC nuclear weapons capabilities while maximizing Chinese nuclear transparency. It is unlikely that other countries could make sufficient concessions regarding their own nuclear forces to induce the PRC to join nuclear arms control reduction talks, especially given how Moscow backs Beijing’s stance on these issues. But the PRC might slow or limit its nuclear weapons increases in return for benefits on other issues. For example, ROK and US officials might offer to discuss the political sources of strategic risks or outer space arms control—issues that PRC diplomats have asked to discuss—in return for China’s more active participation in arms control and risk reduction talks with the United States and its partners. A bolder gambit would be to offer to discuss with China the requirements for adopting and verifying a no-first-use agreement that would apply only to the Korean Peninsula. As noted above, PRC diplomats regularly call on other countries to adopt China’s official position supporting a universal and unconditional no-first-use approach. Though its nuclear buildup and PLA statements seem at variance with this doctrine, perhaps the most important reason the Biden administration refused to adopt a

“sole-purpose” or “no-first-use” declaratory doctrine was South Korean and Japanese anxieties that such a declaration would have committed the United States to employ nuclear weapons in their defense only if North Korea or China had first used nuclear weapons against the United States (Asan Institute for Policy Studies 2022). But discussing a collective no-first-use agreement that included China and North Korea could entice Beijing’s interest while providing a potential wedge issue between the PRC and the DPRK, since the North is pursuing first-use limited nuclear preemption options for attacking US and ROK targets on South Korean territory (Lee 2022).

A recent US government-sponsored study by the Atlantic Council highlighted the seriousness of this issue. It identified multiple pathways leading to concurrent nuclear weapons use by China and North Korea. Most of these scenarios do not require overt cooperation between the PRC and the DPRK. Rather, the logic of conflict dynamics in Northeast Asia could lead a war, especially one that does not end quickly, to spread across the region to encompass China, the Koreas, and nuclear weapons. Even if North Korea initially stays out of a China-US conflict over Taiwan, the PLA would have incentives to attack US forces throughout Northeast Asia, including those in South Korea. This development may trigger DPRK opportunistic aggression, perhaps encouraged by Beijing to further strain US resources. Additionally, a protracted war initially confined to the Korean Peninsula will exert centripetal forces that could pull China and other countries into the whirlwind. The study prudently recommends that the U.S and South Korean national security establishments discard their longstanding biases against considering such unpleasant contingencies and regularly assess—through discussions, wargames, joint planning, and other engagements—scenarios in which China could use nuclear weapons in Northeast Asia independently of or simultaneously with the DPRK. In the authors’ words, “[t]he United States and South Korea should shift their focus to a broader priority of protecting South Korea from aggression—encompassing deterrence of PRC aggression in addition to North Korean aggression” (Garlauskas 2023).

In this regard, China's nuclear buildup could further complicate the restructuring of ROK-US command relationships, particularly the transfer of operational control (OPCON) of ROK forces in wartime. Though South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff have exercised OPCON of their national forces in peacetime since 1994, the date for the transfer of wartime command—from the existing US-ROK Combined Forces Command to a new joint command led by a ROK general officer—has been repeatedly postponed beyond the original 2012 target date. The heightened North Korean military threat, compounded by other complications, disrupted earlier timetables for OPCON transfer as the conditions for confidently making that handoff proved elusive. Not only did the two governments struggle to enhance ROK capabilities that US forces had previously provided, but skeptics worried that a premature transfer would weaken joint deterrence of potential DPRK aggression (Work 2022). Another complication has been South Korea's demographic challenges, notably the declining pool of potential soldiers; for various reasons, the shrinking cohort of younger South Koreans have been less interested in military service than earlier generations (Lee 2021). In the future, China's growing nuclear force and assertiveness could generate additional justifications for postponing OPCON transfer. For example, analysts will question the ability of a ROK command to take the lead in scenarios involving possible concurrent nuclear threats from China and the DPRK. These more complex nuclear weapons contingencies provide ROK policymakers with another reason to pursue a robust nuclear and dialogue with the United States and Japan.

The unprecedented cooperation between the governments of South Korea and Japan in recent years offers another means to manage Northeast Asian security issues. Thanks to what President Biden termed the “political courage” of his ROK and Japanese counterparts, the three leaders met at the Camp David presidential retreat in August 2023 and took important steps to institutionalize their defense cooperation. Among other measures, they committed in their “Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement” to insist on the DPRK's “complete denuclearization,” the end of its ballistic missile programs, and the “ironclad” nature of the US extended deterrence

guarantees for South Korea and Japan. They also pledge to hold multi-domain trilateral exercises every year, exchange real-time missile warning data on DPRK missile launches, and pursue enhanced ballistic missile defense cooperation to counter DPRK nuclear and missile threats” (The White House 2023b).

A next step would be to go beyond the denouncing of various Chinese actions found in the statement to include PLA-related contingencies in the defense exchanges, exercises, and other cooperation. The United States is cooperating more closely with both Japan and South Korea on ballistic missile defense (BMD) issues. On August 18, Japan and the United States commenced formal discussions on the possible development of a joint interceptor against hypersonic missiles such as those possessed by China and Russia and under development by North Korea (The US Department of Defense and Japan Ministry of Defense 2023). South Korea has meanwhile constructed a multi-layered national BMD architecture that combines US and indigenous interceptors and sensors (Ghoshal 2023). Independently, the United States is developing a Next Generation Interceptor (NGI) to upgrade the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense network protecting the US homeland from North Korean ICBMs. The US Missile Defense Agency plans to commence testing of the NGI in 2027 and proceed to deployment and operational testing of the interceptor, currently under development by two competing teams of defense companies, by 2028 (Hitchens 2023). In light of the accelerating DPRK threat, the two company teams developing the NGI, which will be able to intercept the multiple kill vehicles and decoys on North Korean ICBMs, are using digital design methods to advance the timeline for loading the NGIs into silos by 2027 (Judson 2023a).

The Agency will also improve the network’s C4ISR systems to better integrate these elements in line with its “comprehensive missile defeat approach” (Judson 2023; Reddy 2023). It aims to develop a specialized Glide Phase Interceptor (GPI) shortly thereafter, with stronger space-based sensors, to counter hypersonic delivery systems, which can fly fast while maneuvering in the upper atmosphere, below the level of many current

BMD systems designed to intercept missiles in space. For example, a software upgrade to the Long-Range Discrimination Radar under construction could enable it to detect and track DPRK hypersonic missiles (Judson 2023b). These augmentations are critical for negating DPRK attempts to threaten strikes against the continental United States, which could undermine the credibility of US extended deterrence guarantees to South Korea and other Asian allies. The enhancements could also provide some protection against errant Chinese and Russian ICBMs. As these novel technologies are integrating into forward-based regional systems, especially the GPI, they will further reinforce the deterrence and defense of US regional allies against emerging complex threats. For instance, the US Army is deploying the Integrated Air and Missile Defense Battle Command System (IBCS) to provide coordinated command, control, and communications for all its air and missile defense assets on Guam (Abott 2023). The IBCS could offer similar “any-sensor, best-shooter capability” for US and ROK integrated air-and-missile defenses in South Korea.

Yet, protecting South Korea, Japan, and other US allies, along with forward deployed US forces and bases, with a multi-layered defense architecture against ICBM-class threats will require better integration with regionally deployed missile defenses. The network should encompass sensors for detecting and tracking missiles after launch as well as the planned sharing of real-time early warning data. The shooters would include Aegis-equipped Standard Missile interceptors deployed on ships, US-made land-based Patriot and THAAD systems stationed in Northeast Asia, and the indigenous BMD systems developed and controlled by Japan and South Korea. The ROK is strengthening its three-axis system comprising Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation, the Kill Chain pre-emptive strike platform, and the Korea Air and Missile Defense system (Song 2022). In turn, these forward-based regional missile defenses can provide important warning and tracking data of ICBMs launched toward the United States. The Ukraine war has demonstrated the growing effectiveness of integrated air-and-missile defenses against threats from even advanced missiles, such as Russia’s hypersonic air-launched ballistic

missile, the Kinzhal. Given how severely China earlier applied economic pressure against South Korea to limit its missile defenses, the United States, South Korea, and Japan should prepare in advance for renewed PRC coercion and intimidation in response to their missile defense augmentations (Town and Ragnone 2022; Cha 2023).

Along with seeking legally binding ceilings on the PLA's nuclear buildup and enhancing their national defenses, South Korea and the United States should strive to engage with China on confidence-building and risk reduction measures. Such efforts could entail non-treaty agreements, complementary unilateral actions, strategic dialogues, data exchanges, and other initiatives to increase transparency and mutual understanding and eschew dangerous operational practices. Though pursuing arms control as a means of enhancing strategic stability can be less effective than treaty-mandated restrictions with assured verification, risk-reduction measures can still yield benefits such as decreasing the potential for nuclear war or escalation. However, sustained progress on risk reduction will require the PRC to lessen its traditional strategic opacity and share more information about its nuclear capabilities, intentions, and plans. Past PRC-US risk reduction measures have proved ineffective due to these barriers. The "Chinese spy balloon crisis" is but the latest evidence that having a hotline with the PLA has not been particularly useful since the PRC leadership has thus far refused to let Chinese military commanders engage in direct and rapid communications with foreign militaries in a crisis (Liebermann 2023).

China's civilian nuclear establishment wants to keep nuclear energy a safe and secure source of low-carbon energy as well as reassure others that the PRC is a responsible supplier of commercial nuclear products and services. South Korea has a well-earned reputation for supporting nuclear security measures—such as programs intended to deny terrorists and other non-state actors access to nuclear materials, technologies, and experts—since Seoul hosted the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit. The ROK government's effective leadership at the summit further strengthened its reputation as a major civilian nuclear energy player committed to strong

safety and security standards for nuclear-related exports. Looking ahead, as South Korea's role in foreign nuclear energy markets continues to grow, so will its capacity to influence global nuclear security standards and practices, including with regard to China. Repeated PRC exhortations about maintaining the security and safety of Ukraine's nuclear facilities indicate Beijing could be interested in collaborating with South Korea, the United States, and other countries to protect nuclear facilities during wartime (CGTN 2023). Such engagement would be mutually beneficial as many of the world's nuclear power plants are located in regions of ongoing or potential conflict.

The United States will want South Korea to help probe whether the Russia-Ukraine war will create nuclear fissures between Beijing and Moscow. Though the Chinese government and media have generally supported Russia's policies regarding Ukraine, PRC representatives have indicated concern throughout the war about military activities in the vicinity of Ukraine's nuclear power plants. In its February 24, 2023 position paper on "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis," the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed opposition to armed attacks against nuclear power plants and other civilian nuclear facilities. The 12-point paper also called on all parties to respect the Convention on Nuclear Safety and to eschew actions that could lead to nuclear accidents (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China 2023). The Russian government's announcements that it would station nuclear weapons in Belarus also contradicts numerous Sino-Russian declarations denouncing such nuclear-sharing arrangements, including their "Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination in the New Era," which the two governments issued when President Xi visited Moscow in March 2023 (Devonshire-Ellis 2023).

Conversely, South Korea and the United States will need to deny China opportunities to divide Seoul and Washington on nuclear issues (Zhao and Kang 2023). ROK and US officials can minimize this danger by communicating a uniform message to their Chinese interlocutors.

A recurring source of tension between the United States and South Korea has been the latter's interest in reprocessing plutonium. US officials have long resisted the spread of reprocessing technologies due to associated proliferation risks. The advent of China's fast breeder reactors has exacerbated US concerns about the proliferation problems of reprocessing. One solution to avoid providing Beijing a wedge to exploit ROK-US differences over reprocessing might be for the United States and South Korea to insist that any state engaged in widespread commercial reprocessing shares extensive data with other countries and take other transparency measures regarding its fissile material stockpiles and planned production. Meanwhile, South Korea and the United States need to manage tensions regarding sanctions on China or military assistance to Taiwan. In recent months, South Korean national security leaders have more frequently expressed concerns regarding potential PRC aggression against Taiwan, but will likely remain reluctant to overtly help Taiwan boost its defensive preparations against Beijing, let alone make the kind of security commitments the United States and Japan have been making toward the island. ROK and US policymakers should discuss, and ideally game out, possible Taiwan-related scenarios in advance. They should also share insights on how to tighten their export controls to deny China military and dual-use technologies that could further the development of the PLA's nuclear forces or be diverted to states of proliferation concern, like North Korea.

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East Asian Security Cooperation Shortcomings and Opportunities for Second-Tier Actors in the Region

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Abstract

This article assesses the promise of security cooperation through the mechanisms of international organization in East Asia, a region where such approaches face the gravest challenges. The article first considers the mechanisms through which multilateral international organizations and other related institutions look to promote international governance and security cooperation between states, and why this has proven so difficult in East Asia. It then turns to the regional rise of security unilateralism, as well as why this may also not be the answer to the peaceful management of international relations between sovereign state entities. Finally, the article turns to policy prescriptions for second-tier powers, a new category of actor, to contribute to the transformation of conflictual relations in the region. These actors are key to the new conceptualizations of international organization presented herein: non-traditional security (NTS) unilateralism and regional international commissions. The central research questions are: [1] Why has international organizational security cooperation proven elusive in East Asia, and multilateralism failed? [2] Can the rise of security “unilateralism” in the region fill the void? [3] How can newly empowered regional actors address the shortcomings in the international management of relations in East Asia?

Keywords: East Asia, security cooperation, multilateralism, unilateralism, non-traditional security (NTS) unilateralism

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Introduction

Since the emergence of the first paradigm of liberal internationalism, and its physical manifestation in the League of Nations, the regulation of conflictual relationships between states has served as the prime motivating factor for international relations in theory and in practice. The ultimate failure of these projects to provide collective security or universal peace led to the approaches being pejoratively labeled “idealist,” and the inter-war years being termed the “Twenty Years Crisis” (Carr 1939).

Nonetheless, these ideas experienced a resurgence, to such an extent that some commentators have been “tempted to equate the intellectual mood of the present time with the utopian impulse of the post-1918 decade” (Carlsnaes 1986, 8). Furthermore, with the end of the Cold War, they advanced the hypothesis that an image of world politics consistent with that portrayed by Woodrow Wilson eighty years earlier had become applicable and appropriate. As Kegley (1995) put it, “Wilson’s ideas and ideals now appear less unrealistic and more compelling. Old ideas are new again” (Kegley 1995, 10).

Thus, this article assesses the promise of security cooperation through the mechanisms of international organization. It does so in the region of the world where such approaches face the gravest challenges due to the primacy of the state, the limitations of multilateral security organization, great power competition, and conflictual relationships between many of the important actors. Although the drawing of regional boundaries is always difficult, and this is particularly the case for East Asia, the societal and organizational approach of this article requires evaluation of the international governance of affairs between countries belonging to both the Northeast Asian and Southeast Asian subsets. This means the boundaries are drawn to include those countries which have historically shared the densest patterns of interaction (both positive and negative) and a degree of value conformity or community identity (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000, 457-473).

Contemporary debates about the prospects for peace and security in

East Asia have revolved around two dominant perspectives: a realist “back to the future” vision whereby the end of the Cold War has released previously suppressed indigenous conflicts, reigniting a concept of a “war of all against all;” and a liberal view whereby complex interdependence has curtailed military rivalry between industrialized states, leading to potential multilateral cooperation (Buzan and Segal 1994, 3).

The implications for security cooperation from the realist perspective are that states must rely on self-help, maximizing their military capabilities, relying on no other to ensure their survival in a hostile operating environment. They only join with others in the form of (temporary) military alliances, with the weak bandwagoning with the strong, or with states combining to balance against a regional or global hegemon. However, the liberal perspective emphasizes the promise of regional and global multilateralism, manifested through formal international organizations and less formal institutions, as well as the principle of collective security. In recent years, a middle path has come to prominence, which recognizes the realities of power distribution hierarchies, great power competition, and the primacy of national interest, but at the same time offers hope for minilateral rather than multilateral security cooperation among small groups of like-minded actors.

Accordingly, this article first considers the mechanisms through which multilateral international organizations and other related institutions look to promote international governance and security cooperation between states, and why this has proven so difficult in East Asia. It then turns to the regional rise of security minilateralism, and why this may also not be the answer we are looking for in the peaceful management of international relations between sovereign state entities in the region. Finally, the article turns to policy prescriptions for second-tier powers, a new category of actor, to contribute to the transformation of conflictual relations in the region. These actors are key to the new conceptualizations of international organization presented herein: non-traditional security (NTS) minilateralism and regional international commissions.

Hence, this research incorporates analysis of the challenges to, and

opportunities for, the international management of relations between East Asian states, with a focus on the potential for leadership from the key second-tier powers: Japan, South Korea, and Australia. Thus, it examines how multilateral cooperation at both the global and regional level has evolved, from the rise of unilateralism through to the prospects for NTS multilateral cooperation. The central research questions are: [1] Why has international organizational security cooperation proven elusive in East Asia, and multilateralism failed? [2] Can the rise of security “unilateralism” in the region fill the void? [3] How can second-tier regional actors address the shortcomings in the international management of relations in East Asia?

International Organization, Institutions, and Multilateralism

International organization represents a transitional process from the international anarchic conditions which generate conflict, toward the aspiration of global governance, whereby states are actively brought together to solve common problems, reconcile conflicting interests, and generate collective goods, including a more peaceful and secure operating environment. International organizations are representative aspects of the phase of that process which has been reached at a given time (Claude 1963, 4). International organization is fundamentally, even though not exclusively, a reaction to the problem of war (Claude 1963, 219). Attempts to deal with this international societal scourge through a focus on shared interests and values have “given rise to major projects to construct international regimes, laws, and norms to limit war and engineer peace between polities, including states via multilateral organizations” (Richmond 2020, 14).

The institutionalization of multilateral security cooperation at the global level, first under the League of Nations (albeit a false dawn), and more recently and successfully, through the United Nations (UN) system,

has contributed significantly to the resolution of existing conflicts and the generation of a more peaceful international society (Howe 2021, 502). Meanwhile, Sorpong Peou's conceptualization of "global public governance" offers a definition of the international system as being multilayered, polycentric, complex, and comprising formal and informal multilateral institutions, networks, regimes, and the large number of state and non-state actors required to take collective action to provide global public goods (Peou 2022, 12-13). Through such mechanisms, high-minded "utopian" ideals are translated into "real-world" international political action and the evaluation of these processes can be termed "constructivist pragmatism" (Kivimäki 2016).

Multilateralism is part of this broader conceptualization, and "can be defined as the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions," which has become increasingly important since the end of World War II (Keohane 1990, 731). Multilateralism means that the coordination of national policies of three or more states is carried out based on certain principles of ordering relations among them (Ruggie 1992, 567). Furthermore, these should be "generalized" principles of conduct that "specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard to the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence" (Ruggie 1992, 571). Key elements of multilateralism include aspirations towards universality, the welcoming of large numbers of participants, and a strong levelling impulse (Kahler 1992, 681). Open admission and non-discrimination imply participation does not require the patronage of a great power, but rather is linked with the sovereign equality of states and allows much greater participation and leverage in institutional decision-making by "states that were not great powers and could not aspire to be" (Kahler 1992, 681).

Meanwhile, institutions can be defined as "persistent and connected sets of rules, formal and informal, that prescribe behavioral roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations" of actors "which in most important cases are, need not necessarily be, states" (Keohane 1990, 732).

Such regimes are usually accompanied by international organizations “established to monitor and manage a set of rules governing state behavior in a particular issue-area” (Keohane 1990, 733). While lesser powers have struggled to impact the formal mechanisms of multilateral security cooperation, they have made significant contributions to informal regimes and institutions, especially those related to NTS issues. The rising prominence of alternative forms of collective action as complements to, and often substitutes for, traditional intergovernmental cooperation is the defining feature of twenty-first century multilateralism (Patrick 2015, 115). International commissions are significant among these forms of collective action. They are ad hoc transnational investigative mechanisms aimed at transforming “the assumptions and staid thinking that plague long-standing problems in international relations” (Robertson 2020). They have featured prominently in consideration of both traditional security challenges and NTS issues of global governance since the early 1980s.

In the early 1990s, freed from Cold War divides and having achieved a successful collective security action against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, President George H. W. Bush proclaimed a “new world order” governed according to the rule of law (Bush, 1990). His successor, Bill Clinton noted that multilateral action held promise as never before and heralded a “turning point in human history” (Clinton 1993). After the institutions of global governance had been placed on the back foot during the unilateralism of the subsequent George W. Bush presidency, then presidential candidate Barak Obama once again championed a future multilateral renaissance (Obama 2007). Chapter VIII of the UN Charter (Article 52) also makes clear the importance of regional arrangements. The European Union (EU) is often held up as the prime example of the contributions which can be made to peace and security by regional multilateral organization and arrangements (Anastasiou 2007, 31-50). Aspirations for emulation of the global universal institutionalist and European experiences have proliferated in the East Asian region (Han 2006, 83-101).

Unfortunately, critics have noted that optimism about such forms

of multilateralism was to prove unfounded (Patrick 2015, 115). The administration of President Donald Trump disdained multilateralism in all forms and dealt the process of global governance a blow from which it has yet to recover (Weiss 2018, 1-17). Yet, the seeds of its demise were sown well before. Moisés Naím pointed to a pattern that has been clear since the early 1990s—the need for effective multi-country collaboration has soared, but at the same time multilateral talks have inevitably failed (Naím 2009, 137). He noted that “These failures represent not only the perpetual lack of international consensus, but also a flawed obsession with multilateralism as the panacea for all the world’s ills” (Naím 2009, 137). Likewise, although prior to the start of the 21st century, multilateral diplomacy largely took a “maxilateral” form in which institutions like the UN saw inclusivity of as many countries as possible as an end in itself, “in an increasingly divided and complicated world, this form confuses inclusivity with effectiveness as states now only sign onto vague agreements lacking legally binding force” (Ahl 2019).

These trends are particularly prominent in East Asia, where conventional wisdom “carries more pessimism than optimism” about prospects for peaceful cooperation (Mahbubani 1995, 102). East Asia lacks a Western-style security international organization along the lines of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) which evolved into the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Although the ASEAN Regional Forum could be considered a regional equivalent to the CSCE/OSCE process because of its focus on confidence building measures (CBMs), it faces serious challenges in its evolution into a fully-fledged security International Organization, and currently remains largely a forum for discussion. The same is true of the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting (ADMM), first convened in 2006, and the ASEAN Defense Minister’s Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) established in 2010 (Howe 2021, 508). Instead, much of the security architecture is a product of the San Francisco hub-and-spokes system of bilateral security alliances with the US (Calder 2004, 135-157). As such, regional peace and security are more dependent upon great power leadership and cooperation than

perhaps anywhere else.

East Asia further appears to be a unique region in that it combines outstanding economic growth with minimal international organization. The major achievements of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) forum that functions as a coordinator of co-operation between ASEAN's Southeast Asian states and Northeast Asia, are limited to the creation of the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) multilateral currency swap arrangement among the ten members of ASEAN (soon to be expanded to include Timor-Leste), China (including Hong Kong), Japan, and South Korea (Howe 2021, 507).

John Ruggie has pointed out that as it was not possible to construct multilateral institutional frameworks in the region in the immediate postwar period, "today, the absence of such arrangements inhibits progressive adaptation to fundamental global shifts" (Ruggie 1992, 563). Hence, the region remains resistant to multilateral governance and security cooperation. There is no formal multilateral security organization in place to transform the multitude of regional security dilemmas, and no Helsinki-like process through which to begin the minimal task of mutual confidence building (Ruggie 1992, 563). Meanwhile, the "complexity of challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, including US-China tensions, territorial disputes, and the Myanmar crisis, has resulted in a paradox of multilateralism," wherein these developments have underscored the importance of cooperation, while at the same time testing inter-governmental frameworks such as ASEAN (Chhangani et al. 2022).

In East Asia, traditional security multilateralism has foundered on disinterest or even outright hostility from the great powers, and competition between them. The very nature of international relations in the region has been portrayed as inhospitable to multilateral institutions, or at least to their effective operationalization for peace and security despite their proliferation (Acharya 2016, 13; Oba 2017). China has at various times been portrayed as antagonistic towards regional multilateralism, disinterested in it, viewing it as irrelevant for the resolution of regional security challenges, or as wishing to mold it in Beijing's image (Acharya 2012, 20). The same can be said of the US,

with a preference for bilateralism, and lack of support for regional multilateralism revealed in policies which, it is claimed, essentially destroyed the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (Acharya 2012, 20; Kahler 1992, 687). Similar dynamics have even been found at play in regional minilateralism (as developed below).

East Asian Minilateralism

As an alternative to the traditional multilateral approaches to the regulation of interactions between states, Moisés Naím (2009, 135) proposes that we abandon the “fool’s errand” of multilateralism in favor of a new idea, minilateralism: “a smarter, more targeted approach, bringing to the table the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem.” Gordon Ahl (2019) agrees, noting that “while many fear the decline or even collapse of multilateral forums, new ad-hoc coalitions of the willing provide a much-needed alternative path to efficient and strong mutual cooperation on specific issues.” Meanwhile, Harris Mylonas and Emirhan Yorulmazlar (2012) claim that “‘regional multilateralism’ may be the next paradigm that can bring about peace, cooperation, and stability in global affairs.” Hence, states can be seen as participating increasingly in a bewildering array of flexible, *ad hoc* frameworks which are:

often ‘minilateral’ rather than universal; voluntary rather than legally binding; disaggregated rather than comprehensive; trans-governmental rather than just intergovernmental; regional rather than global; multi-level and multi-stakeholder rather than state-centric; and ‘bottom-up’ rather than ‘top-down’ (Patrick 2015, 116).

Policy initiatives have reflected the rise of the concept of security minilateralism. Countries across the region have increasingly embraced “minilateral” groupings, identified as “small, issue-based, informal, and uninstitutionalized partnerships—as a way of coordinating international

policy action,” with these groupings expanding sharply in number and ambition in the 2010s (Tarapore and Taylor 2022, 2). Furthermore, unlike after the end of the Cold War when regional actors sought deeper regional integration in a process inspired by European modalities, they now are “designing defense policies to dissuade potential adversaries, especially China, from revisionist behavior” (Tarapore and Taylor 2022, 2). Hence, the emergence and proliferation of regional minilaterals “cannot be seen as a means to strengthen existing formal institutional arrangements such as the ASEAN” (Rajagopalan 2021, 12). Traditional “multilateral options, such as the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, failed to overcome regional divisions and America’s overwhelming presence” (Kahler 1992, 687). Instead, “strategic minilateralism,” has been increasingly prevalent in the region since the second half of the 2010s, due to two main drivers: “the rise of China and the lack of effective regional security mechanisms for responding to that rise” (Koga 2022, 27). Hence, although a case could be made for some Chinese led initiatives, such as the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC) or the early stage of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to be considered minilaterals, they are not addressed in this paper (Rajagopalan 2021, 3).

For Kei Koga (2022, 28), “in the contemporary Indo-Pacific context, any interstate groupings comprising only three to five members should be considered minilateral rather than multilateral.” For Bill Tow (2015, 24), minilateralism means “usually three, but sometimes four or five states meeting and interacting informally (in the absence of a governing document) to discuss issue-areas involving mutual threats to their security or, more often, to go over specific tasks related to building regional stability and order.” Thitinan Pongsudhirak identifies two emerging trends in minilateral arrangements: (1) they are no longer based on geography, and (2) they have a heavy focus on security interests (cited in Chhangani et al. 2022). Yet the idea that they are no longer based on geography is merely a qualification for including external actors in regional minilateral security arrangements—primarily the US. Hence, in East Asia, minilateralism as it currently stands, concerns the analysis of the strategic operation of

security institutions containing between three and five actors.

Early manifestations of the concept can be found in the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) comprising the US, Japan, and South Korea, and the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) comprising the US, Japan, and Australia. The “standard-bearer” of regional minilateralism is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising the US, Japan, Australia, and India, which was resuscitated in 2017. Perhaps “the boldest minilateral” is AUKUS, announced in 2021, which brings together already close allies the US, Australia, and the UK, to further deepen defense technology cooperation (Tarapore and Taylor 2022, 2). Finally, on 18 August 2023, the “Spirit of Camp David” accords claimed to inaugurate a new level of trilateral partnership between the United States, Japan, and South Korea. Although Japan, South Korea, and Australia consistently feature as important secondary actors, the key actor in regional strategic minilateralism remains the United States. India and the UK are important secondary actors, but do not yet play a significant role as external actors in regional minilateralism.

This new form of international security cooperation in East Asia is not without its challenges. The first problem, as demonstrated by the Quad, AUKUS, and the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral, is that such frameworks are “largely a Western construct that attempts to fill the expectation and capability gaps in regional security systems” (Koga 2022, 7). Given understandable regional resistance to external strategic interference, which could even be viewed as a form of neo-imperialism, they face immediate obstacles to the peaceful management of conflictual relations in East Asia. Indeed, there are “lingering concerns that minilateral partnerships are designed to serve large power interests and not individual state interests in the region” (Chhangani et al. 2022, 3). Most suspicion falls on the US, seen as the driving force behind the most prominent minilateral security arrangements, but there are similar concerns regarding the motivations behind Chinese initiatives (Rajagopalan 2021, 3).

A second related challenge to the efficacy of minilateralism in

resolving regional governance issues is that the most prominent are seen as being constructed primarily to contain a rising China (Tow 2015, 23; Koga 2022, 30; Anuar and Hussain 2021, 3-5). This raises several related issues. First, China will likely push back against and attempt to undermine the operation of institutions that appear constructed to thwart its own objectives. Chinese commentators have warned of serious consequences for those aligning too closely with the US, while competing iterations of minilateralism based on strategic competition between the US and China risk narrowing the space available for others to operate as they are thrust into “with us or against us” narratives (Boon and Teo 2022, 60).

Thus, rather than manifestations of collective security or attempts peacefully to manage affairs between states, regional minilaterals increasingly reflect US attempts to organize groups of like-minded supporters and allies who share security concerns and install policy discipline among them. Those led by the other great powers (China, and in other regions, Russia) could, perhaps, be seen as an inevitable reaction. Forcing regional actors to choose undermines the coherence of regional international organization (Rajagopalan 2021, 7; Chhangani et al. 2022, 2-3). US dominance and strategic manipulation, combined with the perceived anti-Chinese positioning, caused the collapse of the first version of the Quad, and has hampered the functioning of the second incarnation, potentially even triggering regional instability (Anuar and Hussain 2021, 3; Koga 2022, 30-33). Most regional actors would rather not choose sides but would rather maintain a degree of “strategic ambiguity” (Boon and Teo 2022, 60).

This links to a third problematic area for regional security multilateralism, that of its exclusionary rather than inclusive nature. To contribute meaningfully toward regional order-building, minilateral initiatives need to generate support from regional constituencies, particularly ASEAN (Koga 2022, 30). Yet, the exclusionary nature of minilateralism has the potential to undermine multilateral platforms such as ASEAN, generating resentment within the association and among its members. “This is especially so as ASEAN’s core values of centrality and unity are in direct

contradiction with exclusivity” (Chhangani et al. 2022, 3). Patrick has noted that minilaterals threaten to “replace the provision of international public goods with club goods benefiting a narrower range of countries, while marginalizing formal international institutions.” He further argues “unless used deftly and judiciously, minilateralism risks undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of indispensable international organizations and even accelerating the world’s coalescence into rival coalitions” (Patrick 2015, 117, 130).

Hence, a rigid adherence to state-centric conceptualizations and traditional security foci in East Asia has hampered the emergence of regional collective security mechanisms or a peaceful international society. Traditional security minilaterals have, if anything, exacerbated divides within the region rather than bringing together diverse actors. Such state-centric approaches have limited the opportunities to move beyond zero-sum perceptions, and restricted attempts to overcome the challenges of antagonistic relationships to the level of mere conflict management or at best symbolic conflict resolution. Hence, “a reasonably stable balance is the best that one can hope to achieve in the region” (Ruggie 1992, 563)

Yet the response to the failure of security cooperation, in terms of both theory and practice, has always been to learn from the successes and failures of previous manifestations rather than give up on the process of international organization. The shortcomings of the Concert of Europe (1815-1871) did not lead to states abandoning its multilateral principles, but rather to expanding them to approaching near universalism in the Hague Peace Conferences. The failure of the Hague Peace Conferences to prevent World War I led to their institutionalization in the League of Nations, not their abandonment. As addressed above, the failure of collective security during the Twenty Years Crisis led not to it being abandoned, but rather to its reinforcement in the UN system. Likewise, the shortcomings of maxilateralism have not led to the abandonment of multilateral governance of international relations, but rather to its diffusion to other forms, such as minilateralism and regional multilateralism. Any

shortcomings within these manifestations should not result in us giving up on the aspiration for the peaceful management of international relations in East Asia but should rather inspire us to greater creativity.

The conceptualization of minilateralism in this paper follows Naím's "smallest possible number of countries to have the largest possible impact," but advocates that the leadership momentum be provided by second-tier powers rather than great powers. It builds on Ahl's (2019) "strong mutual cooperation" by identifying the most promising specific issues (at least initially) to be those connected with NTS cooperation, and the most likely to be able to bring together "coalitions of the willing." Indeed, NTS issues particularly lend themselves to ad hoc conceptualizations and trans- rather than merely inter-governmental frameworks. While not completely discounting regional multilateralism (and embracing it in the form of regional international commissions), the paper further advocates a regional composition to minilateral initiatives.

So, the definition of minilateralism promoted herein is the potential advocacy of three to five second-tier regionally engaged powers, with a like-minded focus on and shared interest in NTS issues, and a capacity to collaborate (at least on an ad hoc basis), independently of the machinations of great powers. Importantly, while three to five second-tier powers provide the leadership and advocacy roles, this form of minilateralism would not be exclusionary, and not only would welcome engagement with regional small powers and regional multilaterals but would also be more likely to secure their support. Hence, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and potentially other regional second-tier agents (such as Indonesia, or even ASEAN itself), could band together to provide this leadership, without jeopardizing any privileged role they might have in traditional security arrangements.

The final section of this article addresses the potential for further regional management of international relations through the new governance conceptualizations of NTS minilateralism and regional international commissions. Key to the operation of these new initiatives will be the actions of a new class of actor, identified here as second-tier

powers rather than merely middling powers. They are states with significant traditional security resources and political leverage, but also with traditions of acting in accordance with the normative agenda-setting of middle powers.

From Middle Powers to NTS Second-Tier Powers

Middle powers have been the driving force behind global and regional multilateralism (Teo 2022). Dissatisfied with strategies dictated by great powers, countries with middling resources have sought opportunities to assert their independent policy positions (Holmes 1967, 18-27). They have been pioneers in promoting NTS initiatives through global and regional mechanisms and institutions. In particular, the impetus behind most international commissions has been one or more middle powers. Middle powers lack “compulsory power,” but are, potentially, “system affecting states” (Vom Hou et al. 2012, 187-188). This also differentiates them from “rising powers,” which may ultimately have the capacity to act as great powers or have already newly arrived at this level (Hameiri et al. 2020). Meanwhile, behavioral studies of “middlepowermanship” confer status as a middle power in accordance with diplomatic behavior rather than size, focusing on global issue areas like human rights and the environment (Holmes 1970, 18-49; Cooper et al. 1993). In particular, middle power states have most recently been defined as the “staunchest multilateralists” (Rudderhan 2008, 2). As such, however, they are also vulnerable to the challenges and shortcomings of multilateralism addressed above.

Australia, South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, as well as somewhat controversially, Japan and Taiwan, have all self-identified as middle powers or have been described as such in the literature (Emmers and Teo 2018; Kao et al. 2022). According to the above definitions, however, from a regional perspective, there are questions concerning the ability of some of these actors to perform the

functions of middle powers. First, from a power hierarchy perspective, such is the differential between the great powers acting in the region and those at lower levels that the ability of any of these states to act independently is questionable. Second, from the perspective of human rights championing behavior, normative definitions could not only exclude the potential contributions of authoritarian or hybrid regimes in the region, such as Vietnam, Singapore, and Thailand, but also, potentially, democratic Indonesia which operates much more in accordance with the traditional power hierarchical models of foreign policy.

Middle powers have experienced severe challenges in operating on the global stage, often coming up against the harsh realities of great power intransigence. Despite their deep interdependence, engagement with global issues, and elements of cooperation, the world's major powers are increasingly locked in a "comprehensive competitive relationship" (Shambaugh 2018, 85). Hence, the major NTS agendas championed by middle powers through global institutions and international commissions, such as climate change, the responsibility to protect (R2P) and humanitarian intervention, global governance, human rights, refugees, etc. have frequently been blocked by great powers pursuing their own national interest, narrowly defined (Howe 2022, 248-250). Middle powers have also faced regional epistemological resistance to their normative universalism (Howe 2021, 507; Acharya 2016, 13). Even trans-regional middle power cooperative initiatives, such as that championed for Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey, and Australia (MIKTA), have come to nothing. Jeffrey Robertson (2022) argues that "the middle power moment" based on little more than the parties having in common their self-identification as middle powers, is now over.

However, there are reasons to temper this pessimism. First, a regional focus in terms of both aspirations and actors has been missing, despite it being demanded by the peculiarities of the international management of relations in East Asia. Second, the role of powers that have greater than middling resources, and therefore greater capacity to effect change, especially when these resources are concentrated within a limited

geographic region, has not been adequately considered. And third, there is a need to bring in consideration of avenues for activism and cooperation in NTS fields beyond those championed by middle powers in multilateral forums which are often blocked by great power intransigence, interest, and competition. We need to search, therefore, for a category of actor that is potentially able to overcome these middle power shortcomings.

Just as with middle powers, second-tier actors are herein conceptualized in both hierarchical and behavioral terms. Thus, on the one hand, they can be viewed as actors that have greater than “middling” power resources. These resources can manifest across one or more dimensions of power as, especially in the NTS arena, military, economic, political, and soft/cultural power components can all contribute to national prestige and influence enabling consensual leadership. On the other hand, from a behavioral perspective, they reflect a penchant for concentrating their resources into geographically distinct regions. They are therefore distinguished from traditional middle powers with their more limited resources, but global normative aspirations. They are likewise also distinct from rising powers, as they do not have, or at least no longer have great power aspirations, and are cognizant of their geostrategic limitations.

Those powers described above as being the preferred regional partners for US-led security minilateralism serve as a good starting point for identifying those that fit the hierarchical second-tier criteria. The US considers them the strongest allies in terms of capability and intent, hence possessing greater than middling capacity resources. In terms of behavioral criteria, it is important to consider those powers that focus their resources on the East Asian region, but also those with a significant history of NTS advocacy and regional engagement while recognizing geostrategic limitations in the traditional security operating environment in an era of great power contestation. For the purposes of this foundational article, this means a focus on Japan, South Korea, and Australia, and the prospects of these three second-tier powers being sufficient to provide regional leadership through NTS minilateralism. Future work will focus on the possible addition of other powers which

could fulfill these second-tier hierarchical and behavioral criteria.

In terms of capability, Japan has long possessed the attributes of a great power. Even after wholesale destruction and defeat in World War II, Japan quickly re-emerged based on its “economic miracle,” becoming the world’s second largest economy (though substantially based upon its preferential position within the US-led San Francisco system, and later passed by China). More recently, the rise of China, the ongoing threat of North Korea, and pressure from the US to move from mere “checkbook diplomacy” to shouldering more of the regional defense burden have contributed to a remarkable renaissance of Japanese military might. Japan has the ninth largest military budget in the world at US\$54.1 billion. With some of the most advanced military technology in the world, it ranks as the fifth most powerful after the great powers, US, Russia, and China, and the rising power, India (Hecht 2022). Hence, Japan is certainly more than a mere middle power in terms of economic and even military resources.

Until recently, Japan has lacked the political will to be more assertive and to provide regional leadership in the security field. This has significantly been addressed, however, by “Japan’s incremental security ‘normalization’” (Nilsson-Wright 2017, 6). Initially, Japan’s security build-up was focused on the US alliance and becoming a more reliable partner. The “normalization” of Japan’s security role under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001–2006) involved overseas deployment of Japanese troops for the first time since World War II when they were sent in a supporting role to the US-led “War on Terror” operations in Afghanistan and Iraq—a major step up from the checkbook diplomacy operated by Tokyo in support of its allies during the 1990–1991 Gulf War. Then, under Koizumi’s successor, Shinzo Abe (2006–2007 and 2012–2020), Tokyo “adopted a dual-track approach, combining enhanced bilateralism with enhanced regionalism” (Mulgan 2008, 53).

Indeed, for Mason Richey and Michael Reiterer (2022), “Japan’s strongest and most ambitious attempt at Indo-Pacific leadership has come through its involvement in regional minilateral groupings.” As discussed

above, in some of these, Japan plays the role of first deputy to the US, but within regional minilateral groupings, there are indeed instances of Japanese leadership. These include Japan originating the concept of a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” inaugurating the first iteration of the Quad in 2007, “cooperating with the US in 2017 to revive the minilateral as the more robust Quad 2.0,” driving forward the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative, which includes Australia and India, and “taking the lead on the ‘Asia-Pacific Four’ (AP4) — Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia” (Richery and Reiterer 2022).

Nevertheless, in pure security terms, Japan’s role is consistently to play second fiddle to US leadership. Kent Calder (1988, 517-41), the originator of the “reactive state” hypothesis, downgrades Japan even further than middle power status, seeing the country as occupying the unique position of having the power potential of a mid-range European state, yet the political leverage of much smaller and weaker reactive states. Almost two decades later, Calder claimed that his major contentions have stood the test of time, noting that Japan has not, despite a huge economy, emerged as an effective “rule-maker” in international affairs (Calder 2004). Japanese membership in all the US-led security minilaterals makes traditional security international organization an unlikely avenue for Tokyo fully to develop its second-tier credentials. Furthermore, not only is Japan subject to all the criticisms levelled at regional security minilateralism, but also the history of Japanese military expansionism makes a regional leadership role in this field unobtainable.

Japan is further constrained in traditional security terms by “Article Nine” of its so-called “Pacifist Constitution,” imposed on it by the victorious Allied powers after World War II, which forbids the country from waging war or maintaining an army. This definition has long been stretched by interpretations that allow “self-defense forces” and acts of “self-defense,” as well as attempts to “normalize” described above. Still, an aversion to militarism has significantly been internalized by the domestic body politic (Berger 1993, 119-50).

Despite these traditional security shortcomings, and to a significant

extent, because of them, Japan has a lengthy history of proactive NTS advocacy. Given internal and external structural constraints on the use of force, Japan has consistently tried to pursue its foreign policy through economic rather than military means, such as official development assistance (ODA) and foreign direct investment and loans. Indeed, these anti-military, pro-economic norms have become characteristic of Japanese foreign and security policy (Berger 1993, 119-50). Japan has been a major champion of human security at the UN, consistent with middle power aspirations. Tokyo has also, however, integrated the concept into Japan's ODA. East Asia, and Southeast Asia in particular, has been the main focus of these initiatives since it is "a region that has a close relationship with Japan and high relevance to its security and prosperity" (Muto and Ishikawa 2018, 72). Peacebuilding has been placed as a priority issue under the umbrella of human security since the ODA Charter of 2003 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan). Thus, development, peacebuilding, and human security are combined in Japan's NTS policy for regional international cooperation.

Meanwhile, in hierarchical power measurement terms, South Korea has long been more than a middle-ranked power. In terms of territory, it is on the small side, especially when compared with global powers, and its population base is somewhere in the middle of the pack. However, measurements of its military and economic might are far greater. The country's 550,000 active service personnel places eighth globally, while if reserves are included, South Korea's total of 3,699,000 is second only to that of Vietnam. South Korea's defense budget is in the top 10 at more than US\$50 billion. Hence, South Korea's military might ranks sixth in the world, just behind that of Japan (Hecht 2022).

South Korea has emerged as the world's fastest-growing arms exporter (Jung 2022). This is an area of major policy continuity between the Moon Jae-in (2017-2022) and Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-) administrations. Importantly the prioritization of arms development and exports, which has become known as K-Defense, further links to geoeconomic considerations (Howe 2022, 21). A similar story can be told

regarding South Korea's geoeconomic ranking and positioning, making it into the top 10 in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) (World Bank 2021). Korea is, in fact, part of an exclusive club of only eight states with over 50 million population, and over US\$30,000 GDP per capita (Howe 2022, 22).

Such are the geostrategic and geoeconomics constraints upon South Korea, however, that the country has been conceptualized as being stuck between a "rock and a hard place" in terms of its military dependency upon its closest ally, the US, and its largest market and trading partner, China (Kim and Cha 2016, 101-121). Pressured by the US strategic "rebalancing" in the region, and China's geostrategic "wedge" policy platform, rather than balancing or bandwagoning with either, South Korea has often tried to operationalize some form of "hedging" strategy or, as previously mentioned regarding the policy preference of East Asian actors in general, engaged in "strategic ambiguity" (Chun and Ku 2010, 33-57). Ultimately even the hedging approach was abandoned with the inauguration of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration.

Prior to coming to power, President Yoon had made it clear that "rebuilding" South Korea's alliance with the US was to be central to his geostrategic policy commitments and was also a recognition of Washington's frustrations with the hedging of the outgoing government of President Moon Jae-in (Lee 2022). Yoon has come off the fence and chosen sides. For Ramon Pardo (2022), the extent to which this was ever in doubt has been exaggerated by other commentators. Rather than a strategic dilemma, Seoul had "long ago decided that when it comes to foreign policy and security, its past, present, and future lies with the US and other like-minded partners."

However, like Japan, South Korea also has an important tradition of NTS advocacy and engagement. Successive governments in Seoul have promoted South Korea's role as a convener, conciliator and proactive agenda-setter in international negotiations and multilateral platforms such as the 2010 G20 Seoul Summit, the High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in 2011, the Nuclear Security Summit in 2012, and the

Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI). The Moon Jae-in administration's proposal for a Northeast Asia Peace Community (NEAPC) contained three components: a Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Platform (NAPCP), a New Northern Policy (NNP) and a New Southern Policy (NSP). The ambitious aim was to build a sustainable regional system of cooperation with the 10 Member States of ASEAN, the middle power grouping of MIKTA, India and Northeast Asian states. Jae Jeok Park and Er-win Tan (2022, 101-22) claim further that South Korea has been exploring connections between its NSP and the US Indo-Pacific Strategy in part as an insurance to maintain the US security commitment to the Korean Peninsula, but also to give South Korea more leeway to engage with other regional actors without being perceived as tilting strategically towards China.

Seoul has been participating actively in regional multilateralism and is especially committed to ASEAN institution- and community-building efforts (Teo et al. 2013; Mo 2016, 587-607). South Korea has also assumed a leadership role in attempted regionalization initiatives. The inauguration of East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 was the result of Korean president Kim Dae-Jung's initiative on the establishment of the East Asian Vision Group (EAVG) in 1998, which in turn grew out of the experience of the 1997 financial crisis (Teo et al. 2013). Seoul has been involved in all the major ASEAN-led dialogue platforms such as the APT, ARF, ADMM-Plus, and of course, the EAS (ASEAN Korea Cooperation Fund 2017). In these multilateral institutions with ASEAN, South Korea has strived particularly to take on a neutral role while keeping a low profile regarding political and security issues (Teo et al. 2013).

Finally, there is Australia. Although not possessing the military might of Japan and South Korea, it has nevertheless one of the most important spokes of the San Francisco system and is often the first name on the list of potential minilateral security initiatives. While formally being an actor external to the region, Australia has become incredibly active within it. Australia during the government of John Howard (1996-2007) was often characterized as America's "sheriff" or even "deputy" in the region. This

terminology was first coined in 1999 when Howard was too slow to deny an Australian media report that he would accept that role for maintaining security in the region (Sydney Morning Herald 2002). It received additional coverage when, in 2002, commentators and politicians in Indonesia revived the lesser title in response to Howard's promotion of the idea that the UN Charter should be revised in order to allow pre-emptive strikes against conventional or terrorist attacks, and again in 2003, when President George W. Bush indicated that the US saw Australia not as a deputy, but rather as a sheriff in the region (Sydney Morning Herald 2002; 2003). The Howard government committed significant resources to the US-led operations in Afghanistan in 2001, and Iraq in 2003, despite domestic opposition, seemingly fulfilling the impression of being somewhat reactive to the US when it comes to strategic goals. Howard himself rejected the terminology (Sydney Morning Herald 2003). Instead, he was keen to point to Australia's independent regional leadership roles.

Certainly, Australia has been very active in regional NTS operations. These include the September 1999, Australian-led international peace-keeping force to East Timor (INTERFET), after pro-Indonesia militia launched a violent "scorched-earth" campaign in retaliation to the referendum's overwhelming vote in favor of independence; Australian leadership in countering trans-national crimes, notably people smuggling, money laundering and terrorism, especially after the October 2002 Bali bombings; and crisis relief and reconstruction after the 2004 Indian Ocean Boxing Day tsunami (Cotan 2005). Howard's successor, Kevin Rudd (2007-10 and 2013), was keen to put more distance between Australia and the assumptions of automatic reactivity to US interests in the region. Rudd saw Australia as being able to help shape world responses to urgent global challenges through active diplomacy, including the creation of global and regional institutions and building of coalitions, "centered on the consequences for Australia of the emergence of an 'Asia Pacific century'" (Gyngell 2008). Hence, the Rudd government's policymaking was both multilateral and regional in focus, fitting well with the thrust of

this article, but more along the lines of a middle power.

Rudd was followed by Tony Abbott (2013-2015) a “domestic traditionalist,” who viewed international affairs and Australia’s role through a similar lens to that of Howard. Then came Malcolm Turnbull (2015-2018) a “regional idealist,” promoting a “global rules-based order” as earlier middle-power self-imagers may have done, but also playing greater emphasis on regional opportunities for second-tier activism, proactively shaping the regional order to benefit Australia amid the US-China rivalry, hence coming closest to the second-tier power conceptualization introduced in this article (Lee and Carr 2022, 91-93). Scott Morrison (2018-2022) is described as a “domestic pragmatist” who’s administration represented a retreat to traditional security unilateralism by initiating the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS deal, and in doing so, breaching “a long-considered taboo of Australian defense policy” (Lee and Carr, 93-94). Finally, Anthony Albanese (2022-) has initiated more progressive policies both at home and abroad. While his first overseas visit was to Tokyo to attend a meeting of the Quad, he has also placed emphasis on better relations with China, and on regional cooperation, especially with Indonesia, another candidate for regional second-tier activism.

Thus, these three second-tier powers have significantly more resources than many middle powers and have also demonstrated a regional and cooperative focus in their policy initiatives. Despite their military capacity, in traditional security terms, they remain significantly constrained. All have seemingly accepted a destiny of joining the US bandwagon. Yet their power credentials, across multiple measurements, still contribute to their international “prestige,” and thus their capacity to effect change in the international system. Indeed, for Robert Gilpin (1981, 31), “prestige, rather than power, is the everyday currency of international relations, much as authority is the central ordering feature of domestic society.” As authority is also considered the morally legitimized exercise of power, arguably here is a normative responsibility to effect change for the better in avenues where second-

tier powers have the most influence and ability to lead.

As demonstrated above, at least these three second-tier powers, and potentially other regional actors to be addressed in future research, have already shown an affinity for NTS issues, and have provided regional leadership in addressing them. The conclusion of this article returns to the inherently less confrontational nature of NTS issues and provides policy prescription for regional actors in the consideration of new forms of regional organization and institutions.

Conclusions and Prescriptions

Middle powers, operating through the maxilateral organization of international society at the global level, and regional multilateralism, have failed to resolve collective action problems and peacefully regulate relations between states in the region to provide for the common good. The rise of security “minilateralism” in the Indo-Pacific region, driven primarily by US-led initiatives, has failed to fill the void. Indeed, such institutions are not designed for the purpose. However, they may even have exacerbated the conditions on the ground. Nevertheless, newly empowered regional actors, the second-tier powers, have the potential to address shortcomings in the international management of relations in East Asia. Especially in the NTS realm, they have the capacity and will to effect significant change, and thus policymakers have a responsibility to consider how best to do so.

The rise of NTS perspectives and “new security challenges” have seen the broadening of the scope of enquiry along the x-axis of issues from a strict focus on national survival in a hostile operating environment and questions related to war and peace. Now, it includes some or all of the following: a focus on non-military rather than military threats, transnational rather than national threats, and multilateral or collective rather than self-help security solutions (Acharya 2002; Weaver 1995). Within both security and peacebuilding discourses, there have also been

increasing emphases on individual human beings and the planet or global biosphere, corresponding to a bi-directional expansion along the y-axis of referent objects (Howe 2019, 184).

Contemporary critical perspectives call for “positive, proactive programs that promote peace building, rather than negative, reactive programs intended to reduce violence” and a focus on promoting “harmony, understanding, and effective problem solving” (Kimmel 1992, 125). In other words, a focus on how to bring people constructively together to build a whole greater than the sum of the parts, rather than on how to keep them apart to mitigate against the worst manifestations of conflicts of interests. Policy prescription and obligations for those who govern, as well as putative peacebuilders, must increasingly consider spillover between these diverse agendas, and this has been reflected in the newly emerging humanitarian-development-peace nexus (HDPN) discourse (Howe 2019, 184). Through such an understanding, it becomes possible to generate policies and initiatives that may alleviate conflictual pressures.

Even within the East Asian region, the post-Cold War world has seen a dramatic shift from focusing upon external threats to the state to focusing upon direct and indirect violence upon individuals within the state, and this process has picked up speed since the outbreak of COVID-19. Conceptualizations of security in the academic and policy communities need, therefore, to embrace a comprehensive understanding of security. In a similar manner, peace can no longer be characterized as the simple absence of war (if that was ever truly the case). Rather, in our efforts to construct a truly sustainable peace, we need to broaden our understanding of those forces which stimulate conflictual relationships (Özerdem and Lee 2016, 82). Johan Galtung (1969, 167-191) characterized this as a difference between “negative peace” and “positive peace.”

Over time, therefore, security provision in both theory and practice, has become steadily entwined with other international governance aspirations and provisions. There remain operational shortcomings at the global governance level. Still, these amount to “noble opportunities” for

second-tier actors to act with a degree of independence from great powers, furthering their national interest, while also furthering the cause of security cooperation and governance, particularly in the regional context (Lee 2014). As newly empowered actors, second-tier powers have a moral responsibility to promote the peaceful regulation of conflictual relationships, but also to generate collective good, and increasingly the resources to do both. With greater power or prestige comes greater responsibility.

Traditional security issues involve threats to the very existence of a state, and are also caught up with ideas of national sovereignty and identity. Not surprisingly, therefore, under conditions of limited trust and historical overhangs, all states in East Asia have been resistant to any pooling of sovereignty or collective security initiatives, preferring to rely on “self-help” or bilateral military alliances. Yet cooperation in the NTS arena is a very real possibility, with some already documented in peacekeeping operations, disaster response, and in the EAS. NTS issues are less closely correlated with existential threat to state entities, and therefore cooperation between states becomes more viable, especially when they have a shared interest. They also lend themselves to leadership by actors other than great powers. What success in terms of NTS cooperation has accrued at the global level has been through the efforts of middle powers, whose leadership is also seen as less threatening. At the regional level there is greater hope for further success as not only are epistemological heritages likely to align more closely, but also regional second-tier powers are less likely to be viewed as part of the Western hegemony in such fields.

What then can and should the regional second-tier powers and their societies do to promote solutions to NTS challenges? Rather than lament geostrategic inadequacies and challenges, it would benefit regional actors to divert at least some of their resources to exploring solutions to seemingly intractable challenges through radical NTS thinking. John Nilsson-Wright (2017, 1) has pointed out not only that “[n]ew and more flexible minilateral alliances and security partnerships offer a valuable

means to confront non-traditional security challenges” but also that there is “an increased appetite for eschewing grand strategic designs but still cooperating where particular interests overlap or converge.”

Kim Dae-jung, was not only, as described above, an early proponent of regional cooperation through the EAVG, excluding the hegemonic power of the US, but also a champion of NTS cooperation as a way of de-escalating conflict. He initiated a positive engagement policy towards North Korea called the “Sunshine Policy,” emphasizing reconciliation and cooperation between the two sides (Kim 1999, 12 & 64-5). Learning from the failure of previous traditional security foci, the aim was for “easy tasks first, difficult tasks later,” “economy first, politics later,” “non-governmental organizations first, government later,” and “give first, take later” (Moon 2012, 26). Second-tier power cooperation should follow a similar order.

In terms of formal international organizational cooperation, NTS minilaterals could combine the collective leadership approach of middle power multilateralism with the greater focus of minilaterals. Thus, there might be three to five regionally focused second-tier powers providing joint leadership on NTS issues rather than mere back-up for great powers as is usually the case in a traditional security-focused minilateral. Meanwhile, more informal institutions would include but would not be limited to regional, as opposed to global, international commissions. Such commissions could be launched on a variety of NTS challenges like regional pandemic response, transnational pollution (yellow dust in Northeast Asia and haze in Southeast Asia), regional refugee flows, and disaster risk reduction.

There are numerous advantages to taking this type of institutional approach. First, it would empower new East Asian agents. Second, it would remove the great power tensions from NTS security promotion. Third, collaboration in NTS fields can build confidence, lead to a more cooperative wider relationship between actors, and even the evolution of a culture of “yesability” whereby the expectations of parties are those of joint problem-solvers rather than adversaries, even under conditions of animosity (Fisher et al. 1991, 40-55). Moreover, consolidating a workable

partnership between countries, communities, and people in the region is a meaningful confidence building exercise, which would contribute to improving the bilateral relationship at the people-to-people level. Thus, cooperation on NTS can spill over into the traditional security field, enabling the normalization of relations between state level actors in East Asia.

This process would reflect both functionalist and social constructivist perspectives on building peace. According to David Mitrany (1933, 101), collective governance and “material interdependence” develops its own internal dynamic as states integrate in limited functional, technical, and/or economic areas, ultimately spilling over into the high political sphere of security through the establishment of a culture of cooperation. Here, the functional cooperation would take place within the institutions of NTS minilaterals and regional international commissions. Meanwhile, for constructivists, rules, norms, and related practices form institutions which shape both behavior and identity of actors (Onuf 1998, 61). Rules make agents, agents make rules. “Social rules (the term rules includes, but is not restricted to, legal rules) make the process by which people and society constitute each other continuous and reciprocal” (Onuf 2013, 4). Thus, the practices adhered to in NTS minilaterals and regional international commissions could shape not only the behavior of states within the region, but also their very identities, contributing to the internalization of peaceful norms in East Asia.

Hence, once established, regional international commissions and NTS minilaterals could ultimately turn to address seemingly intractable and zero-sum traditional security issues such as nuclear proliferation, governance (state) failure and intervention, and even geostrategic flashpoints, as well as those issues which bridge two challenges, such as resource and water security. Through these mechanisms second-tier powers could provide much needed impetus and leadership to East Asian security cooperation and conflict transformation.

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The Evolution of Japan's Policy of Regional Security Multilateralism in East Asia in the Post-Cold War Era¹

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Abstract

Japan's policy of regional security multilateralism has emerged as an additional paradigm alongside the two traditional bilateral approaches in Japan's foreign and security policies. This shift has taken place in response to the new regional and international conditions that have arisen in the post-Cold War period. A multitude of external and internal factors have influenced Japan's decision to adopt a multi-tiered security approach in the aftermath of the Cold War. In this context, multilateralism has evolved as one tier within the broader multi-tiered security approach, which now dominates Japanese foreign policy in the new era focused on the Asia-Pacific. This approach has materialized as a result of Japanese policymakers' assessment of various internal and external factors. These influential factors can be summarized as follows: changes in the regional security order and structural transformations, Japan's aspiration to enhance its great power status, historical considerations affecting Japan's standing in the region, and constitutional constraints. Consequently, Japan has assumed the role of a key supporting state in the construction of regional multilateral institutions through a cooperative security approach. Grounded in this foundation, Japan has pursued its policy of regional security multilateralism primarily through its interactions with ASEAN-centered institutions.

Keywords : regional security, multilateralism, multi-tiered security approach, Asia-Pacific, Japan

¹ This article is derived from the author's doctoral thesis at Shandong University.

Introduction

This article aims to examine how and under what conditions Japan's policy of regional security multilateralism developed in the post-Cold War era in the Asia-Pacific. However, in order to better understand Japan's regional security multilateralism, it is necessary to consider Japan's security policy in a broader context. Japan's regional security multilateralism is one of the tiers within the multi-tiered security approach developed in the early post-Cold War years. This multi-tiered security approach introduced an additional paradigm to Japan's security policy beyond its alliance with the United States (US) and presented new options for Japan in the realm of foreign and security policy. At its core, the multi-tiered security approach reflects a desire to shape a new regional security order for Japan, given the uncertainties of the post-Cold War Asia-Pacific region.

The principal method for data collection in this article is document research, encompassing content and discourse analysis. To gather relevant and qualitative information on the topic, the research draws from an extensive variety of data sources to extract available knowledge. The majority of the content for analysis in this study originates from official Japanese government policy papers and discourse, as well as other policy documents from various state institutions and agencies. Additionally, the article utilizes reports, surveys conducted by think tanks, academic journal articles, books, newspapers, academic dissertations, laws and regulations, and other online sources.

Japan's adoption of a policy of regional security multilateralism developed as a result of several internal and external factors amid the new regional and international conditions brought about by the end of the Cold War. Firstly, as the US began reducing its troop presence in the Asia-Pacific in the early post-Cold War years, Japanese policy-makers perceived a shift in US attention, away from a region where it had been at the core of the security order for nearly half a century. Multilateralism emerged as an alternative paradigm to address Japanese security needs.

Secondly, within the new context following the Cold War, Japanese policy-makers recognized a disparity between Japan's economic power and its political and military capabilities. This realization prompted a shift from small-middle power diplomacy to great power diplomacy, aimed at shaping the regional order in the Asia-Pacific. Multilateralism was viewed as a viable political option to manage these concerns, as pursuing great power status was seen as potentially causing apprehension among regional countries about Japan's intentions. Thirdly, both the apprehensions arising from Japan's historical baggage within the region and the easing of concerns among regional countries that Japan might leverage its substantial economic power into political and military influence following US troop reduction plans played a significant role. Lastly, a key factor driving Japan towards multilateralism was Article 9 of the constitution, a crucial limiting factor in the execution of the country's security policy. Despite efforts to reinterpret the constitution and some progress made, Article 9 still prevents Japan from maintaining a full-fledged army, participating in collective defense initiatives, and extending the role of Self-Defense Forces (SDF) beyond the country's territorial boundaries. Given these limitations, regional cooperation and multilateral institution-building have gained importance in Japan's foreign and security policy.

In this manner, this study aims to contribute to the literature by delving beyond the US-Japan bilateral alliance, which has been the cornerstone of Japan's foreign and security policy for the past 70 years. It accomplishes this by examining the policy of regional security multilateralism, an aspect that is generally less explored in Japanese foreign and security policy literature, within the framework of regional multilateral initiatives.

This study consists of three main sections, in addition to the introduction and a general evaluation section. The first part examines the contours of Japan's security policy during the Cold War period, setting the stage for a deeper understanding of Japan's policy of regional security multilateralism in East Asia during the post-Cold War era. The second part addresses how, under what conditions, and for what purpose the

multi-tiered security approach was developed to better respond to Japan's evolving security perceptions and threats. This development occurred within the new regional and international environment that emerged immediately after the Cold War. The third part focuses on multilateralism as one of the tiers within this multi-tiered security approach, considering Japan's chronological role in regional multilateral initiatives such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), East Asian Community (EAC), and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+)—initiatives in which Japan is either involved or actively striving to develop.

Japan's Security Policy During the Cold War Era

Throughout the Cold War era, Japan adhered to the foreign policy framework outlined by its first Prime Minister, Shigeru Yoshida, during the occupation years. This "Yoshida Doctrine" encompassed a comprehensive security policy that advocated minimal military rearmament for Japan and prioritized economic recovery. It was based on a security alliance with the US (Akaha 1991, 324-325; Okazaki 1982, 188). Operating as a junior partner in this bilateral relationship, Tokyo acknowledged the unequal terms of the security treaty established in 1951, during the final stages of the US occupation of post-war Japan, which was later ratified alongside the San Francisco Peace Treaty in the following year (Shinoda 2011, 13; Smith 2011, 32). However, the increasing criticism of the initial security pact's origins and imbalance in the 1950s led to the negotiation of a revised treaty, finalized in Washington in January 1960, which addressed many of its shortcomings. This new treaty clarified the US's defense commitment to Japan (Article V) and recognized the necessity of mutual consultation on security matters (Article VI) (Kazuya 2009, 71-72, 75). Article VI of the security treaty stipulated that the US forces could use military bases and areas in Japan to "maintain the security of Japan" and "preserve international peace and

security in the Far East” (Sakata 2011, 94; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA) 2022a).

During the entire Cold War period, Japan adhered to a foreign and security policy aligned with and supportive of US policies, showing limited interest in regional multilateral security structures. According to Kolmas (2014, 49-50), this was primarily due to the sufficiency of the Yoshida Doctrine, which relied on the US for security matters and emphasized an export-oriented, international trade-focused recovery strategy. This approach obviated the need for multilateral and bilateral partnerships, and embracing multilateral political and security institutions would have weakened US-Japan bilateralism. Additionally, the absence of a shared perception of threat and the diverse political, economic, cultural, and social systems within the region contributed to the inappropriateness of a multilateral security approach for Japan (Hughes 2021, 46).

Cha (2011, 158-159) asserts that another reason for Japan’s indifference to multilateral security approaches during this period stemmed from historical suspicions harbored by many countries in the region regarding Japan. Any endeavor towards multilateral security would necessitate Japan taking on a larger leadership role, which was met with resistance by many countries. For instance, proposals like establishing a Pacific Treaty Organization (PATO) counterpart to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the 1960s, and the concept of Pan-Pacific Cooperation, reflecting Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira’s efforts to play a more substantial political and economic role in Southeast Asia during the 1970s and 1980s, were met with negative reactions. The issue lay in the perception that Japan’s increased role would translate to a reduced role for the US, implying that the US was ceding regional control to Japan. Consequently, throughout the Cold War, Japan’s regional security policy hinged on the US-Japan bilateral security alliance, aligned with the principles of the Yoshida doctrine, and did not consider multilateral security as a viable alternative approach.

With the collapse of the bipolar system, the regional security

landscape in the Asia-Pacific region underwent a transformation. From the late-1980s to the mid-1990s, improved diplomatic relations among regional countries positively influenced regional dynamics. Notably, Sino-Japanese relations, strained since the 1960s, were restored in 1990. China also improved relations with several ASEAN countries, including Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam. The Soviet Union and its successor, Russia, improved relations with Japan and South Korea. Furthermore, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Mongolia and Cam Ranh Bay played a significant role in reducing regional tensions in East Asia (Diplomatic Bluebook 1991). In the eyes of Tokyo's decision-makers, this evolving international environment created opportunities for regional cooperation on political and security matters.

However, despite these perceived positive developments, the post-Cold War era retained certain security risks and uncertainties. The Taiwan Strait and Korean Peninsula conflicts, the Cambodian issue, disputes in the East China Sea (ECS) and South China Sea (SCS), as well as unresolved disputes such as the Northern Territories issue, persisted. Japan's historical baggage from World War II and the ongoing rivalry among regional countries fostered a sense of insecurity and distrust. Concerns also arose that the diminishing influence of the US and the Soviet Union could lead to a shift in regional power dynamics, triggering a potentially dangerous competition for regional dominance and resulting geopolitical uncertainties (Diplomatic Bluebook 1990). The end of bipolarity and the Cold War, coupled with arms build-up in East Asia, China's military growth, improved Sino-Russian relations, and the potential proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, transformed the environment that had previously hindered the development of multilateral security mechanisms during the Cold War into a conducive setting (Hook 1999, 160; Yuzawa 2005a, 83). All these factors prompted Japan to consider external developments in the regional security architecture.

In a region characterized by security uncertainties, Japan recognized the need to reassess its regional security policy. The primary threat to Japan's security was no longer the Soviet Union, but rather the prevailing

regional uncertainties. Addressing these uncertainties required a broader security policy that extended beyond the confines of the US-Japan bilateral alliance. Although Japan continued to regard its alliance with the US as pivotal to its security, it began to embrace a new security approach referred to as the “multi-tiered approach,” alternatively termed the multi-faceted or multi-layered approach (Yuzawa 2005a, 62; Ashizawa 2003, 362).

Japan’s Multi-Tiered Security Approach: Post-Cold War Era

In the early 1990s many Japanese decision-makers grew dissatisfied with the disparity between Japan’s economic might and its political power and security role on the global stage. Certain bureaucrats and politicians, in particular, believed that Japan should assume a role in shaping the evolving world order (Mochizuki 1995, 65-68; Inoguchi 1993, 139-146). As the Cold War ended, the demise of US-Soviet rivalry and the transformation in Eastern Europe were anticipated to bring about changes in the Asia-Pacific region. This significant shift prompted Japan to reevaluate its stance on regional security multilateralism. During the early 1990s, Yukio Satoh, Director General of the Information Analysis, Research and Planning Bureaus at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), along with other ministry officials, introduced and conceptualized the multi-tiered security approach. This approach viewed stability and security as multifaceted mechanisms through various arrangements and frameworks (Yuzawa 2005, 47-48-50).

Broadly, the multi-tiered approach comprises four pillars. The first tier emphasizes bilateralism, rooted in the US-Japan alliance. The second tier centers on multilateralism, focusing on collaborative security efforts among Asia-Pacific nations to tackle security concerns. This tier facilitates the exchange of ideas, approaches, and thoughts among member states to promote cooperation, mutual understanding, and communication

within the region. The third tier involves minilateralism or supplementalism, functioning through case-by-case and ad hoc arrangements among select countries to address specific security-related issues rather than the involvement of all regional countries. The fourth tier concentrates on economic and environmental issues unrelated to security but believed to foster favorable conditions for long-term regional security and political relations (Ashizawa 2003, 364).

Ashizawa (2013, 136) specifies that the multi-tiered security approach assigns distinct functions to different tiers with a hierarchical emphasis on defense and deterrence functions. However, the roles of these four tiers are mutually complementary. He contends that several external and internal factors contributed to Japan's adoption of a multi-tiered security approach after the Cold War. These factors include a shift in the regional security order and structural changes, Japan's aspiration for greater global power status, historical legacies in the region, and constitutional limitations (Ashizawa 2003, 363).

A primary impetus for Japan's adoption of the multi-tiered security approach appears to have been the alteration in the regional security order. In April 1990, under the Bush administration, a report outlining the Asia-Pacific framework announced the US's intention to withdraw around 14-15,000 military personnel from East Asia by the end of 1992. This reduction included 5-6,000 personnel from US bases in Japan, marking the initial phase of troop reduction. Subsequent stages of troop reduction followed. Negotiations concerning the closure of specific bases in the Philippines and the repatriation of troops from bases in Okinawa and Korea signaled to Japanese policymakers a changing regional security order and structure. The reduction of US troops in East Asia marked a significant departure from the nearly half-century-old US-led hub-and-spokes security arrangement, and it signified a shift in US attention away from East Asia. In response, Japanese policymakers began to consider the necessity of incorporating multilateral security cooperation alongside the existing security approach rooted in the US bilateral alliance (Singh 2009, 93).

Another key driver behind Japan's adoption of the multi-tiered security approach was the reassessment of its security strategy following the Cold War, fueled by a desire for major power recognition. Despite Japan's economic ascendancy by the late 1980s, its security status remained confined to a regional sphere. This discrepancy between economic and security realms underscored Japan's low profile and reactive stance in foreign policy. Consequently, Japanese policymakers recognized the need to redefine Japan's identity in the post-Cold War landscape. In their view, Japan should transition from a position of small-middle power diplomacy to major power diplomacy, actively contributing to shaping the emerging world order during this transitional period. This transformational role involved fostering the East Asian regional order (Ashizawa 2003, 372). In this context, Yuzawa (2005, 465) contends that multilateralism was a fitting approach within Japan's foreign policy toolkit to allay neighboring countries' concerns regarding its new security role. Moreover, multilateralism offered a platform for regional countries to voice concerns about Japan's benign intentions. According to Singh, this coincided with a new approach in Japan's national security discussions that sought to address Asia-Pacific security matters holistically, transcending the American hub-and-spoke system to ensure regional peace and stability. This approach entailed engaging in political dialogues on shared security concerns, deepening political and security cooperation among regional countries alongside the pre-existing bilateralism (Singh 2009, 94).

Ashizawa (2003, 373) underscores the significance of Japan's imperial past and its implications for neighbors that suffered under Japanese militarism, such as the Koreans and China. These countries remain sensitive to the possibility of a resurgence of Japanese militarism. This historical baggage necessitates Japan to adopt a novel approach to its regional policy. Concerns emerged regionally as the American military presence dwindled in Asia. The prospect of Japan, an economic powerhouse, seeking an independent military capability raised apprehensions. Neighboring Asian countries worried that Japan's heightened power

would fill the void left by retreating US forces, leading to the conversion of economic influence into political and military dominance. Consequently, Japan needed a new security approach to allay these concerns and demonstrate a commitment to eschewing militarism.

Another influential factor pushing Japan toward the multi-tiered security approach stemmed from constitutional limitations, specifically Article 9 of Japan's constitution. This article serves as a critical constraint on the execution of Japan's security policy (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2022). Katzenstein and Okawara (1996, 285-286) highlight Japan's efforts to enhance its regional and international security role, including reinterpreting the constitution to affirm the right of self-defense and the existence of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF). However, despite these reinterpretation attempts, Article 9 does not authorize the establishment of a standing army or participation in collective defense initiatives. Moreover, the activities of the SDF are restricted to Japan's territorial boundaries. Sending SDF personnel abroad is only permissible for UN-approved rear-area support and peacekeeping operations in challenging conditions. Ashizawa (2003, 375) argues that these limitations led Japan to prioritize its bilateral security relationship with the US and promote regional cooperation and the development of multilateral institutions. Furthermore, strong bilateral ties with the US make multilateral arrangements more advantageous for Japan, as they tie the US to the Asia-Pacific region.

Ashizawa (2003, 375-6) suggests that the pursuit of major power status enabled Japan to assume an active role in building the regional security order. The decision by the US to reduce its East Asia-based troops prompted Japanese policymakers to recognize a shift in the regional security order. Japan needed a novel conceptual framework for its foreign and security policy in response. Yet, this new conceptualization had to account for historical legacies and constitutional constraints. Historical legacies informed policymakers about the viability of multilateral cooperation, while constitutional constraints shaped the significance and functions assigned to collective protection and regional security

maintenance. The term “multi-ness” in the approach allowed Japan flexibility to engage with various regional cooperation mechanisms and groupings, provided they complemented the importance of the US alliance structure (Ashizawa 2003, 124).

Japan’s Regional Security Multilateralism

Japan’s role in the development of regional multilateralism within the Asia-Pacific region has historically been enigmatic to neighboring countries. Specifically, during the Cold War era, due to Japan’s heavy reliance on its bilateral alliance with the US for regional stability and national security, Tokyo held a skeptical and negative stance toward establishing Asian-centered multilateral institutions, particularly in political and security contexts. Japan’s strong dependence on the US alliance was perceived as a mechanism preventing Japan from adopting militaristic and aggressive tendencies, ensuring the trust of regional states. Consequently, Japan’s engagement in the region’s multilateral security structures and mechanisms was overshadowed by the imperative to safeguard this alliance. However, this disposition underwent a transformation with the conclusion of the Cold War. As a result, Japan emerged as a significant supporter of regional multilateral institution building in the area, notably evident in its participation in Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (Goh 2013, 179). Japan’s inclination toward regional security multilateralism in the post-Cold War era found its roots in the cooperative security approach (Yuzawa 2005a, 82). On this foundation, Japan executed its regional security multilateral policy through engagements with ASEAN-centered institutions.

Japan’s ASEAN-focused approach to multilateral regional security has consistently followed a coherent trajectory, actively engaging in ASEAN-led multilateral security structures to cultivate trust, enhance confidence, and bolster regional security, particularly since the 1990s. In

this context, Shoji (2020, 2) delineates Japan's involvement across three main categories: i) supporting ASEAN's endeavors to establish mechanisms for addressing regional security concerns; ii) enhancing, adapting, and expanding existing platforms; and iii) promoting ASEAN's initiatives to fortify its multilateral framework. These encompass various multilateral mechanisms, including the ARF, East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+). The evolution of Japan's objectives within these ASEAN-driven multilateral security mechanisms over time reflects a cautious deliberation on how to balance cooperation with its US alliance while addressing concerns arising from China's growing influence and challenges.

ASEAN Regional Forum

Midford (2000) highlights a pivotal moment in Japan's regional security multilateralism during July 1991, when Tokyo proposed the establishment of a region-wide multilateral security dialogue mechanism at the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC) meeting held in Malaysia. This initiative, known as the "Nakayama Proposal," put forth by then Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Nakayama, marked a significant departure from the post-World War II approach centered solely on the US alliance. The proposal, which gained acceptance, suggested using an existing framework rather than constructing a new institution. Its focus was primarily on dialogue, as opposed to functions such as conflict prevention, resolution, or collective security (Midford 2000, 368). Yuzawa (2005a, 12) underscores that this initiative played a crucial role in contributing to the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994. A key reason for Japan's adoption of a multilateral security approach in the post-Cold War era was the recognition that it needed to expand beyond its reliance on the US alliance to address the new array of threats in the evolving regional security landscape.

However, Ashizawa (2013, 126) notes that this initial attempt by

Japan did not receive the expected response from either the US or ASEAN. The US and ASEAN were unaware of the Nakayama proposal beforehand, leading to reservations. While the US opposed the idea of a multilateral security framework in Asia, ASEAN's concern was that the proposal did not align with their notion of introducing a multilateral mechanism for regional security. Specifically, ASEAN's objection was related to the proposal's suggestion to establish a security dialogue meeting for senior officials within the ASEAN-PMC.

Despite the initial setback, Japan's interest in regional multilateralism remained robust in the 1990s. In fact, during this period, Japan's foreign and security policy circles garnered increasing attention. Japanese endorsement of regional security multilateralism was reflected in official reports generated by a series of commissions tasked with assessing the country's foreign and security requirements post-Cold War. For example, in May 1992, Prime Minister Miyazawa established the "Committee on Asia and the Pacific in the 21st Century" to evaluate Japan's foreign and security policy toward the Asia-Pacific in the post-Cold War era. The committee's report recommended that Japan support efforts to establish a region-wide multilateral security mechanism aimed at addressing arms control issues, enhancing military transparency, and fostering disarmament endeavors in the Asia-Pacific region (Ashizawa 2013, 137-8). Similarly, in 1992, the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) special commission on security affairs, established to assess the country's post-Cold War security policies, presented a 10-point recommendation in December. The proposal suggested supporting the establishment of a multilateral regional security mechanism in the Asia-Pacific region, while also bolstering Japan's military capabilities and strengthening its alliance with the US. Specifically, the commission recommended that Tokyo endorse the ASEAN-PMC as a political dialogue process and transform it into a broader, officially recognized, regional multilateral security institution (Yuzawa 2005a, 79).

In January 1992, during the fourth summit of ASEAN held in Singapore, the leaders of ASEAN member states proposed the introduction of a

new regional mechanism for security dialogue among Asian and Pacific countries. This proposition advocated utilizing the ASEAN-PMC, an annual meeting involving foreign ministers from ASEAN member states and six dialogue partners: Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and the US, to discuss bilateral and regional economic matters (Ashizawa 2013, 128; Association of Southeast Asian Nations 1992). Japan had already submitted its institution-building proposal to ASEAN. Nakayama's initial proposal differed slightly from the eventual creation of the ARF. As Ashizawa points out, the Japanese proposal excluded China and Russia from the institution and suggested using an existing mechanism rather than establishing an entirely new institution. Nakayama's proposal, however, paved the way for conceptualizing multilateral regional security structures as a novel instrument for addressing regional security concerns (Ashizawa 2013, 128). Following ASEAN's proposal to establish the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1993, Japan became one of its founding members, and the forum convened its inaugural meeting in 1994, thereby becoming part of a regional multilateral security structure for the first time (Ashizawa 2013, 140).

From the outset, Japanese policymakers viewed the ARF as a platform supporting multilateral cooperation in addressing regional security challenges. Japan saw the ARF as a means of exerting leadership to a certain degree as a new order emerged in East Asia following the end of the Cold War. Tokyo perceived the ARF as a tool to facilitate security dialogues, enhancing mutual reassurance among regional countries, particularly between Japan and its neighbors. This approach allowed Japan to play a more pronounced political and security role in the region (Goh 2013, 179; Hook 1999, 174-5).

Furthermore, the assessment made by Japanese decision-makers during the establishment of ARF was based on the belief that a multilateral forum would contribute to the continuation of America's commitment to the region and its presence there (Goh 2013, 179; Shoji 2020, 3). Hook (1999, 174-5) suggests that it is also important to consider the idea that multilateralism can complement Japan's bilateral alliance with the US.

Additionally, the ARF could serve Japan's interests as a convenient multilateral platform for engagement with, rather than balancing against, China in East Asia. Therefore, the inclusion of China in the ARF has been a significant issue for Japanese policymakers.

Additionally, as highlighted by Hughes (2009, 855), Tokyo aimed to resist China's growing influence through a strategy of "over-supplying" regionalism to diffuse China's ability to concentrate its power in any one forum." The ARF process, as explained by Lam (2011, 199), served as a mechanism for Tokyo to manage potential conflicts, especially with China. Japan sought to leverage the ARF process to promote military transparency, mutual reassurance, information sharing, confidence-building measures, and an arms registry, while also engaging China through dialogue, cooperation, and consultation. Tokyo envisioned the ARF as a practical institution to enhance coordination and collaboration among regional countries in addressing unresolved issues and conflicts. Furthermore, Japan perceived the ARF as a multilateral platform that could bridge the divide between the West and East, as well as between China and ASEAN.

However, when Japan's efforts to utilize the ARF for greater transparency in military spending and confidence-building measures encountered resistance from China, Japan began to adopt a more pessimistic view of the ARF's efficacy. Japan expressed concerns that the organization's contribution to regional power balance might be limited, showing only partial functions (Yuzawa 2005, 480). Furthermore, at the second ARF summit in 1995, a crisis emerged over territorial sovereignty claims in the South China Sea (SCS), during which China opposed Japan's perspective that the dispute in the SCS, while not involving Japan directly, could impact freedom of navigation. Chien-peng (2017, 136) argues that China preferred to address the issue bilaterally with parties directly involved, such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Brunei, rather than internationalizing it. China's opposition led to substantial discussions on the matter, with Japan finding itself outside of the dialogue platforms. Consequently, Japan began to question the effectiveness of the ARF, as

it was unable to influence developments in Southeast Asia despite its strength and influence. Nonetheless, Japan continues to view the ARF's effectiveness as valuable for practical cooperation, especially regarding joint exercises for non-traditional security threats. Notably, Japan actively participated in the ASEAN Regional Forum Disaster Relief Exercise, held biennially from 2009 to 2015. As indicated by Shoji (2020, 3-4), Japan's ongoing efforts to revise the ARF are geared toward fostering practical cooperation and mutual trust among participating nations, allowing the ARF to transition from building trust to implementing preventive diplomacy.

East Asia Summit

In a speech delivered in Singapore in January 2002, Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi introduced the concept of establishing a community in which Japan collaborates and advances alongside other Asian countries (Hosoya 2011, 17; Kersten 2013, 41). A year later, the Japanese government, together with ASEAN members, unveiled the Tokyo Declaration, expressing its endorsement for creating a community in East Asia (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2012). Koizumi's proposition envisioned China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and ASEAN members as the nucleus of this community. This idea, synonymous with the "East Asian Community" (EAC) concept, rested on the assumption of positive Sino-Japanese relations and Japan's need for robust relationships with East Asian nations to realize such a community (Hosoya 2011, 17). China responded favorably to Koizumi's suggestion, and a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson remarked:

China is willing to see Japan and various countries in Southeast Asia maintain good cooperative relations and it hopes Japan, being the only developed country in Asia, will play a constructive role in maintaining economic stability and promoting the healthy development of cooperation in the region. (Terada 2006, 5-6)

However, while Tokyo and Beijing initially supported regional cooperation through institutional mechanisms like the EAC, a significant point of contention regarding the East Asia Summit (EAS) revolved around membership. Central to this debate was the question of whether non-East Asian countries—Australia, India, and New Zealand—should participate. This debate mainly unfolded between Japan and China. Japan argued for the inclusion of these countries to counterbalance Chinese influence, as their participation would dilute China's sway. Prasirtsuk (2006, 229) asserts that Tokyo's insistence on Australia's participation aimed to strengthen its partnership with Australia and the US, and to counter China's regional dominance ambitions. Conversely, China contended that the summit, focused on East Asian community-building, should only involve ASEAN members and China, Japan, and Korea. Nonetheless, Japan's stance partly prevailed when India expressed strong interest in the EAS, rather than ASEAN Plus Three, for the purpose of East Asian community-building.

Keen to shape the structure of the EAS, Japan issued a concept paper in mid-2004 outlining its approach to regional community-building. Japan demonstrated its commitment by indicating its willingness to co-chair the inaugural EAS meeting with Malaysia. In response, China, uneasy about Japan's leadership in community-building, released a modality paper in January 2005. Through this paper, China rejected Japan's joint leadership proposal, arguing that the summit's presidency should be held solely by the host country (Terada 2006, 8-9).

The divergence between Japan and China paved the way for ASEAN to lead the organization of the EAS, as intensifying competition between the two major regional powers risked hindering the creation of an East Asian community. Consequently, ASEAN foreign ministers stipulated the criteria for EAS membership. To join the summit, states needed to be i) ASEAN dialogue partners; ii) signatories of the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation; and iii) economically engaged in the region. Ultimately, this membership discussion led to the inclusion of Australia, India, and New Zealand, alongside the 13 ASEAN Plus Three members, in the first

EAS meeting held in Malaysia in December 2005 (Prasirtsuk 2006, 230; Terada 2006, 6-9).

Yuzawa (2021, 142) suggests that Japan displayed limited interest in utilizing the EAS for regional political and security cooperation. Although Japan incorporated principles like openness, transparency and inclusiveness into the EAS' annual declaration, the Abe administration leaned more towards an Asia-Pacific multilateralism grounded in universal values such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and market economy. In line with this, Abe introduced the notion of a "broader Asia" during his speech to the Indian Parliament in August 2007, connecting the Pacific and Indian oceans with the US and Australia. This broader Asia concept, later evolving into the Indo-Pacific concept, aimed to legitimize US involvement in Asian institutions. This development gave rise to "value-oriented diplomacy," emphasizing the creation of an "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" comprising democratic Eurasian countries. This diplomacy stressed universal values in Japan's foreign policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2011). According to Terada (2013, 158), this value-oriented diplomacy aimed to underline the significance of Japan's alliance with the US, sharing common values.

East Asian Community

Although the concept of the EAC was initially introduced during the LDP era, it became a prominent political goal during the Hatoyama-led Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government. This era aimed to prioritize "Asia First" diplomacy and elevated the EAC as a key theme in its foreign policy (Kersten 2013, 45). Hatoyama's vision of the EAC positioned Japan as an integral Asian nation and underscored Japan's leadership role in institutionalizing East Asian security (Hatoyama 2009). Hatoyama sought to shift Japan's foreign policy away from its US alliance, aiming for a more autonomous and Asian-focused direction (Anno 2012, 55). While Hatoyama (2009) acknowledged the US alliance as the "cornerstone of

Japanese diplomatic policy” in a September 2009 article published in the Japanese-language magazine *Voice*, he also stressed that Japan’s national identity was rooted in Asia. He also pointed out the approaching end of the US’s unipolar era and the onset of Asian multipolarity.

Envall and Fijiwara (2012, 67) assert that the primary distinction between Hatoyama’s EAC initiative and that of the Koizumi era lay in their approaches to East Asian countries. While Koizumi aimed for close ties via bilateral trade agreements and intergovernmental institutions, Hatoyama intended to realize his vision through significant compromise with East Asian neighbors, especially China. He sought to downplay the security aspect stemming from Japan’s US alliance and redefine Japan’s role in Asia. Thus, the 2009 DPJ manifesto emphasized the need for Tokyo to strengthen ties not just with China but also with South Korea and other Asian nations (Democratic Party of Japan 2009; Yuzawa 2021, 143). Although Hatoyama expressed his interest in the EAC at the fourth EAS meeting in October 2009, he encountered less support than expected from both domestic and international audiences. This raised concerns about Japanese foreign policy under DPJ leadership, particularly in the US and other regional parties, as Hatoyama’s proposal aimed to reduce the US alliance’s significance in Japanese foreign policy (Yuzawa 2021, 143).

During the EAS summit in Malaysia in December 2008, Japan and China disagreed on the EAC’s membership composition. China favored an East Asian model involving the ASEAN states plus China, Japan, and Korea, whereas Japan sought to also include the US, Australia, and New Zealand. Beijing saw a strategy led by an increasingly weak Japan to counterbalance its vulnerability to a rising China. Consequently, Envall and Fijiwara (2012, 66-7) contend that the DPJ-led EAC vision was ineffective, raising China’s suspicions that Japan pursued a zero-sum multilateral policy to regain its economic and diplomatic dominance in the Asia-Pacific. Hatoyama expressed opposition to US membership in the community, suggesting it would weaken Japan’s leadership. However, Takahara (2011) notes that the struggle for regional

supremacy within the EAC framework was primarily between China and Japan, with the US assuming a marginal role. During a trilateral summit among China, Japan, and Korea in October 2009, Hatoyama stressed his aspiration to prioritize Asia in foreign policy as an Asian nation and criticized Japan's excessive reliance on the US.

However, after hearing statements from senior American officials, Hatoyama adjusted his stance, emphasizing the significance of the US alliance (Japan Times 2011). His vision faltered when US President Obama labeled the US an Asia-Pacific nation in November 2009 and deemed it unacceptable to exclude the US from regional institution building (White House 2009). In response, Hatoyama clarified in his speech titled "Towards the Realization of an East Asian Community" that the US was not excluded from regional institution-building efforts. Similar messages continued to be conveyed by him and foreign minister Okada Katsuyo (Kersten 2013, 46). Hatoyama's vision of establishing an Asian community based on "fraternity" essentially sidelined the US while placing China at the center of his vision. However, due to his short 9-month term in office, Hatoyama had limited time to advance his vision (Yahuda 2019, 194). Consequently, Hatoyama's proposal ultimately failed due to strong opposition from the US and resistance from established bureaucracy in Japan (Oros 2021, 217).

Little progress was achieved during the DPJ era regarding the EAC. Naota Kan, Hatoyama's successor, did not mention the EAC in his 2011 speech on administrative policies. Kan emphasized pursuing a realistic foreign policy and presented a 2010 DPJ manifesto that differed significantly from the Asianism of the 2009 manifesto. While the 2010 manifesto mentioned "close and equal Japan-US relations" and the EAC, it placed greater emphasis on strengthening the US alliance (Democratic Party of Japan 2010). Notably, as Funabashi emphasized, Japan faced discouragement in EAC creation. Thus, Yoshihiko Noda, the last DPJ era leader, displayed reluctance toward the EAC, stating that launching a major vision like the East Asian Community was unnecessary. The reasons for Hatoyama's EAC attempt's failure include the DPJ's strategy

combining indirect balancing against the US and engagement with China, viewing the international environment optimistically, and maintaining vagueness (Funabashi 2009). Additionally, poor leadership, lack of government experience, and a contested new regional order contributed to the failure of Japan's EAC initiative (Envall 2017, 24).

In my view, Japan's Asia-First diplomacy faltered due to its lack of an independent military structure, making it vulnerable to China's advances. This realization likely played a significant role in the failure and abandonment of the Asia-First diplomacy policy, as without a robust and independent military, Japan's chances of succeeding in this approach were limited, even if pursued around 15 years earlier.

ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM Plus)

Japan has been an active and willing supporter of ADMM Plus since its initial establishment in 2010, which consists of ten members of ASEAN (Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) and eight dialogue partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Korea, Russia and the US). ADMM Plus is valued by Japan's Ministry of Defense (MOD), as it is currently the only official multilateral security meeting among defense ministers in the Asia-Pacific region. In this context, Tokyo has actively promoted the ADMM Plus process to advocate security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. A series of factors, such as the devastating effects of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami convinced Japan of the need to further strengthen multilateral security cooperation (Shoji 2013, 16).

ADMM Plus covers a ministerial-level meeting as well as some sub-meetings from the Experts' Working Group (EWG) that address various issues. The participating countries continue their cooperative activities in seven areas of non-traditional security, including counterterrorism, military medicine, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR),

de-mining, maritime security, cyber, and peacekeeping operations (PKOs) under the EWG. Japan's active role in ADMM Plus is illustrated by assuming the co-chairmanship of the military medicine EWG with Singapore in 2010-11 and the EWG on HA/DR with Laos in 2014-15. Moreover, both the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and the MOD have actively participated in meetings and joint drills under other EWGs (Shoji 2020, 6). Additionally, Japan has developed a separate "ADMM Plus Japan" platform under ADMM Plus and has been holding informal meetings of defense ministers with ASEAN nearly annually since 2014 (Shoji 2021, 3).

Regarding Japan's reasons for joining the ADMM Plus process, first of all, Shoji (2013, 16) points out that Japan evaluated that cooperation in the field of non-traditional security (NTS) would positively affect traditional security cooperation over time. Tensions have escalated for Japan, particularly due to ongoing disputes with China in the East China Sea (ECS) and the arrest of a Chinese fisherman by the Japanese Coast Guard in 2010. Japan saw the potential for a spill-over effect in broadening its cooperation with China in NTS issues while addressing China's challenges, aiming to ease tensions in the traditional security realm. However, it cannot be said that Japan has achieved the positive effect it expected, as disputes persist apart from multilateral cooperation in the maritime domain.

Second, Shoji (2020, 7) emphasizes that Japan aims to utilize specific multilateral security mechanisms, including ADMM Plus, as tools to promote dialogue on territorial and maritime disputes and other security issues, effectively communicating Japan's position on these matters. Third and lastly, Japan desires to enhance security cooperation and ties with ASEAN by promoting ASEAN's centrality in a regional multilateral security platform. Japan's desire to strengthen security cooperation with ASEAN is driven by seeking a comprehensive partnership, developing security ties with ASEAN to foster stability in the region, alongside longstanding economic and political connections. Moreover, China's increasing activities in the ECS and SCS in recent years have made

Japan and other countries in the region uneasy, prompting Japan to collaborate with these states. In this context, the importance of ASEAN has gained significance in Japan's foreign and security policy calculations.

A General Evaluation

Considering all these multilateral efforts, it can be said that during the Koizumi era, although the EAC proposal and the search for real leadership in the security field showed Japan's willingness to improve political and security cooperation with Asian countries beyond its bilateral alliance, Japan's approach to regional security multilateralism was somewhat overshadowed by prioritizing a stronger US alliance. Japan's interest in security multilateralism has waned significantly because the country's strategic thinking has prioritized the need to balance the rapid rise of China's regional influence and power (Yuzawa 2021, 141-2).

Thus, following the Hatoyama era, the succeeding governments of Naoto and Yoshihiko continued to emphasize the importance of the US alliance. This shift in the DPJ's policy brought to the fore in foreign policy the refocusing on Asia-Pacific security multilateralism, with a special emphasis on the promotion of universal values. In this vein, Foreign Minister Maehara Seiji's speech titled "Opening a New Horizon in the Asia-Pacific" in January 2011 stated that regional countries ought to "develop institutional foundations embodying the rule of law, democracy, respect for human rights, global commons, free trade and investment rules" (MOFA 2011). Thus, while Seiji expressed his satisfaction with the US's participation in EAS, he also put forward the idea that EAS should be strengthened and expanded by including security issues (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2011).

In line with this vision, in November 2011, Prime Minister Noda announced Tokyo's intention to transform the EAS into a leader-led regional forum that affirms ground rules and common ideas of the region

via the increase of its political and security initiatives. Furthermore, he recommended, as the first step of such an organizational transformation, the establishment of a forum for maritime security matters in EAS, aiming to create maritime rules for freedom of navigation and peaceful dispute resolution (MOFA 2011a). In his speech to the Diet in January 2012, Noda expressed Japan's intention to take a more proactive role in order building and rule setting in the Asia-Pacific, using multilateral mechanisms created with the participation of a wide range of regions and countries. Concerning the rule-making domains, Noda mentioned counter-terrorism, free trade, non-proliferation, energy, conflict prevention, and freedom of navigation. He talked about the region's need to foster dialogue to affirm universal values such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2012).

As seen in Maehara's and Noda's statements, Japan's regional role was identified as a rule-setter, aiming to support regional rules based on universal values through regional multilateral frameworks. This political approach of Japan towards regional security multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific was mainly due to concerns created by the rapid rise of China. Since the 2000s, the opinion that China was a revisionist power was dominant in Japan's foreign policy community, and its increasing influence in ECS and SCS, especially after 2009, reinforced this view. In effect, for Japanese officials, China's growing power and influence posed risks not only to their national security but also to the existing regional order, which had long served Japan's interests (Yuzawa 2021, 144). Furthermore, Japan's Diplomatic Bluebook (2011) stated that China's lack of transparency in military and maritime activities was a concern for Japan. It also pointed out that "in 2010 it became readily clear that the security environment in East Asia was harsh and uncertainty and instability existed in the region" (Diplomatic Bluebook 2021). In an environment of strategic uncertainty caused by China's growing power and influence and the perceived decline in the US's ability to provide public good in the security field, Japanese decision-makers felt that they ought to protect the existing regional

security order through their political and security initiatives (Yuzawa 2021, 144).

Japan's desire to take a more active role in supporting a stable regional order by creating a network of multilateral frameworks embracing universal values has grown with the awareness of these motives (Yuzawa 2021, 145). Therefore, the Noda government developed the concept of "open and multilayered networks" in 2011, aiming to support a prosperous and stable regional order based on democratic values. To achieve this goal, the concept emphasized supporting common rules and regional cooperation in various fields in harmony with existing international law by establishing a close regional link between regional multilateral institutions such as ARF, EAS, ASEAN Plus Three, and existing bilateral and minilateral frameworks among regional countries (Diplomatic Bluebook 2012).

According to Yuzawa (2021, 145-6), the concept also expected that China should be included in this institutional network. However, the concept's emphasis on existing international law and democratic values was perceived as Tokyo's intention to circumscribe Beijing's growing power and influence in the region. In effect, Japan's new emphasis on Asia-Pacific security multilateralism aimed to build a rule-making multilateral network through regional frameworks to support international legal norms that favor the US and its allies in the face of the perceived challenges posed by China to the existing regional status quo. Noda's proposal to establish a maritime security forum within the EAS was a product of this consideration. Japan's renewed emphasis on Asia-Pacific security multilateralism was paralleled by the US's pivot to Asia. The main purpose of Japan's diplomatic strategy was to bind the US to the rule-making efforts by means of regional institutions. From the perspective of Japanese policymakers, the success of any regional rule-making effort required strong support and engagement from the US since, given the growing material gap between China and other regional powers, including Japan, a strong US engagement would be the only way to set international norms and rules compatible with the

US-centered regional order.

However, this concept of open and multi-layered networks in Japan came to an end at the end of 2012, with the transition of power from the DPJ to LDP. In fact, although the Abe government has emphasized universal values, it proceeded in the same line as the Noda administration (Yuzawa 2021, 147). For example, while criticizing China's activities in the ECS and SCS at the Shangri-La Dialogue meeting in 2014 and emphasizing the need to address regional maritime issues via the rule of law and conflict resolution mechanisms, Abe suggested enhancing "the EAS as a premier forum for dealing with regional political and security issues" and establishing "a permanent committee for preparing a roadmap for bringing renewed vitality to the EAS and enabling the Summit to function along with the ARF and the ADMM Plus in a multi-layered fashion" (Diplomatic Bluebook 2014). Abe's main expectation was to benefit from multilateral security frameworks such as EAS to protect the maritime laws and rules that restrict Chinese behavior. However, Abe frequently pointed out the need to develop a regional order that would include maritime cooperation based on the rule of law as a political agenda for the EAS (MOFA 2016).

Eventually, all these initiatives coalesced and evolved into the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, which includes i) promotion and establishment of fundamental values like the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, and so on, ii) pursuit of economic prosperity, and iii) commitment to peace and stability. Thus, since the 2010s, Japan aimed to form a practical coalition of like-minded countries via regional security institutions. These attempts at regional security multilateralism over the past decade have aimed to strengthen the regional multilateral security institutions, foster greater US-Japan cooperation in rule-making efforts to constrain Chinese behavior within the regional status quo, and maintain and reinforce the existing regional order in the Asia-Pacific.

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Understanding China's Role Within the Current International and Regional Orders

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Abstract

The debate around the role of China in the current international order continues to be divisive within the theoretical discussions of International Relations. Is Beijing seeking to establish a new order? Or, considering the current challenges faced by the liberal international order, is it redefining some of its practices and principles while still playing a vital role in sustaining it? The article argues that, on the global level, China's international policy has sought to adapt and incorporate itself into the prevailing multilateral structure, but with a selective approach. On a regional level, however, Beijing has developed a set of policies based on fundamental liberal economic practices and mechanisms to boost trade and finance through regional integration and interdependence. To reach these conclusions, this article takes a qualitative methodological approach using an in-depth review of secondary sources to frame the central theoretical discussion, accompanied by analysis of primary statistical data. The specific cases analyzed are the BRI in East Asia and RCEP, both structures of regional governance.

Keywords: China, East Asia, USA, multilateralism, international liberal order

Introduction

The competition between China and the United States in East Asia is a key issue in contemporary international relations. China's rise as a global economic power has had significant implications for East Asia, which had led to a transforming economic and political order in the region, with a shift in the balance of power and increased US interest as a response to China's growing influence. This shift has been accompanied by a range of external factors that have had an impact on the region. These include the worldwide shift of industrial operations from West to East, political changes in the US impacting on trade policy, developments in regionalism in East Asia, stagnation of the Doha Round, and the global financial and economic crisis.

China's rapid economic growth has been the catalyst for these profound transformations. In 2010 it surpassed Japan to become the world's second-largest economy in terms of total GDP. Furthermore, since 2016, China has claimed the top spot in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), solidifying its position as the world's largest economy by that metric (World Bank 2023). This is the result of a spectacular and sustained GDP growth rate of nearly 10% from 1979 (when economic reforms began) to 2016 (CRS 2019; Ka 2020). Although since then China's growth rate has slowed to approximately 6-7% per year, the country continues to expand faster than the US and any of its neighbors in East Asia. Moreover, China became the world's largest trader in goods, surpassing the US. Most East Asian nations, as well as nations in most other regions, have increasingly become reliant on the Chinese market to drive their economic expansion (Ross 2019).

Regarding East Asia, China's accelerated economic growth was accompanied by an unprecedented trade performance. As Ross (2019) argues, "China's emergence as an East Asian economic power began in 2000/2001, when it replaced the US as the largest export market for Taiwan and South Korea" (Ross 2019, 310). A few years later, in 2010, China became the largest world exporter, replacing Germany (ITC 2023).

Its role in East Asia as a regional trade hub became evident, transforming the region into a Sino-centered trade system (Shambaugh 2005).

Regional economic dynamics were transformed along with China's increasing role as a regional and global protagonist. Its centrality translated into a more active role in multilateral initiatives in the region, particularly in the economic dimension. The proliferation of regional trading arrangements and the emergence of trade blocs after the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis, along with Beijing's interest in taking part in multilateral arrangements, led to the dynamism of East Asia's active *de facto* economic integration with a significant trade-investment nexus within the region (Kawai and Wignaraja 2009). China remains Asia's major driving force in regional economic integration through various regional trade agreements (Jiang Yu 2011), and the expansion of Chinese-led initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), among others.

Given this significant increase in China's economic power in East Asia, and the specific weight of this region in the global economy, many observers have underlined the impacts Chinese influence may have in the reconfiguration of the regional order, and most importantly, in the liberal international order (LIO) (Lee, Heritage and Mao 2020; Can and Chan 2020). Hence, the question driving this paper is the following: Is Beijing seeking to establish a new order, or, in light of the current challenges faced by the liberal international order, is it redefining some of its practices and principles while still playing a vital role in sustaining it? A secondary, regional question also presents itself: What are the implications of China's approach to the global order for the economic order in East Asia?

As a central hypothesis, I understand that China's international policy has sought to adapt and incorporate itself into the multilateral international system since the beginning of the 2000s (Kastner, Pearson and Rector 2020), but with a selective approach regarding the dimensions or suborders (Li 2011). Consistent with that, and based on its consolidation as a global power, it is also contributing to sustaining the liberal multilateral architecture. In this sense, it has become an indispensable actor for the

maintenance of the system, particularly in the economic suborder. Moreover, as long as the practices, norms, and ideas of the international and regional Asian orders continue to favor China's interest, there is little incentive for Beijing to significantly alter the status quo (Ikenberry and Lim 2019). The motivations behind this can be explained mainly by internal Chinese factors, linked above all to socioeconomic, productive, and financial needs, as well as to the political legitimacy of the regime.

It is important to note that Beijing's engagement with the prevailing international order involves a nuanced adaptation to various institutional frameworks. However, alongside this accommodation, Beijing has demonstrated resistance to certain aspects of liberal international norms, particularly within the realm of human rights. Additionally, within the security sector, Beijing has exhibited a willingness to contest specific liberal elements of the international order, as evident in its actions related to conflicts such as those in the South China Sea (SCS), over Taiwan, and the ongoing Russian attack against Ukraine.

In the case of the SCS conflict, China's assertive behavior, characterized by infrastructural development, artificial island construction, and continuous patrols, has fostered a sense of insecurity among neighboring coastal states. This situation has been extensively discussed (Rubiolo 2020; Liu 2020a; Ba 2016), emphasizing how Beijing's actions have generated apprehension within the region and seemingly violated international maritime law. As for the Russia-Ukraine scenario, China's tacit support for Russia's actions by refraining from condemning the invasion, and boosting trade with Russia, also raises questions about its alignment with certain liberal order principles, notably that of inviolable state sovereignty. While not the central focus of this article, it is worth highlighting that in both the human rights and security suborders, China has adopted a selective approach, by embracing certain elements while rejecting others. This selectivity underscores Beijing's complex relationship with the broader international framework.

The methodology employed in this study is qualitative in nature,

drawing primarily from secondary sources. To begin, the analysis provides a comprehensive review of relevant theoretical texts to establish an up-to-date understanding of the ongoing discussions surrounding China's role in the international liberal order and its potential implications. Beyond that, primary sources, including official documents and statistical trade and financial data, are utilized to provide contextual insights and enhance the understanding of East Asia economic dynamics. The article is developed as follows. The first two sections analyze the current state of the debate on the international liberal order, China's participation in it, and the implications from the multilateral point of view. In the third section, I focus on China's economic interactions in East Asia, particularly via the BRI and RCEP, as initiatives of bilateral and multilateral nature contributing to regional and global governance. Finally, the conclusion sums up the argument and highlights that Beijing's regional initiatives, especially in the economic domain, are primarily aimed at bolstering its leadership through diplomatic and soft power strategies, rather than constituting a direct challenge to the international and regional orders.

Theoretical Approach to the Liberal International Order

A commonly held perception within academia regarding the international liberal order is the inherent challenge of defining it (Chan 2021; Kundnani 2017). Its geographic scope was originally limited to a small group of states (Glaser 2019); however, it has evolved, particularly after the Soviet implosion, to a quasi-global degree, at least formally. But still the degree of participation of states in the order remains dissimilar, as does the representation of ideas. In this sense, the international liberal order incorporates principles and practices of the US and European system of states, which expanded globally, and although there are different readings and ideas in non-Western societies, the international theories and principles that have achieved a near hegemonic character at a global level are

Western ones (Puranen 2019).

The liberal order originated from the humanistic ideals of the 18th-19th centuries, intertwining the principles of liberal internationalism, emphasizing openness, with an orderly framework founded on a system of flexible rules (Ikenberry 2018b). Following the United States' triumph in 1945, the international order underwent a transformative phase characterized by the establishment of a network of multilateral institutions aimed at safeguarding and advancing the tenets, rules, and values of liberalism. These institutions also mirrored the interests of the Western powers. These foundations of the international order acquired a hegemonic global character, although from the point of view of non-Western countries they can be seen as foreign. Rather than a liberal international order, for some non-Western societies it is an international order led by the United States or the West ("American-led/Western-led international order"), and which considers the interests of the non-developed world in a secondary way.

In addition to its international status, the scope of which has extended geographically, the order possesses distinctive traits of liberalism. These features have been the subject of much discussion, particularly due to their sometimes uneasy fit with the Westphalian concept that was historically instrumental in the formation of liberalism. The Westphalian order was based on the concept of state sovereignty. The liberal condition, on the other hand, included "open markets, international institutions, a democratic community of cooperative security, progressive change, shared sovereignty and the rule of law" (Ikenberry 2011, 2). In other words, the liberal order was constructed as an additional layer within the preexisting Westphalian system, which necessitated both changes to the original concept of Westphalian sovereignty and compromises on the part of liberalism.

The notion of "liberal" refers to the universal nature of individual equality and the primacy of individual and collective self-determination as human aspirations (Kastner, Pearson and Rector 2020). Crucially, this does not imply that only liberal states are part of a liberal system; on the

contrary, the LIO, in its openness, enables the participation of states that do not share its philosophy in all aspects. Thus, countries such as China, Russia, or Saudi Arabia, to mention a few, are part of multiple organizations—in some with even greater participation than the United States—despite not sharing all the principles of political liberalism at the internal level.

Regarding the concept of order, Johnson (2019, 12) defines it as “the emergent property of the interactions of multiple state and nonstate actors.” Inductively, this exercise yields a world of multiple orders in different domains of human governing activity, rather than a single liberal order dominated by the US. Adopting this definition results in a worldwide terrain consisting of manifold orders across separate realms, including military, human rights, trade, the environment, and information. This stands in contrast to a solitary liberal order that is predominantly influenced by the United States.

These different dimensions or suborders could be systematized in a simple typology. Following Kundnani (2017), the LIO is divided into three main spheres: the security order, the economic order, and the human rights order. The first one refers to the notion of an order based on rules, and not only determined by the relative distribution of power among its members. That is, an order in which international law functions as a constraint on the individual and self-preservation actions of the state, however powerful it may be (Kundnani 2017). Undoubtedly, international law can limit, but not prevent, the use of unilateral force by more powerful states: examples include the interventions in Afghanistan in October 2001 and Iraq in 2003, and their subsequent occupation by the United States and a coalition of Western countries; the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and follow-on attack by Russia in February 2022; and the construction of artificial islands by China in the disputed maritime territory in the South China Sea. In this regard, most significant global powers have contested certain normative facets of the LIO when such actions were perceived to align with their strategic interests.

The second sphere, namely the economic dimension, pertains

fundamentally to the level of international trade openness, initially limited to the Western bloc of countries. However, its scope expanded significantly with the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1994. Nevertheless, it was not until China's inclusion in 2001 and subsequently Russia's membership in August 2012 that this dimension truly attained a global scale. In the genesis of this form of economic liberalism, Western powers sought to articulate trade openness and free markets with domestic social demands, in order to avoid disruptions arising from inequality in the distribution of benefits without eliminating the benefits and efficiency of international trade. This notion is known as "embedded liberalism" (Ruggie 1982), and its basic principle "is the need to legitimize international markets by reconciling them with shared social values and institutional practices" (Abdelal and Ruggie 2009, 153).

The third dimension, or third suborder, in Johnston's (2019) typology, refer to human rights and political development. The two main elements in this dimension are political democratization and the protection of individual political and civil liberties. Kundnani (2017) argues that it has been the one that had the slowest development compared to the other two dimensions. As one of the sub-orders of the LIO, according to Lake, Martin and Risse's (2021) conceptualization, it is one of the most challenged by Western and non-Western societies today. This is a result of the fact that as more international organizations acquire the power to regulate and protect individual human rights based on the definition of the United Nations Charter, the more the Westphalian nature of the international system contradicts the liberalism of the prevailing order (Lake, Martin, Risse 2021). In this regard, it is not only non-liberal countries that have expressed criticism or limited their participation; a paradigmatic example is the United States' non-acceptance of the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, which stands as one of the central bodies of the human rights regime (Kundnani 2017).

This brief historico-conceptual description of the LIO has shown how tensions and contradictions were part of its genesis, and that the process of geographic expansion, added to the results of the very dynamics of its

functioning, especially economic, deepened the negative effects on the societies of the states that comprise it. The very idea of universalization of human rights and the responsibility to protect, although historically founded on a liberal tradition and the preservation of the fundamental situation of the human condition, collides with that of sovereignty, generating conundrums even for Western States most invested in the LIO.

China in the Liberal International Order

The impact of China's rise as a global power on an international order that was not constructed in its image and likeness is a highly debated topic in academic analysis. Some argue, quite simply, that China has benefited tremendously from the prevailing order, so it would be irrational to predict full-scale revisionism by a rising power. Other authors point out that—historically speaking, and for numerous reasons involving optimizing an existing order to better benefit the rising power—a new power will tend towards revisionism, which makes it possible to foresee a radical change in the established norms and institutions responding to the interests and principles of the new power. This perspective underlines a binary interpretation of order and change, in which the emergent power will inevitably challenge the existing institutions and norms.¹

From an institutionalist perspective, the very international institutions that house and integrate the new power both contribute to socializing it and will have acquired the ability to survive without the hegemon that gave rise to them, given the dissemination of norms, rules and principles

¹ For insightful references to this debate see: Emma Ashford. 2021. "Revisionist States are the Cause of Great-Power Competition." New American Engagement Initiative, Issue Brief. Atlantic Council, pp. 1-14.; and Alastair I. Johnston. 2019. "China in a world of orders. Rethinking compliance and challenge in Beijing's International Relations." *International Security*, 44/2: 9-60.

among all the members of the institutions that contribute to sustaining them. In this sense, China's emergence would not result in a disruption of the liberal order, because of the very strength of the institutions (Feng and He 2017).

China's participation in the LIO was secondary during the post-World War II period and for several decades thereafter. With the reform process initiated by Deng Xiaoping, China began a new stage of engagement with the West and with the multilateral institutions of the international order. The beginning of the current century marked a greater rapprochement between China and the international multilateral organizations, associated with its greater economic power. China's rise, as Ikenberry and Lim (2017) point out, occurred within these multilateral structures, and it is therefore unsurprising that China's growth would have translated into a quest for greater representation in the decision-making structures of multilateral organizations (Breslin 2013).

In this sense, and in contrast to the widespread narrative emanating from some US policy circles defining China as "revisionist" vis-à-vis the international order (Breuer and Johnston 2019), an extensive line of scholars argue that over these past two decades, Beijing has in many instances shown a growing willingness to adhere to international practices, norms, and multilateral institutions (Yang 2020; Johnston 2019; Kastner, Pearson and Rector 2020, Liu 2020b; Breslin 2013). Albeit selectively, China has increased its engagement with various multilateral regulatory frameworks in dimensions such as the environment, trade, finance, and security (Johnston 2017). This selectivity is not unique to Beijing; on the contrary, numerous liberal and non-liberal countries, including the United States, have engaged in similar behavior (Ikenberry 2018). The decision to withdraw from UNESCO in 2018, from the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations in 2017, and from the Paris Climate Agreement in 2020 were also indicative of Washington's instrumental use of participation in international bodies (Marwecki 2019) and its selective engagement in those that respond to its interests.

One of the most controversial aspects of China's foreign policy

regarding the rules-based international order, is the South China Sea situation. In this regard, China's rejection of the 2016 ruling by the Arbitral Tribunal, established at the request of the Philippines, is noteworthy. However, China claims that its stance on this matter aligns with the international norms derived from the Convention on the Law of the Sea.² In a position paper released in December 2014, China not only voiced its non-recognition of the Arbitral Tribunal's jurisdiction over the arbitration but also substantiated this position with a foundation in international law (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2014; Wu 2016). One may or may not agree with this interpretation, but China's rhetorical approach to the dispute was to frame its position by acceptance of international maritime law per se, even if Beijing rejected its applicability in this case. That is, China's assertions to exempt itself from compulsory arbitration were rooted in established international legal frameworks, thereby underscoring Beijing's acknowledgment of these norms. This indicates that the rationales underpinning the refusal to acknowledge the Tribunal's jurisdiction and the dismissal of its verdict were grounded within the parameters of norms and regulations within the liberal international order.

It is also evident that Beijing's orientation towards the order, both at the regional and international level, shows a willingness to adapt it to its own interests and ideas, in the cases that the existing ones are detrimental to Chinese interests. Li Xing (2019) has referred to this dynamic as a double track strategy. But, as China's engagement with multilateral institutions gets deeper, the country faces greater limitations to significantly alter or overhaul the international or regional order (Li 2011). Furthermore, following Ikenberry's and Lim's (2017, 15) argument, "China's economic miracle has relied upon the effective operation of international markets and states' institutionalized cooperation on cross-border movements of

² For details on dispute settlement according to the International Convention on the Law of the Sea, see: Mensah, Thomas. 1998. "The Dispute Settlement Regime of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea." *Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law Online*: 307-323. 10.1163/187574198X00109

goods and capital. The rules, practices, and norms of these economic systems empower and protect Chinese economic interests.”

Lake, Martin, and Risse (2021) and Weiss and Wallace (2021) underline that the Chinese government is generally inclined to the Westphalian principles underpinning the international order of sovereignty and non-interference, particularly as linked to domestic obligations vis-à-vis human rights and individual freedoms, although not only circumscribed to this dimension. The glaring case of China’s strategic calculus to not condemn Russia for its invasion of Ukraine is an exception, but the case of the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) also shows the limits of China’s acceptance of the principles of the LIO. As Wang and Sampson (2019, 380) show, although the AIIB adopted much of its institutional design and regulations from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, it also purposely opted for some different rules and practices, “particularly non-interference in the political affairs of any member and that only economic considerations will be relevant to the Bank’s decisions.” But despite the AIIB as indicating a limit, it is not a sign of an alternative order; on the contrary, it evinces the intention to be part of the same order, but with a leading role in some of its institutions, even though they had a previous origin with a nature different from the characteristics of the Chinese domestic order. Other examples within East Asia, such as ASEAN+3, the China ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, and more recently RCEP, are examples of China’s engagement with the multilateral nature of the regional order and a means to reassure its neighbors of its cooperative intention besides its increasing capabilities (Pearson 2014).

Drawing from this succinct overview, the perceived Chinese threat to the liberal international order appears to be less pronounced than frequently emphasized by US officials and some academics. China's range of actions has been limited due to its active involvement and participation in global interactions (Person 2014). Furthermore, it is apparent that as Beijing aligns its conduct with multilateral institutions at both regional and international levels and continues to derive advantages from

such engagement, the logical trajectory suggests that it is more inclined to uphold much of the existing order rather than vigorously contesting or substantially reshaping it.

China's Role in the Economic Order of East Asia

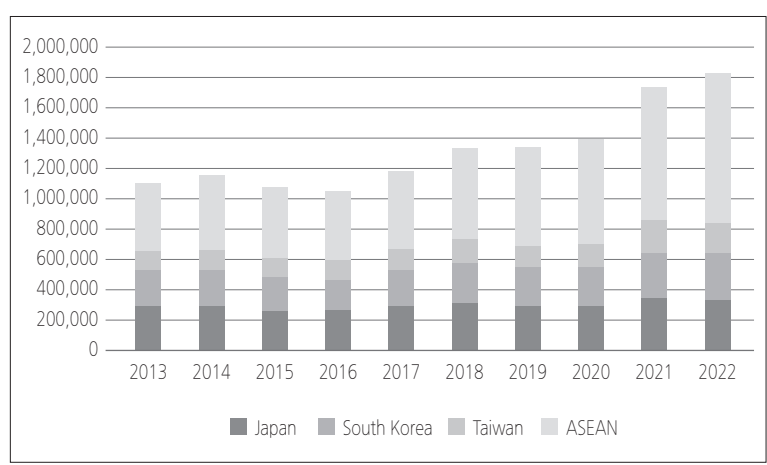
China's economic rise in the last few decades has positioned it as a central player in East Asian economic integration. While the origins of China's multilateral economic integration in East Asia can be traced back to the late 1990s, it was during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997-1998 that China's role and contribution to regional economic cooperation became more apparent (Rubiolo 2020; Haacke 2002). Over time, and in the context of the US's renewed presence in the region, the ascension of China has engendered the establishment of a dichotomous regional configuration predicated upon distinct centers of the economy and security. Some authors call it “dualistic structure” (Zhou 2014), or “dual leadership” (Zhao 2014). Although there is no clear-cut division between the economic and the strategic spheres (Liu and Liu 2019), China's role as the region's economic center has been consolidated through its leadership in economic integration initiatives in East Asia. The collapse of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was also a stimulus for consolidating Beijing as the leader of large-scale regional economic integration.

As Loke (2019) suggests, China's economic influence has surpassed that of the US (in East Asia), given the level of interdependence measured in terms of regional trade and investment relationships as well as economic diplomacy. Furthermore, as highlighted by Park (2021), China's economic surpassing of Japan has served as a catalyst for Beijing to assume economic leadership in the region. This has positioned China as a regional hub for trade and production, leading to accelerated economic integration and sustainable growth. As Khoo (2020, 7) shows, and as I will analyze in

more depth in following paragraphs, “in 2003, six of China’s top trading partners were from the Asia-Pacific region. By 2010, this number had increased to eight. By 2017, eight of China’s top ten trading partners were from the region.” Some authors have pointed out that from an international trade perspective, much of East Asia has become a Chinese sphere of influence (Weede 2010). Moreover, according to Ba (2014), despite the potential impact of escalating security tensions, empirical evidence suggests that most regional states find it challenging to resist the attraction of China's economic size.

Trade is the pillar of this attractiveness. As shown in figure 1, trade with ASEAN reached 975 bn USD in 2022, and Chinese exports accounted for 567 bn USD, while ASEAN exports to China reached 408 bn USD. South Korea also witnessed a new bilateral trade record with China, with total trade reaching 310 bn USD. For Japan, bilateral trade reached a peak in 2021, accounting for 349 bn USD, and for Taiwan total trade reached 204 bn USD in 2022, only slightly lower than the 208 bn USD record reached in 2021. Total trade with East Asia for 2022 accounted for 1.8 tn USD, also representing a new high in regional trade for China (ITC 2023).

Figure 1: China - East Asia total trade, 2013-2022 (in million USD)



Source: Author's elaboration of data from the ITC, 2023.

Although with differences in total share, China is ASEAN's main destination and import origin, as well as Taiwan's, Japan's, and South Korea's. In the case of Japan, according to recent data from the International Trade Centre (2023), in 2022 almost 23% of its total imports were from China, while 10% were from the USA, Japan's second partner. Regarding exports, the gap between both countries as destinations is notably smaller: while 19.3% of total exports went to China, 18.7% went to the USA in the same year. Overall, in the period 2013-2022, Japan's trade relations with China remain mostly unchanged in terms of total share of both trade flows. Trade balance was favorable for China during the whole period, with a slight decrease during the pandemic years, and reaching a new high in 2022 with a deficit of over 44 bn USD for Japan.

In 2022, imports from China constituted 21% of Korea's total imports, while the US accounted for 11% during the same year. Additionally, China stood as Korea's primary export destination, making up 23% of the total exports, whereas exports to the US represented 16% overall. Unlike Japan, Korea maintained a trade surplus with China throughout the period from 2013 to 2022. But it has been in sharp decline, from a 69 billion USD surplus in 2013 to 1.2 billion USD in 2022, the lowest Korean trade surplus with China since 2001. This exposes a change in the bilateral trade pattern, partly explained by the increase of Korea's imports of Chinese integrated circuits. Overall, and as result of China's production upgrading, the industrial complementarity between the two countries is gradually decreasing, and the trade structure between China and Korea is changing from a complementary structure with division of labor to a competitive structure (Liu 2023).

For Taiwan and ASEAN, China was also the main destination of their exports, representing 25% of the total for Taiwan and 16% for the latter. In both cases, the US came in second place accounting for 15% of total exports. Regarding imports, while Taiwan's share shows a slight change in the ten-year period, from 15% in 2013 to 19% in 2022, ASEAN's imports from China show a sharp increase from 15% in 2013 to 25% of

total imports in 2022. Furthermore, despite geopolitical tensions and US efforts to discourage economic interdependence, Taiwan maintained a consistent trade surplus with China, reaching a remarkable 37 billion USD in 2022. In contrast, ASEAN experienced an amplified deficit, reaching a new record of 139 billion USD in 2022. Notably, among the association's members, Vietnam played a significant role in the surge of bilateral trade with China and accounted for 40% of the total deficit, amounting to 54 billion USD in 2022. Most Vietnamese imports are from China, while its primary export destination is the US.

Finally, China's role in East Asian commercial networks also had an impact in intraregional trade figures as a share of world trade. While in 2013 intraregional trade accounted for 2.9% of total global trade, in 2022 this figure increased to 3.8%. This emerged as China became the engine of regional value chains, as it is not only a huge and irreplaceable consumer market for regional exports, but rather it is also becoming a hub for high-tech intermediate and final goods, upgrading its role from a low- and medium-value added export hub.

As for China's overseas investment and lending figures, it is still difficult to be certain, given that Chinese reports are not centralized or transparent. Based on recent analysis, the United States continues to be the primary partner for Outward Direct Investment (ODI) in the region, with a stock of 750 billion USD in 2020, with notable investments being made in Singapore, Japan, and Australia (The Economist 2022). According to Fuest et al. (2021), Asia continues to be the primary destination for mergers and acquisitions by Chinese enterprises, specifically in countries such as Australia, Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Regarding ODI by China, ASEAN was China's main destination, although a decline in both total value and market share was registered in 2021 (Huang and Xia 2022). Main country ODI destinations in Asia in 2021 were Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam, according to official Chinese sources (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2023). Nonetheless, investment from the United States ranked at the top, rising by 41% to 40 billion USD, mainly because of

significant increases in investment in banking and finance, and in the electronics, biomedical, and pharmaceutical industries. ODI from China increased by 96% to almost 14 billion USD, mostly in manufacturing, EV-related activities, the digital economy, infrastructure, and real estate (ASEAN 2022).

China's economic role in East Asia is predominant and is restructuring trade relations within the region, as well as consolidating it as the most dynamic economic trade environment worldwide. This economic predominance has (geo)political spillover, one that underlines the ways in which China is selectively supportive of the international institutional order. As its role as an economic epicenter and its interdependence with regional economies increased, its regional policy also began to privilege more active participation in multilateral regional institutions. As a result, Beijing is now an active presence in numerous institutions spread across Asia: APEC, ASEAN+3, Asian Development Bank, etc. (Pearson 2014; Beeson, 2019; Ba, 2020). Additionally, "regional cooperation is also used to show that China's preferred national self-image as 'a responsible Great Power' is more than just a rhetorical tool" (Breslin 2013, 621).

As Beijing consolidated its position as a regional economic power, and as its participation in the multilateral integration structure became more active, it also began to generate and promote spaces for regional multilateral cooperation under its leadership. In line with the central argument of this article, Beijing has sought to participate and integrate in, adapt to, and even promote existing regional integration mechanisms, strengthening East Asia's multilateral structures (Breslin 2013; Li 2011; Breslin and Ren 2023). At the same time, it is developing initiatives with distinctive characteristics, incorporating conditions linked to the liberal model of regional integration and elements of China's interests at the regional level. Two outstanding initiatives in this regard are the Belt and Road Initiative and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which are the focus of the following section.

BRI, RCEP, and China's Regional Economic Leadership

China's role in East Asia has become indisputable in terms of economic material capabilities. As reviewed in the previous section, trade is the main pillar of this deep and dense interdependence. In this section I aim to analyze the implications of China's institutional leadership in the region through two initiatives: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Both the BRI and RCEP exhibit a relatively low level of institutionalization and formalization, but they are major components of the Indo-Asia-Pacific system. The BRI operates through MoUs signed by interested countries, lacking binding commitments, while RCEP serves as a flexible free trade agreement connecting the major East Asian economies within a unified integration framework. It builds upon existing free trade agreements between the region's countries and ASEAN. While the BRI originates directly from China, primarily addressing its domestic needs and interests, RCEP, initially driven by ASEAN, also positions Beijing as a regional leader and power.

Drawing from the previous regional analysis and reengaging with the theoretical discussion on international order, it is evident that distinct suborders are gradually taking shape within the broader framework. These suborders are primarily shaped by the interests and material capabilities of the leading powers, while also implicating ideational elements. The United States, with its formidable military power and regional alliances, including, increasingly, minilateral networks, has reinforced its primacy within the security suborder. Conversely, China's economic prowess, manifested through extensive trade, production, and financial interdependencies, as well as its growing leadership in regional initiatives, underscores its central role in the economic suborder. Does this imply the restructuring of the East Asian regional order, distinct from the liberal one, or is there rather continuity under the leadership of Beijing through new but complementary initiatives?

As a starting point, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched originally in 2013, has drawn enormous attention from analysts across the globe. In general terms, it can be described as a strategic framework for China to enhance regional interconnection, political influence, and economic integration in Asia. From a regional perspective, some authors suggest that it reflects strategic and geopolitical intentions and concerns related to China's role as a leading power and to the need to maintain regional stability (Rolland 2018). It is also regarded as a means to promote regional integration and trade, through an ambitious infrastructure project. (Wu et al. 2020) Furthermore, the BRI, as Garlick (2020, 51) suggests, can be understood as a regionalizing initiative “designed to enhance economic integration and cooperation along the BRI by taking each region as a distinct unit or arena within which Chinese policy can be enacted.”

With a view to international competition with the United States, Loke (2019) suggests that the BRI helps advance China's strategic goals by providing a soft regional balancing strategy against the US, allowing China to present itself as a responsible great power on its own terms and reshape global governance in line with Chinese preferences, values, and interests, if needed. This does not necessarily imply a significant alteration in the foundations of East Asian integration, considering that regional integration has been molded by interregional economic dynamics for a minimum of the past forty years. Furthermore, as previously examined, it is unquestionable that Chinese interests have found their fulfillment within this framework of regional multilateral integration, as highlighted by Ikenberry and Lim (2017). In essence, this suggests that despite the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) being crafted to cater to Beijing's objectives, particularly on the domestic front, China lacks the motivation to modify regional institutions, norms, and mechanisms that do not hinder the pursuit of its interests.

The BRI became “Xi Jinping's foreign policy centerpiece, reflect[ing] a crisis of overaccumulation in China's domestic construction sector, [and] has promoted a change in the focus of Chinese international relations,

leading to an expansion of foreign infrastructure and communication investments” (Hogeboom et al. 2022, 11). Regarding domestic economic motivations, the BRI is also intended to attend to the need to consume China’s industrial over-capacity; to expand or find new markets for Chinese exports; to secure access to natural resources; and find new uses for surplus (Clarke 2018; Yu 2018). As Zhou (2019) points out, the BRI complements China’s economic restructuring and vice versa. The Initiative helps transform and upgrade the manufacturing industry and alleviate the problem of overcapacity in traditional Chinese industries, including increasing the demand for building materials (Johnson 2016) and hi-tech industrial supplies for infrastructure projects abroad. But as Gong (2018) aptly suggests, the BRI is not a brand-new policy initiative, given the fact that over the past decades China and Southeast Asia have fostered extensive economic cooperation, collaborating on numerous significant projects. Despite these economic and trade cooperation initiatives in Southeast Asia being initiated prior to the BRI, they are now widely recognized as notable accomplishments within the framework of the BRI.

Overall, the BRI, and specifically the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), provides a platform for China’s leadership in East Asia and facilitates regional interconnectivity and economic cooperation. The focus within East Asia has been Southeast Asia. All ASEAN countries plus Timor-Leste have signed the MoU to access the initiative. The Republic of Korea has also adhered, leaving only Japan among the major East Asian economies as a non-signatory of the BRI. Moreover, East Asia is the main recipient region of BRI-related investments, accounting for 26% of total Chinese infrastructure investments between 2013 and 2020 (Green Finance and Development Center 2023). For its part, the MSRI represents an expansive scheme for connectivity, spanning across a wide array of projects encompassing finance, manufacturing, resource exploitation, telecommunications, and trade. Its connectivity dimension predominantly consists of a plethora of substantial “transportation” endeavors, ranging from airports, freeways, and high-speed railways to pipelines and seaports.

These initiatives are strategically designed to enhance the seamless movement of goods, individuals, and services both within nations and across borders (Blanchard 2019).

Even though the BRI was welcomed in Southeast Asia in the beginning, particularly by state officials and diplomats, given the potential for development it entailed, different concerns emerged after the first decade, related to economic dependency, environmental costs, and good governance, among others (Blanchard 2019; Garlick 2020). As a result, there have been several setbacks on BRI projects that have underscored that parts of Beijing's designs for a BRI-led regional economic policy were perhaps driven by the predatory liberalism of weaponized interdependence.

One example was Malaysia's ambitious infrastructure project (a centerpiece of China's BRI in the region), the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), which was approved during Najib's government in 2016, and suspended in 2018 after Mahathir won the elections. Mahathir based his decision on allegations that the project was too expensive, and economically unviable, and it would be deferred until the country could afford it and reduce the costs of loans (Fook 2018). He further implied the infrastructure projects under BRI could become a new form of colonialism due to the political and financial leverage that was being generated through external debt (Hornby 2018).

Notwithstanding the temporary suspension of the ECRL, Mahathir made clear Malaysia would continue to be a part of the BRI, and the ECRL project was renegotiated in 2019. Mahathir's government obtained lower costs and a joint venture arrangement for operation and maintenance. Malaysia's case also serves as a demonstration that, beyond the Chinese perspective of the BRI as a regionalizing and connectivity-focused endeavor, several factors act as barriers, causing significant delays in the execution of projects. Among these factors are local political dynamics and regime shifts within the receiving nations. Simultaneously, an alternative interpretation of Malaysia's situation can be seen as a reflection of Chinese adaptability and even a learning curve throughout the process.

This interpretation is particularly relevant given the BRI's early developmental stage.

Finally, on the positive side, particularly for ASEAN, Chinese investments through BRI have the potential to contribute to the increasing need for essential infrastructure in the region. According to a recent report from the Asian Development Bank (2023), Southeast Asia's rapid economic development, urbanization, and population growth have led to an ever-widening gap between the actual spending and the funds needed to meet the increasing demand for infrastructure in the subregion. As a result, ASEAN economies will need infrastructure investments of at least 2.8 trillion USD from 2023 to 2030 to sustain economic growth, reduce poverty and respond to climate change. Since traditional sources of government financing alone are insufficient to meet the widening demand for infrastructure financing, China's role as a financier of infrastructure for development will become increasingly central and attractive to countries in the region.

The second initiative, which has gained worldwide attention given its economic and geographical dimensions, is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). RCEP, unlike BRI, is a multilateral mega free trade agreement. RCEP, led by ASEAN officially but with China having the preponderance of population and economic weight, aims to reduce and/or eliminate tariff and non-tariff trade barriers, enhance trade facilitation, promote investment liberalization, and foster the development of global value chains among its member countries. The Agreement was signed on November 2020, eight years after official negotiations were launched in November 2012. It comprises most East Asian countries: the 10 ASEAN members, China, Japan, and South Korea, plus Australia and New Zealand. Economically, RCEP member states account for around 30% (2.2 billion people) of the world's population, 30% (26.2 trillion USD) of global GDP, and 25% (12.7 trillion USD) of international trade as of 2020 statistics, which makes it the biggest trade bloc in world history (Khan et al. 2022).

RCEP has the clear potential to boost intraregional trade and

investment and strengthen regional cooperation in an already dynamic economic region, integrating most major economies. Some argue that RCEP was established as a response to the conflict between China and Japan, aiming to create the largest trade agreement in the world and enhance China's economic influence in the region (Pratama et al. 2022). Others highlight the central role of ASEAN in RCEP, which has provided opportunities for middle powers like Japan to contribute to the agreement and strengthen their own interests within the Asia-Pacific region (Magno & Vivo 2023). China's role in RCEP is seen as significant, with China being the leading economic power among the member countries and controlling a major share of the market in the region (Pratama et al. 2022).

Regarding China's leading role, according to Park (2021) China's motivations for advocating for (RCEP) are multifaceted. These include responding to (and taking advantage of certain parts of) the repositioning of US trade policy in Asia, integrating into the global order shaped by the establishment of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), consolidating its identity as an economic superpower, and asserting regional leadership in the Asia Pacific region. China initiated the regional FTA with ASEAN as a collective entity, aiming to enhance market expansion and establish regional supply chains for its economy.

Following its ratification and subsequent entry into force in January 2022, member countries have articulated their perspectives on the agreement. These viewpoints emphasize the agreement's potential to foster regional integration and underscore the advantages it offers to individual economies. To take one example, Enterprise Singapore, a government agency, points out that "RCEP is a modern, comprehensive, high-quality and mutually beneficial economic partnership that builds on existing bilateral ASEAN agreements with its 5 Free Trade Agreement (FTA) Partners. It will further broaden and deepen Singapore's economic connectivity with the region, open opportunities and provide businesses with preferential access to the region" (Enterprise Singapore 2023).

Similarly, Malaysia's Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry (2023) indicated that the agreement promotes "greater transparency, information sharing, trade facilitation, economic cooperation, standardization of international rules relating to E-commerce, international standards, technical regulations, and clarity in protection of intellectual property rights."

Thus, to return to the central argument of the article, China's active participation in and promotion of RCEP shows a commitment to liberal practices and mechanisms in the area of trade and economic cooperation. This suggests the state's intention to support rules-based institutions in the international commercial sphere, rather than an intent to replace a liberalized trade order with an alternative arrangement. To pick up on the discourse of Ikenberry and Lim (2017, 2), China's actions to develop self-led institutions must be understood "within the wider context of its engagement with regional and global institutions, and the broader system of existing multilateral rules and institutions." China's engagement in the Asia-Pacific region through the promotion of liberal-inspired initiatives may well be intended to foster Chinese geopolitical gains—even primacy—in the region, but that is not per se revisionist if doing so in turn strengthens (or at least does not undo) the regional preexisting practices of economic cooperation and integration.

Final Remarks

In summary, this article's findings emphasize the perspectives, echoed within academic circles, highlighting that Beijing's pursuit of regional initiatives—at least in the economic realm—primarily aims to consolidate its leadership through soft or diplomatic means, rather than posing a direct challenge to the preexisting order. China's objectives also include countering efforts to constrain Chinese power, without explicitly seeking to overturn the existing liberal international economic system and its underlying principles. Furthermore, Chinese endeavors, both regionally and in-

ternationally, are more oriented towards responding to the problems the country is facing domestically than challenging the geopolitical positions of Western powers.

While BRI and RCEP showcase Chinese leadership and influence within its own region, neither initiative poses a challenge to the existing regional order. The current regional order in East Asia is built on principles such as free trade, diversity, the presence of multiple economic poles, and the maintenance of strong ties with the United States by most East Asian countries. The BRI and RCEP, despite their significance, do not disrupt these fundamental principles and instead operate within the existing framework of regional cooperation and engagement.

To answer the initial question, China is reshaping certain aspects of the regional economic order while mostly adhering to the institutionalization and conditions established after 1945. It seeks legitimacy by formalizing its regional and international policies through bilateral and multilateral initiatives that are embodied in institutions reflecting shared norms, principles, and practices. Notably, some of these initiatives, such as free trade and competition, demonstrate continuity with the principles of the liberal economic order. Furthermore, they signify China's aspiration to be part of the same collective, leading its own initiatives or supporting those of others, and thereby gaining recognition as a global power through the endorsement of participating third states. Even if sometimes unintentionally, China's efforts to establish its legitimacy in relation to external parties through the adoption of, participation in, and endorsement of practices and norms aligned with the liberal economic order play a role in reinforcing that very order.

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The EU's New Thinking in a New Geopolitical Reality: How Challenges to the Global Order are Driving EU-Taiwan Ties

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of US-China geostrategic rivalry and Russia's war against Ukraine, the European Union (EU) has advanced in its long-pursued efforts to become a geopolitical actor on the global stage. In close cooperation with like-minded partners, including Taiwan, the EU is rethinking its ties with China, and has made de-risking of trade relations a core pillar. The EU is in a learning process in its cooperation with Taiwan, a relationship which it had previously framed in the EU-China context. As the largest investor in Taiwan, and with China's coercion on the rise, the EU has started to engage in new thinking regarding Taiwan's relevance to its own security and prosperity, concerned that China and Taiwan are headed for conflict, with the potential of a US-China confrontation. This paper argues that the EU's geostrategic adjustment to a new reality defined by power politics is shaping a more pragmatic and realist approach to Taiwan. The EU is in the process of a shift as far as its identity as an international actor is concerned, moving from a normative toward a realist foreign policy. Russia's renewed aggression in its neighborhood and China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, including against Taiwan, have accelerated this shift, the sustainability of which depends on the EU's political will and ability to manage power politics. The extent of expansion in its cooperation with Taiwan also depends on the latter's own contribution to the growth of bilateral ties. The EU remains engaged in the pursuit of common values with Taiwan as the foundation of bilateral relations. Yet, as part of its adjustment, it has started framing cooperation in a pragmatic framework seeking to both better protect its interests and contribute to the protection of the international rules-based order.

Keywords: EU, Taiwan, China-US rivalry, international order, Indo-Pacific

Introduction

Against the backdrop of US-China geostrategic rivalry and Russia's war against Ukraine, the European Union (EU) has advanced in its long-pursued efforts to become a geopolitical actor on the global stage. In close cooperation with like-minded partners, including Taiwan, the EU is rethinking its ties with China, and has made de-risking of trade relations a core pillar. The EU is in a learning process in its cooperation with Taiwan, a relationship which it had previously framed in the EU-China relations context. As the largest investor in Taiwan, and with China's coercion on the rise, the EU has started to engage in new thinking regarding Taiwan's relevance to its own security and prosperity, concerned that China and Taiwan are headed for conflict, with the background risk of a US-China confrontation.

This paper argues that the EU's geostrategic adjustment to a new reality defined by power politics is shaping a more pragmatic and realist approach to Taiwan. The EU is in the process of a shift as far as its identity as an international actor is concerned, moving from a normative toward a realist foreign policy. Russia's renewed aggression in its neighborhood and China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, including against Taiwan, have accelerated this shift, the sustainability of which depends on the EU's political will and ability to manage power politics. The extent of expansion in its cooperation with Taiwan also depends on the latter's own contribution to the growth of bilateral ties. The EU remains engaged in the pursuit of common values with Taiwan as the foundation of bilateral relations. Yet, as part of its adjustment, it has started framing cooperation in a pragmatic framework seeking to both better protect its interests and contribute to the protection of the international rules-based order.

The EU has started seeing Taiwan both through the lens of democracy and security. It has accelerated efforts to articulate a new approach to Taiwan not only within, but also outside the context of EU-China relations. This paper maintains that this process is rooted in cooperation with like-minded partners and shaped by three inter-related dynamics: one,

the EU's pursuit of its geopolitical ambitions in an increasingly multipolar and less multilateral world; two, the EU's emerging vision for the Indo-Pacific; and three, the EU's rethinking of its relations with China. Consistent with this empirical development, and after a short background and theory section, this paper first assesses the EU's geopolitical agenda in a global framework shaped by multilateralism and multipolarity. Second, it explores emerging dynamics regarding Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific, including cross-Strait relations. Third, it examines the impact of the new reality in EU-China relations on the expansion in EU-Taiwan cooperation.

Background Context and Theories of EU Power

With Russia's war against its sovereign neighbor ongoing, the question remains as to whether that aggression will be a game changer in the long run for the EU's geopolitical ambitions. What is clear is that the renewed invasion of Ukraine, following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, has pushed the EU to accelerate the rethinking of its security and vulnerabilities, its identity, its integration model and enlargement processes, as well as capacity to act as a relevant global actor. It has also forced the bloc to reconsider its partnerships, particularly with Russia and China, as the two have consolidated their friendship into a "no limits" strategic partnership and reinforced each other's efforts to undermine democratic governance (Reuters 2022). Russia's war has also supported Europeans' efforts to get serious about articulating a long-term strategic vision for its external power projection capabilities along democratic norms in the face of authoritarian aggression. In this process, what role the EU would play in a Taiwan contingency, and how it would contribute to protecting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, have become much-debated questions.

Global dynamics have also altered perceptions of power and power projection. The central balance of international power has shifted from the

Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, a region that accounts for more than 65 percent of global GDP. Taiwan sits in the heart of the Indo-Pacific, and, as a pivotal node in the global semiconductor supply chain, it has an indispensable place in the global economy. Yet it faces an existential threat from China, which claims it as its own, although it never ruled the island. This threat has reinforced security coordination of democratic countries in the region and beyond.

Within the region, bilateral and minilateral partnerships have gained importance, for example the Quad involving the United States, India, Japan and Australia, with such formats increasingly influencing the regional security architecture. Calling for regional security “by Asians for Asians,” China has expanded its own bilateral partnerships and multilateral security forums, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, relations that encompass not only economic but increasingly security cooperation too (Heiduk 2022). The regional security order has become more multipolar and less multilateral, with countries seeking to adjust to the Sino-American rivalry whilst also preventing the emergence of a Sino-American bipolarity.

Beyond the region, in response to the Russian aggression, NATO’s message has been that the security of Europe and the security of Asia are joined, which is also why leaders of Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea attended the 2022 NATO summit (NATO 2022). Their presence at the 2023 summit further illustrated that NATO continues to link trans-Atlantic security to events in the Indo-Pacific, and is one form of getting ready to address the threat posed by China’s continuous military and economic rise (NATO 2023). This stance is rooted in democratic countries’ awareness of the risks of their overwhelming dependence on China, including for critical raw materials vital for their economies. These dynamics in power politics have had implications concerning the EU as a *sui generis* kind of international actor, with the question of national sovereignty central to its *modus operandi* both internally and on the global stage.

In this context, with the intensification in the Sino-American

geostrategic competition, particularly since Washington launched a trade war against China in 2018, the EU has sought to adjust to the new reality emerging in the Indo-Pacific and seek ways to protect its own interests. In light of a “geopolitical” European Commission formed in 2019, the bloc has elevated discussions on the threat that an increasingly assertive China presents to the rules of the liberal international order, but also to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Beijing’s rhetorical alignment with Moscow, and their joint military exercises and strategic coordination, have further amplified Europe’s concerns (Hille 2022). China has been investing in its power projection capabilities in the region, including modernizing its military, reclaiming land in the South China Sea, and using trade for strategic ends by exploiting its position as the most important trade partner for most of the region’s economies. Beijing has ramped up political and military pressure on Taiwan, seeking to shape the political debate there through gray-zone activities, including disinformation, cyberattacks, military incursions into its airspace, and simulations of a naval blockade (Herscovitch 2022).

China’s behaviour has accelerated a sharper tone in the EU’s policy discourse. EU leaders have made it clear that “how China continues to interact with Putin’s war will be a determining factor for EU-China relations going forward” (European Commission 2023a). The bloc has moved forward by embracing the Indo-Pacific as a concept by adopting a strategy for the region in 2021 and including Taiwan in it (EEAS 2021a). In the context of deteriorating relations with China, the EU is working on de-risking bilateral relations and is exploring ways to expand cooperation with Taiwan as a partner, framed as one of the key pillars of its engagement of the Indo-Pacific. This is part of its adjustment to a world dominated by great power competition, but also an effort to avoid having to choose sides and instead follow the “Sinatra Doctrine” to deal with US-China rivalry: in the words of EU High Representative Josep Borrell in 2020, the EU has to do things “its own way” (EEAS 2020a). This would be based on two pillars, namely cooperation with China on global challenges while strengthening the EU’s strategic sovereignty, key to

promoting European values and interests.

The claim of simultaneously pursuing interests and projecting values has for decades shaped external perceptions of the EU. Different concepts have guided assessments of the EU's conduct in its foreign policy as an international organization. These include its role as a civilian, normative, responsible, ethical and/or small power. In the 1970s and 1980s, an emphasis on the EU's economic instruments of foreign policy suggested that the EU was and acted as a civilian power. According to François Duchêne's analysis in the 1970s, the European Economic Community (EEC)—created in 1957 by the six founding European countries and legally succeeded by the EU in 2009—was a “civilian group long on economic power and relatively short on armed forces,” reflecting the trend of diminishing significance in military power at the time (Duchêne 1973).

According to Christopher Hill, a key advocate of the concept, civilian power Europe highlights “diplomatic rather than coercive instruments, the centrality of mediation in conflict resolution, the importance of economic solutions to political problems” (Hill 1983). In addition, civilian power Europe has multilateralism at its core (Trott 2010). This was also the guiding principle of the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), indicative of the EU's self-identification as a civilian power (Whitman 2006). Notably, the ESS called especially for Europe to contribute to a more effective multilateral order (Council of the European Union 2009). Debates on the concept of military power Europe in the 1980s and into the 1990s reflected dynamics surrounding EU-level investment in military capabilities. With developments in European security and defence policy, Hedley Bull was among those academics who called on the EU to be a military power, arguing that civilian power was ineffective in international relations (Bull 1982).

Tension has persisted in the EU between those who thought a defense dimension was indispensable for EU integration, and those who feared EU defense capabilities would undermine NATO. Others, such as Karen Smith, suggested engaging in a debate on what the EU does and does not do, as opposed to defining what the EU is, and then debate what it should

be doing (or not doing) in international relations (Smith 2005). With less focus on trade and more on values, in the early 2000s Ian Manners argued that the EU was a “normative power,” an economic and political entity based on a set of common values, which differentiate it from traditional state actors acting according to a realist paradigm (Manners 2002). He maintained that the EU had a distinct kind of identity, transcending the anarchic and self-interested behaviour of states, going beyond the perception of the EU as an international organization.

Manners argued that given its foundation on a normative basis, the EU is predisposed to act normatively in world politics. Ideational scholarship, in particular discursive institutionalism, has explored the role of ideas in exerting political power (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016). Yet, the EU’s performance on the ground, through a foreign policy characterized by fragmentation and the lack of convergence between member states, has led to much criticism of its ability to act as a normative power. Asle Toje described the EU as a “small power,” with its strategic behaviour characterized by dependence and a support of multilateralism. Europe has the interests of a great power but the mentality and capacity of a small power, he argued (Toje 2019). In this understanding, given its identity based on intra-European sovereignty and trans-Atlantic reliance, the EU has failed to optimize its international influence and has been unable to shape global outcomes.

The return of power politics has tested the EU’s claims to international actorness. Russian aggression has renewed debates on the development of a collective European military action capability. The EU has displayed an unprecedented level of political will to act with NATO as a cornerstone of its collective defence capability, supported by economic sanctions. The war has confirmed the urgency of articulating a long-term strategy to ensure European security, including its economic security not only within its own neighborhood but also in the Indo-Pacific. Being the largest foreign investor in Taiwan, the EU has significant interests to protect in the region. These dynamics have revealed a new reality, in which the EU’s share of world trade has gradually diminished while that of emerging countries has

increased.

Notwithstanding dynamics in the new reality, as the world's greatest trading bloc the EU has continued to wield influence through the power of its economy, with well-established policies anchored in a framework of rule-based governance (Mayer 2008). The EU's regulatory power has helped its institutions to use regulation to advance European integration. Externally, this power provided the EU with the capacity to influence the multilateral agenda in the fields of competition policy, digital regulation, food and consumer safety, and environmental protection. For example, since 2018 its General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has not only harmonized data privacy laws across EU member states, it has also shaped the principles of data protection on a global scale. Similarly, through its Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act, the EU has aimed to set global standards for online platform regulation and help to create a safer online space for users and consumers worldwide (EEAS 2023).

However, the EU has significant strategic dependencies which have limited its ability to act strategically. Although the response to Russian aggression and China's assertiveness has illustrated that the EU is beginning to embrace a more realist foreign policy, the EU's ability to exert tangible influence in a more confrontational global context has been limited by the persistent tension between member states' pursuit of norms and economic interests. This reality is shaping the EU's emerging approach to Taiwan.

The Global Stage – Less Multilateral, More Multipolar?

In 2020, EU High Representative Josep Borrell said that the EU “must learn quickly to use the language of power,” and not only rely on soft power (EEAS 2020b). The EU needed to think in terms of balance of power while advancing its own interests, he stressed in 2021; the EU is a “principled Union, but principles alone are not enough to make a policy

and even less a successful policy” (EEAS 2021b). In 2022, Russian aggression against Ukraine intensified an embrace of a realist world view and discourse shift across the EU, a shift also visible in response to China’s growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. The EU High Representative’s 2023 call for European navies to patrol the Taiwan Strait to demonstrate Europe’s commitment to freedom of navigation should be read in this context (Lau 2023).

Beyond Europe, Russia’s attack on its sovereign neighbor has pushed democracies across the globe, including Taiwan, to generally reconsider their vulnerabilities. A self-governing entity led by a democratically elected government, with a robust civil society and a thriving economy, Taiwan is under growing pressure from the PRC. In light of Russian revanchism and China’s growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan’s geostrategic role has increased both as a democracy and as a technological leader in advanced semiconductors on which the digital economy relies. Taiwan remains vulnerable, but so does the global economy, raising Europeans’ awareness of its fragility in a complex international setting.

By invading Ukraine, Russia violated fundamental principles of international law, namely territorial integrity and sovereignty. The implications of the outcome of the war therefore go beyond Ukraine and Europe; they are global and will shape the future of the international order, the rules by which all countries across the developed and developing world are expected to abide. At the same time, in an increasingly multipolar world, the multilateral global architecture has become more fragmented, with many countries, in particular in the developing world, questioning its effectiveness to address global challenges such as poverty, global health (e.g., pandemics), and climate change.

With a new distribution of global power and systemic crises on the rise, multilateralism is in crisis. Paradoxically, however, the multilateral system has never been as in demand and as relevant as it is today, despite the lack of trust therein. Since the end of World War II, the EU has supported multilateralism as an institutional form of global policy coordination centered on the UN system, on international financial

institutions, development, and trade. That is, multilateralism has been a tool to govern global relations, as well as a source of rules and standards for international cooperation; yet, with an increasingly multipolar world embraced by developing countries in the Global South, the appeal of multilateralism has been overshadowed.

The concept of the Global South in international relations has gained increasing attention against the backdrop of failing multilateralism. In a more multipolar world, emerging economies such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (the BRICS states) have sought a greater role in shaping key policy areas, including the reform of international institutions. They have become more vocal about their lack of representation in the UN, G20, and global/regional financial institutions, and have challenged multilateralism, denouncing it as ill-prepared for the complexity and interconnectedness of the 21st century. Consequently many in the Global South have failed to condemn Russia's attack on Ukraine, staying neutral instead and claiming it was their decision not to take sides (Sidiropoulos 2022). This feeds the argument that the reluctance across the developing world to support Ukraine and denounce Russian aggression is a reminder that Europe has no reason to expect that they change their sentiment just because Europe thinks there is an urgent need to do so (Dubenko 2023).

While many Western observers have framed the war as a clash between democracy and autocracy, non-Western observers have sometimes framed it in "North-South terms" (Gowan 2023). Others noted that "a bipolar world in which all countries line up behind the West or a combination of China and Russia is the opposite of the global order that countries in the Global South want" (Burrows and Darnal 2022). As Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar said, Europe needs to grow out of the mindset that its problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems aren't Europe's problems (The Wire 2022). It was also Jaishankar who said, in his September 2022 address to the 77th UN General Assembly, that the UN Security Council is "anachronistic and ineffective, deeply unfair, denying entire continents and regions a voice in a forum that deliberates

their future,” highlighting India’s commitment to the reform of multilateralism.

Consequently, Jaishankar based India’s position on the war in Ukraine in terms of the foundations of the UN General Assembly, stressing that India is “on the side that respects the UN Charter and its founding principles” (UN 2022). Announcing its ambitious plans to be the leading voice of the Global South, India has claimed it is ready to play a proactive role in upholding a multilateral system and participating in reforming it in a way to meet the complexity of the 21st century. India’s regional ambitions are all the more significant as both the EU and the U.S. recognize its role as a counterbalance to an aggressive China in the Indo-Pacific, hence their efforts to increase international cooperation in the region, including with Taiwan.

In terms of China’s push for an alternative multilateral framework, the EU and the U.S. both fear Beijing’s conceptualization of such an order, as well as its means to redesign multilateral arrangements, the current structure of which Beijing perceives as part of the US-endorsed and -imposed liberal, rules-based order. An important element in Beijing imposing its alternative has been advocating a more multipolar world, whereby China is not bound by American-dominated institutions, but instead regains centrality over global governance. In this process, Beijing has regarded Taiwan an issue of core national interest, the pursuit of which it considers indispensable to safeguarding China’s sovereignty. Chinese leadership has linked “reunification” with Taiwan, a term Beijing uses to describe its intention concerning the island, with “national rejuvenation,” a narrative used in Chinese political discourse that refers to the revival of China’s national power and international standing. “Rejuvenation” should be achieved by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the PRC’s founding, according to statements by Chinese leaders (Blanchette, Boland, and McElwee 2023).

Through its tacit support for Russia, Beijing has continued to build on its foreign policy activism, reflective of the emerging central worldview under Xi Jinping, one which links Chinese domestic and international

visions. During the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, and later the COVID-19 global public health crisis, Beijing leveraged social media, especially Twitter, to spread its narrative that its successes were thanks to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and China's governance model, while framing failures in democracies as shortcomings of their political system. It was EU HR Borrell who first spoke of a "battle of narratives" between proponents of the rules-based international order and those embracing alternative views at the expense of democratic governance (EEAS 2020c). These dynamics have shaped the EU's more contentious relationship with China, with the downstream effects of leading to more support for and more willingness to engage with Taiwan. This is not only normative, however, as it reflects the aforementioned shift toward a more pragmatic and realist foreign policy of a "geopolitical Europe" (ECFR 2022).

In May 2022 just over two months after Russia's attack on Ukraine—and symbolically on Europe Day, celebrated on May 9—French President Emmanuel Macron proposed the idea of a "European political community" (EPC), put forward as a tool for creating solutions for war-torn Ukraine and its aspiration for EU membership. But it was an initiative that many questioned (Herszenhorn, von de Burchard, and de la Baume 2022). The rationale behind the EPC was to amplify European geopolitical cooperation and remedy enlargement fatigue by presenting an additional format (Tscherneva 2023). Macron's proposal came following a yearlong process of EU self-assessment, the Conference on the Future of Europe, a citizen-led series of debates that enabled European citizens to share ideas on the kind of European future they want.

As HR Borrell said, EU member states "have done more than what it was thought to be possible" to address Russian aggression (Koutokosta and Liboreiro 2023). They have agreed to jointly defend the multilateral rules-based institutions and principles that have enabled it to prosper. As some suggested, the EU has demonstrated its growing ability to speak the language of true geopolitical power (Blockmans 2022). Even if questions concerning European leadership in reshaping the multilateral order remain,

the EU is learning to navigate its realist shift, driven by a growing awareness that the world has changed—and that China in particular has changed, as European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen noted in 2023. She said that how the EU manages its relationship with China would be a determining factor for its future economic prosperity and national security, suggesting the significance of the EU's relationship with China to the pursuit of its own geopolitical ambitions. The specter of Beijing-Moscow relations was present, of course, as she stressed that how China continues to interact with Putin's war will be a determining factor for EU-China relations (European Commission 2023a).

But going beyond Europe, at the same time, she underscored the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, signaling to Beijing the EU's readiness to play a more prominent role in the region. Elevating Taiwan to such a level is indicative of a more pragmatic approach, through which the EU has started seeing Taiwan both for its own merit and as a part of a larger competitive (and potentially conflictual) environment. While there is no common EU-level position on Taiwan, such statements illustrate an emerging convergence on its importance to the EU's security, beyond the threat from Russia. Thus, although the EU's foreign policy remains fragmented and member states' China policies are not aligned, the EU's overall stance on China is shifting in line with its geostrategic adjustment. Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific region are an integral part of this process.

Navigating Cross-Strait Relations – Interdependence and Complexity

The EU's strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific adopted in September 2021 states that “the display of force and increasing tensions in regional hotspots such as in the South and East China Sea and in the Taiwan Strait may have a direct impact on European security and prosperity” (EEAS 2021c). The EU has made cooperation with like-minded

partners a core pillar of its geopolitical ambitions, seeking to carve for itself a role that protects its interests in the US-China geostrategic competition. It has stepped up efforts to engage the Indo-Pacific beyond China. By upgrading ties with India, the Republic of Korea, Japan, South East Asian nations (ASEAN), and also Taiwan, the EU aims to secure its presence in the Indo-Pacific, a region central to global trade, but also most exposed to China's economic coercion.

China has been seeking a dominant regional role, militarizing islands and leveraging its economic size, forcing regional states into the difficult situation of balancing their economic and security imperatives. Taiwan, at the centre of the Indo-Pacific, is critical in this regard. The Taiwan Strait, a body of water extending between the South and East China Seas, is home to some of the world's busiest and most important shipping lanes. It contains a corridor of international waters and airspace within which all countries and their vessels enjoy freedom of navigation and overflight. Most importantly, the Strait does not, as a matter of international law, belong to China.

Beijing, however, falsely claims sovereignty over the Taiwan Strait – and Taiwan. The majority of states in the world, including the EU and its member states, recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the sole legal government of China, but do not accept the One China Principle that the Republic of China is invalid and that Taiwan is a province of China (defined as the PRC). Chinese leadership has for decades tried (with various levels of success) to impose its One China Principle in its relations with the rest of the world, asserting that this is the political foundation of their cooperation. In other words, Beijing falsely claims that the world, including the EU as a whole and its member states, had signed up to its Principle and accepted that Taiwan is part of the PRC. Such information manipulation has wider implications beyond Taiwan and cross-Strait relations.

In reality, the recognition of the PRC as the sole legal government of China implies the EU's own One China Policy, which states only that there is one China (whose legal government is the PRC) and takes no position

on the question of whether Taiwan does or does not belong to the PRC, nor whether Taiwan is or is not independent. This policy, which is the basis for the development of direct EU interaction and cooperation with Taiwan, has also served as the boundary of EU-Taiwan bilateral relations, and thus is a critical part of the context of the EU's relations with mainland China. That is, as the EU expanded its cooperation with China, Taiwan did not become a prominent overt issue on the bilateral agenda. On the contrary, considering it an internal matter and an issue of critical national interest, Beijing maintained it as a sensitive issue not subject to discussion. As EU-China trade relations grew more robust, Beijing faced little resistance from the EU, and Taiwan was kept outside of bilateral talks. At the same time, although the One China Policy has been a boundary to EU-China relations, it has not constrained bilateral cooperation, as the two sides have continued to exchange in a wide range of issues, in particular trade.

However, the European approach to Taiwan has shifted as the EU has started toughening its stance on China, reflected through high-level statements and EU-communications. EU leaders have urged that a new EU approach to China should be tailored to Europe's economic and national security imperatives, cautioning that China was moving into an era of security and control, including by showing military force in its neighborhood against Taiwan, through its human rights violations in Xinjiang, and by using economic coercion (European Commission 2023b). As a sign of the shift, in 2019 the EU labeled China a "systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance," and has built on this approach ever since. With Chinese pressure growing, a tangible shift in the EU's approach to both China and Taiwan has emerged. In April 2020 the EU thanked Taiwan for the 5.6 million masks it donated to the EU to help it fight the COVID virus—an unprecedented move (von der Leyen 2020). In June the same year, it was equally unprecedented that the EU named China, for the first time, and in addition to Russia, as a source of disinformation (linked to the coronavirus) aimed at undermining Western democracies, sowing internal divisions, and projecting a distorted view of

China's response to the global pandemic (Scott, Kayali, Cerulus 2020).

Chinese state-linked media outlets, but also Russian ones, not only promoted dangerous conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 virus, but also praised their own handling of the pandemic while criticizing democracies. Detecting such operations inside Taiwan, locally conducted investigations described it as China's "cognitive warfare" targeting Taiwan (China Power 2021a; China Power 2021b). While EU member states have become more aware of such threats, understanding the complexity of cross-Strait relations, and their impact on the security architecture of East Asia, still remains a challenge for most democracies across the world.

Despite growing geopolitical tensions, cross-Strait relations have grown paradoxically closer in terms of business and trade. Over the years, Taiwan's economic ties with the rest of the democratic world have not followed the same path. In 2021, the value of cross-Strait trade was 273.06 bn USD, with China being Taiwan's number one trade partner, followed by the US. In 2021, China and Hong Kong accounted for over 40 percent and 22 percent of Taiwan's total exports and imports respectively, and received 30 percent of Taiwan's total outward investment (Lee 2022). In reality, Taiwan depends more on China for trade than it does on the EU or the U.S., with the latter also being Taiwan's closest security partner.

With the US-China geostrategic rivalry growing more acute, Taiwan's trade dependence on China has become increasingly problematic. The US and China are in a tight race for technological supremacy, which has dramatically boosted Taiwan's geostrategic relevance; Taiwan operates the world's biggest advanced computer chip manufacturer, the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), and has become a pivotal node in the global semiconductor supply chain. Advanced chips, along with critical raw materials that are vital to producing chips, play an indispensable role in powering the modern digital economy. They are also key to the ambitions of the U.S., the EU, and China in terms of the pursuit of advanced technologies, including self-driving cars, energy transition,

quantum computing, robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), or 5G/6G.

Taiwan has earned a critical place in the global economy, but is vulnerable to China's coercive trade measures. Taiwan's TSMC operates factories in China, as does Apple supplier Foxconn and other Taiwanese companies. China also relies on Taiwan's semiconductors. Yet, as part of its strategic objective to take Taiwan, Beijing has shown increasing willingness to weaponize this economic relationship, with the aim to convince Taiwanese people that they are left with no choice but to accept being part of the PRC. For Beijing, Taiwan is a non-negotiable issue. The Chinese leadership has used a wide variety of coercive measures to signal that it will not compromise on Taiwan, including economic, political and military means.

Suggesting that taking control of Taiwan is a matter of when, not if, the Chinese leadership has also invested in its military capabilities (so-called anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD)) in order to be able to keep US forces away long enough, and if necessary successfully engage in combat, so as to accomplish a military takeover of Taiwan. China has a significant missile inventory (notably including intermediate range missiles the US lacks) and operates the world's largest navy (351 battle force ships), ahead of the U.S. Navy's 294. China also has an active-duty combat force of more than 2 million people, twice the size of the U.S., and far above Taiwan's 169,000 military personnel. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) thus already ranks among the world's leading militaries. It is also developing hypersonic missiles, and, on the back of government support of "military-civil fusion," is advancing Beijing's objective of becoming the dominant power in the Indo-Pacific (Maizland 2020).

In addition to modernizing its military, Beijing has used economic statecraft in cross-Strait trade relations for political goals. Starting in the early 1980s, it cultivated positive economic ties with Taiwanese businesses, offering incentives and rewards supported by active government regulations and policies, hoping that higher levels of economic interaction would allow Beijing to politically shape their interests and lay the foundation for closer political ties. At the same time, closer cooperation

was useful for China, as it relied on Taiwanese expertise and know-how for its own economic development. Following decades of economic engagement that was effective from a commercial perspective but ineffective in reaching the strategic objective of bringing Taiwan closer, Beijing started using negative economic statecraft, exploiting Taiwanese businesses' economic dependence on China (Norris 2016). Politically, the primary interest in Beijing has been to discourage and prevent any movement within Taiwan toward *de jure* independence. Over the years, this included influencing elections, coercion, and intimidation against Taiwanese firms operating in China, but also fruit embargos on products such as pineapples and sugar apples, or grouper from Taiwan (Lee 2022).

Beijing's aggressive posture in the Indo-Pacific, including against the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) and Australia, has pulled democracies closer together to coordinate measures aimed at deterring coercion. The stakes of coercion against Taiwan are high, considering that Beijing's ultimate goal is to incorporate Taiwan politically and destroy the idea of a democratic Taiwan. This would not only affect Taiwan, but regional and global trade, including that of the EU. As U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said, a crisis in the Taiwan Strait would not be an "internal matter," but one that concerns "literally the whole world" (Tso 2023). In this context, the EU, along with a growing number of democracies, has started exploring ways to upgrade cooperation with Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific.

EU-Taiwan Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific – Towards an Upgrade

The Indo-Pacific and Europe account for 70 percent of global trade in goods and services, and over 60 percent of foreign direct investment flows. Over one third of the EU's exports go to the Indo-Pacific region, and the majority of these transit through the sea lanes of the Indian and

Pacific Oceans, making it highly dependent on unhindered sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that pass through the Indo-Pacific. The EU thus has an interest in maintaining a rules-based order in the region and ensuring that growing militarization does not escalate into conflict (Mohan 2020). The EU's overall approach to the Asia-Pacific in past decades has, however, been dominated by attempts at keeping stable relations with China, a key trade partner, at the expense of the EU cultivating ties with other important regional actors and/or focusing on order maintenance in the region.

With the shift in global power, the EU has recognized this as a missed opportunity and started expanding its outreach to the region, by for example creating digital partnerships with the ROK, Japan, and Singapore, or by launching a Trade and Technology Council with India. These countries have all, to different degrees, expressed deepening concerns about cross-Strait frictions and a desire to send deterrence signals to Beijing. With its westernmost island less than 100 miles from Taiwan's east coast, Japan has been worried it could be forced to respond to a conflict. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also raised questions in Tokyo whether Chinese leader Xi, like Russia's Putin, may also want to embark on a risky war with a neighbor. As Prime Minister Fumio Kishida put it, "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow" (Brown 2028).

When it comes to China, the EU and India are today more geopolitically aligned than ever, an alignment that also matches Taiwan's concerns. The EU wants to diversify relations with the Indo-Pacific, and India wants to advance its economic and technological modernization, which is vital to its ability to play a bigger regional role (Ferenczy 2023). India wants to reduce its economic and technological dependence on China, which is a top priority for the EU through its de-risking agenda. With its high dependence on China, Taiwan is pursuing a similar objective. Both India and the EU want to increase their trade and foreign policy profiles in the Indo-Pacific, and both are seeking as independent a role as possible in the US-China rivalry. Taiwan wants to accelerate its internationalization, a process that China's aggressive posturing in the

region has ironically helped.

With the EU and India, Taiwan shares the objective of finding a way to manage economic interdependence with China. Albeit in different ways and with different intensity, the U.S., EU, India, and Taiwan perceive China as a threat to peace, stability, and the international order, as well as to their own prosperity. They have all developed different relations with China in recent years. In addition to border conflict in the Himalayas, India is already member of the Quad and the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) launched in May 2022 by the Biden administration as an economic engagement blueprint with 14 partners in the region, representing 40 percent of global GDP, both groupings notably excluding China. The EU, even as it is de-risking both in terms of trade and investment with China, has become one of the most important foreign investors in India, its third most important trading partner and second most important sales market, after the U.S.. The U.S. and the EU also stepped up bilateral cooperation in particular in key industries for global leadership through the establishment of the EU-US Trade and Technology Council, which, again, is significantly seen as a part of an agenda to curtail Chinese access to certain technologies. As a way of hedging risks vis-à-vis mainland China, Taiwan is seeking ways to upgrade its ties with the EU and regional partners, and is reinforcing relations with like-minded partners, in particular South East Asian countries in the framework of its New Southbound Policy launched in 2016, with the primary strategic goal to diversify Taiwan's economy, facilitate its regional integration, and reduce its isolation.

Notwithstanding an emerging convergence on the need to address China-related threats, the EU and the U.S. diverge in some ways in their approach to this end. In the first place, there are inherent structural limitations to European efforts to articulate a common position and policy on China. This is due to the intergovernmental and therefore fragmented nature of the EU's foreign policy along 27 national positions. This is in contrast with Washington's policy on China, which is largely free of the kind of internal fragmentation the EU is burdened with as a bloc, and has enjoyed bipartisan political support for many years, whether that be with

respect to a confrontational policy (as now) or a more cooperative policy (roughly over the first decade of the 2000s). A second reason for differing EU and U.S. approaches to China stems from differing strategic cultures, as the U.S. never lost sight of hard-power geopolitics and geostrategy after the end of the Cold War, whereas the EU allowed this form of strategic thinking to wane under the peace dividend. Finally, beyond these differences shaping how Brussels and Washington manage China, the main reason for the EU-US divergence remains the fact that the two are pursuing, in part, different strategic objectives concerning China. Ultimately, the US is locked in a geostrategic rivalry with China, countenancing the possibility of a new Cold War, while the EU has been trying to avoid this outcome set.

In line with this approach, already in 2017 Washington characterized China as the U.S.'s primary strategic threat in its National Security Strategy, claiming that "Chinese dominance risks diminishing the sovereignty of many states in the Indo-Pacific" (The White House 2017). In 2018, Washington launched a trade and technology war against China, initially imposing 25 percent tariffs on selected Chinese imports, and then in October 2022 introducing export controls on advanced semiconductors to China (mobilizing international partners to follow suit). In 2023, the Netherlands and Japan agreed to impose their own restrictions, but neither explicitly named China as the target of the export controls, nor did they indicate that their measures were related to an agreement with Washington (Allen, Benson and Putnam 2023). Washington's direction has been driven by the assessment in American policy circles that engagement with Beijing was a failure, a sentiment that remains widely shared. As concerns Taiwan, this also implies that the US has been out in front in terms of rhetoric and action pointing at indirect (and potentially direct) support for Taiwan in the event of greatly increased mainland Chinese coercion against the island.

In line with Washington but driven internally by member states as much as by Brussels, in 2019 the EU also labeled China a "systemic rival," a nomenclature acknowledging the failure of China to integrate into the

global/regional rules-based order. Although this signaled trans-Atlantic convergence on perceptions of China as a threat, the EU also refers to China as an “economic competitor” and necessary “partner” in certain areas of shared concern (such as global change). Thus Washington and Brussels still seem to diverge in the way they want to go about dealing with China, both as such and through the prism of Beijing as a threat. As opposed to Washington’s approach, engagement remains central to the EU’s discourse on China, as well as for most member states including Germany, China’s most important trade partner in the EU. Ultimately this is based on the belief that no global challenge can be solved without China.

Nonetheless, even if less drastically than the U.S., the EU is transitioning to a new kind of engagement with China, one expected to break with the past, including in terms of how to handle Taiwan. Fundamentally, of course, the U.S. and Europe have similar positions under the heading of One China Policy, although the US has a more institutionalized framework through its Taiwan Relations Act. Still neither the US nor Europe takes a position on the question of Taiwan’s sovereignty, and both have opposed the use of force to make any attempts to break the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

Beyond fundamental bright lines, inconsistencies remain and EU member states are not precisely aligned on China or Taiwan. This was on full display during the joint visit of French President Emmanuel Macron and Commission President von der Leyen to China in April 2023, where the two seemed to pursue different agendas, as opposed to being in line with each other and supportive of a common European agenda. While von der Leyen stressed that stability in the Taiwan Strait is of “paramount importance,” Macron, perhaps solicitous to avoid statements that might put French business interests in China in jeopardy (similarly to German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in November 2022) was reluctant to indicate that Europeans could get involved in a potential conflict between China and Taiwan (Bermingham 2023).

Such inconsistencies damage the emerging convergence among EU

member states on China and Taiwan. And as far as so-called de-risking is concerned, it has been the EU that has shown leadership in this regard, with the term, as put forward by the Commission President, also being incorporated into the May 2023 G7 Hiroshima communiqué. To this end, the EU, as well as other G7 members, have agreed to coordinate their approach to economic resilience and economic security based on diversifying and deepening partnerships, a multifarious effort at taking risk out of commercial/trade relations with China, not de-coupling (The White House 2023).

The EU's de-risking approach thus targets "risky" cooperation, i.e. strategic dependencies, but maintains overall "un-risky" cooperation with China, as European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen laid out in her speech prior to her visit to Beijing in April 2023 (European Commission 2023b). By including Taiwan in its Indo-Pacific strategy, the EU also signaled that it intends to work more closely with Taiwan, with notable emphasis on areas (semiconductors and other high-technology) that have been identified as strategically critical. The EU is thus seeking to rebalance relations with China in a way that enables it to protect its interests and curb Beijing's attempts to exploit its vulnerabilities, with EU-Taiwan relations a crucial fulcrum in this effort.

The EU's turn toward the region is therefore driven by geopolitical concerns related to China's continuous rise, and the acknowledgement of an economic-security nexus in the EU's geopolitical agenda, hence the urgency in reducing its strategic dependencies on China. This includes critical raw materials, where the EU has a 98 percent reliance on China (European Commission 2020a). Rare earths are a particularly important area, as they are vital to semiconductors and therefore to the EU's green and digital agenda. The EU and the US converge on the need to address technology-related threats and have started to deepen collaboration on securing supplies of critical minerals. They agreed to negotiate a critical minerals agreement for the purpose of enabling relevant critical minerals extracted or processed in the EU to count toward requirements for clean vehicles.

In this shift toward the Indo-Pacific, the EU now sees Taiwan on its own merit, which is unprecedented in EU-level policy-making. Support for Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organizations has been the main focus in the EU's approach to Taiwan for decades, as present in EU-level communications and official documents. This focus has, however, been expanded, as EU institutions have elevated Taiwan on their agenda, with the European Parliament playing a leading role. Cooperation with Taiwan as a like-minded partner is becoming normal, as opposed to still being treated as a "sensitive issue," which Beijing made sure was the case for decades. It is noteworthy, however, that, in addition to the supranational-focused European Parliament, this process has been mostly driven by EU member states, in particular countries in Central/Eastern Europe, namely Lithuania, Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland, which have engaged Taiwan more directly and concretely. In the context of the pandemic, these EU member states have reciprocated Taiwan's mask diplomacy with vaccine diplomacy, which has helped to establish a kind of partnership that showcased Taiwan as an equal partner (Jerzewski 2021).

Lithuania stands out in particular for its principled approach to both China and Taiwan. The Baltic state's turn toward Taiwan in 2021 was primarily driven by its disappointment in China as a partner, and concerns that continuous bilateral cooperation would not only fail to bring the promised benefits, but would present serious national security threats. Vilnius decided to leave the 16+1 cooperation framework, which China initiated in 2012 with 11 Central/Eastern European countries and 5 Western Balkans states, promising much needed infrastructure investment to the region. Vilnius also allowed Taiwan to open a "Taiwanese" office in the country, breaking with the practice of naming it the "Taipei office," and also opened a Lithuanian representative office in Taipei.

This angered Beijing and brought on an unprecedented response designed as punishment, but also as deterrence for other EU member states; Beijing banned not only Lithuanian goods from entering China, but all Lithuanian products with European components, thus affecting

intra-European trade. This aggressive measure backfired, however. The EU not only supported Lithuania politically and financially, but accelerated its work on adopting an EU-level Anti-Coercion Instrument, which was lacking at the time of Beijing's coercion. Lithuania has maintained its commitment to expand cooperation with Taiwan and Taiwan has reciprocated with trade and investment, which has played a significant role in shaping perceptions of Taiwan as a partner in its own right, not a part of EU-China relations (Ferenczy 2022).

In response to Beijing's economic coercion, EU leaders proactively asserted member states' right to cooperate with Taiwan and condemned Chinese reaction they deemed "unjustified and disproportionate," indicative of a more self-confident and pragmatic approach vis-à-vis China. Commission President von der Leyen and Council President Charles Michel vowed to "push back" against "threats, political pressure and coercive measures" aimed at any of the bloc's member states. They also made it clear that the naming of the representative office did not constitute a breach of the EU's One China Policy (Taipei Representative Office in the EU and Belgium 2021). This was unprecedented and set a new standard for how the EU deals with Taiwan and rising tension in the Taiwan Strait. The most valuable element of this kind of new push-back against Beijing's coercion is the fact that the EU leadership explicitly stressed that cooperation with Taiwan is in line with the One China Policy, not a violation of it. Given Beijing's use of disinformation as a powerful tool to undermine European unity and democratic governance, this is of particular importance.

On the EU institutional level, parliamentary diplomacy has been an effective tool in bringing Taiwan closer to Europe. As such, in November 2021, the first ever official EP delegation visited Taiwan. Members of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference and Disinformation (INGE) met Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, and called on the EU as a whole and other democracies facing interference operations to draw lessons from Taiwan's best practices (European Parliament 2021). This visit was significant. It set a precedent for more EU-level parliamentary exchanges.

In July 2022 EP Vice-President Nicolas Beer visited Taiwan, and in December the same year, an EP delegation of the International Trade Committee (INTA) followed. INTA members explored issues such as a possible Bilateral Investment Agreement (BIA) and a resilient supply chains agreement that the EP had been calling for. According to participating European legislators, the discussions saw a constructive engagement on bilateral and multilateral trade relations and related issues, including the impact of China's coercion in the region, sustainable trade, supply chains, and critical raw materials (European Parliament 2022). In June 2023 an EP delegation including legislators active in the Security and Defence (SEDE) Committee visited Taiwan.

These visits are all in line with the EP's first-ever resolution on Taiwan, adopted in 2021, encouraging increased economic, scientific, cultural, and political exchanges at the most senior level. The report urged an impact assessment for an EU-Taiwan BIA, advocated Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organizations, and encouraged cooperation on supply chains, especially on semiconductor technologies (European Parliament 2021a). Through visits and resolutions, the EP has therefore been driving a process of elevating Taiwan on the EU's agenda. In terms of economic ties on an EU-level, since 2021 the European Economic and Trade Office (EETO) in Taipei, the EU's official representation, has held annual investment forums to encourage bilateral investment with high-level participation from both sides (Taiwan Today 2022).

The European Commission's Directorate General (DG) for Trade has held annual trade and investment consultations with Taiwan for over two decades. The two sides conduct a Dialogue on Digital Economy, with high-level participation, including Taiwan's Minister of National Development Council (NDC), and representatives of the Directorate General for Communications (DG CONNECT), DG Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW), and DG Trade (INTA) at the European Commission. Major topics discussed include research and technology, blockchain, AI, cybersecurity certification, and digital economy (National Development Council 2020). With their Trade and Investment

Dialogue held in June 2022, the two sides modernized their long-established trade dialogue, elevating cooperation on strategic items linked to trade and technology in critical areas linked to security, such as semiconductors, supply chains, export controls, FDI screening, and R&D (European Commission 2022).

Conclusion

The growing tension in the Indo-Pacific has amplified a realization in Europe that its future and that of the international order is being forged by developments in the region. The EU started reinforcing ties with Taiwan as part of its ongoing efforts to rebalance cooperation with China, clearly stressing that cooperation with Taiwan falls within the EU's One China Policy, asserting that it is the right of EU and member states to pursue exchange. Through the embrace of the concept of the Indo-Pacific, the EU has engaged in the broader debate as a strategic, not merely normative power, moving toward a more pragmatic and realist foreign policy. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU amplified its search for a geopolitical role to better navigate an increasingly multipolar, less multilateral world.

The EU now sees Taiwan for its own merit and has engaged it through different means, including parliamentary diplomacy and the modernization of bilateral trade consultations. In this process, reinforcing cooperation with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific, including India, Japan, and the Republic of Korea will remain key. The EU and the US agree on the need to de-risk trade with China, in particular to reduce strategic dependencies, and to explore ways to bring Taiwan closer to the international community.

The EU's new approach to the Indo-Pacific, and the renewed commitment underlying it, has created strategic space to expand bilateral cooperation with Taiwan. This relationship already rests on a well-established trade and economic framework, but also on solid cultural,

political, and science exchange. The EU's regional allies and partners have welcomed its embrace of closer relations with Taiwan within the framework of its 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy. Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that as a like-minded partner, Taiwan is committed to working with the EU to enhance cooperation in strategic sectors spanning digital economy, green energy, post-pandemic economic recovery, and supply chain restructuring (Taiwan Today 2021).

As the EU normalizes ties with Taiwan, both in political and trade terms, parliamentary diplomacy is vital, not only practically but as a common practice of democracies. This is an approach that not only the European Parliament has embraced, but also national parliaments across EU member states, including in Czechia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Poland, and Italy. Not only does this concretize EU interest in Taiwan, but this suggests an unprecedented level of readiness across the bloc to assert Europe's right to cooperate with Taiwan despite Beijing's objections and false claims of sovereignty over Taiwan.

Finally, the recent modernization in EU-Taiwan trade cooperation shows that reinforcing engagement with Taiwan is possible within existing boundaries, such as the EU's One China Policy. Discussions on Taiwan's strategic relevance to the EU's own security and prosperity are now regular in Brussels, just as discussions on China are. Going forward, less ambiguity and more convergence and consistency on this path will be key for the EU's search for a geopolitical role in the region. If the EU and Taiwan want to continue expanding cooperation, both sides will have to do their part and stay committed to investing further in each other's resilience. Discussions with like-minded democracies on how to better integrate Taiwan into economic frameworks and increase regional deterrence must continue.

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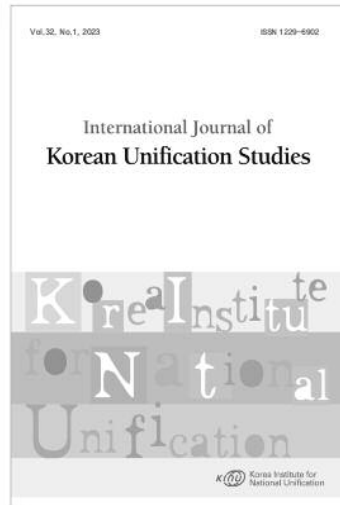
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