REGIONAL CONFLICTS IN EAST ASIA — A ROLE FOR CHINA

James F. Gregg

The rise of China has raised more questions than answers regarding conflict probability, conflict resolution and the future of the security architecture in the East Asian region. Territorial disputes in the South China Sea, as well as historical periods of conflict between China and other Asian actors, have already complicated the relationship between states in the region. In what ways has the rise of China changed the regional security architecture of the East Asian system and what events are corollary to such new paradigm shift? What aspects determine China's role and the extent of China's influence in regional conflicts? Clearly, the rise of China has fundamentally shifted the security paradigm in the East Asian system away from the US dominated system, to a system of growing multilateral integration, utilizing various institutions such as free trade agreements and security dialog platforms.[1] The rising political, economic and military influence of China will give it license to be more assertive in regional conflicts, a variable for increased conflict likelihood. However, in reaction to this power shift, the region itself is further integrating and deferring open conflict in preference of mutual security cooperation as means of strengthening positions over security concerns. Thusly, with the rise of China, it has been shown that even nations with competing economic pursuits and territorial claims can participate in a single, albeit loosely binding, security structure. Therefore, the rise of China is paradoxical in effect toward the security architecture of the region,

simultaneously giving impetus to integration, a factor for conflict de-escalation, but also raising tension and military capability, a factor for greater conflict probability. In this short note, the notions of nested security regions will be examined in brief, followed by the outline of this paradoxical role of China in the developing regional security complex.

Geographically, China spans from the East Asian region into the Central Asian former Soviet space. This encompassing and vast territory brings about equally vast security concerns, ranging from narcotrafficking, maritime economic channels, anti-piracy, and separatism, to the spread of political Islam.[2] Is China therefore a region unto itself? It is certainly large enough and has unique history to merit the title of civilization and even a region, but China, nonetheless, is a part of a greater Eastern Pacific system and Central Asian System, making it similar to Russia, a "trans-regional actor."[3] China participates in "nested regionalism," in which China, itself, can be considered a region with its own regional security concerns, while simultaneously acting in the interest of the security concerns of a larger, more encompassing region involving many other states.[4] In regards to the security architecture of the Central Asia Region, which is not the focus of this note, China has learned heavily from the development of East Asian, promoting the method of "open regionalism,"

[1] Solis, Mireya; Katada, Saori. Understanding East Asian Cross-Regionalism: An Analytical Framework // *Pacific Affairs*, 2007, Vol. 80, No. 2, pp. 229-257.

[2] Sahashi, Ryo. The Rise of China and the Changing Regional Security Architecture. Japan Center for International Exchange, 2011. 20 p.

[3] Solis, Mireya; Katada, Saori. Understanding East Asian Cross-Regionalism: An Analytical Framework // *Pacific Affairs*, 2007, Vol. 80, No. 2, pp. 229-257.

[4] Ibid.

with collective security.[5] Combating terrorism, separatist movements and drug traffic from Afghanistan are shared concerns for the entire geographical region which compose what Buzan describes as the "Regional Security Complex."[6] The Shanghai Co-operation Organization is the driving integration institution to address these security issues throughout the former Soviet space, by providing a large platform with many actors with varying degrees of participation and commitment.[7] No nation wants to lose autonomy or fall into the dominion of China as a regional hegemon.[8] However, the loose framework of "open regionalism" allows for a mutual security architecture to exist, without dramatic commitment or military alliances. Despite suspicion, economic competition and complex history, the entire Central Asian region has a shared security threat, and, as Buzan explains, "a regional security complex is denoted usually by a high level of threat/fear which is felt mutually among two or more major states."[9]

The East Asian system does not have obvious and demanding mutual security concerns to the extent of Central Asia, as it does not have an active and destabilized war zone involving major powers on the border of the region, as Central Asia has had from the War in Afghanistan. However, according to Buzan, East Asia does, nonetheless, comprise its own Regional Security Complex. Perceived divisions of interest in East Asia are therefore "the product of regional polarization, causing the formation of sub regional alliances."[10] The entirety of the region still has the common interest in regional stability, self-preservation and prosperity, despite individual competition and perceived military or economic threats among the states themselves. This is the overarching and driving security concern of the entire sub-system. However, competing territorial claims in the South China Sea and the growing political influence of China cause the formation of what Buzan describes as "sub regional alliances," most notable ASEAN. The Association of South East Asian Nations initially worked for the "security independence, preservation of regional identity and collective autonomy" of the member states.[11] This was with the growing trepidation that China would rapidly become the dominant force in the region, and without unity, the smaller and middle sized nations of the East Asian Region would lose autonomy.[12] The result is more nations interested in the protection of their autonomy coupled with the growth of Chinese boldness over regional points of contention. Conflict in the East Asian region occurs along fault lines of clashing values.[13] According to Power-transition theory, as China gains more influence, these zones of conflict will be more prone to escalation. Peace Studies writers Kim and Morrow explain this phenomenon elegantly in their 1992 piece "When Do Power Shifts Lead to War" and with extensive tested modeling, conclude that dramatic power shifts have the capacity to lead to war and even statistical correlation with war, but occur within a dynamic and reactive system.

Growth of capabilities of dissatisfied states increases their ability to push demands for change in the international order. Such demands accumulate over time until the dissatisfied state approaches equality, with the state defending the status quo. The accumulated weight of the dissatisfied demands then triggers a massive war that relieves the accumulated grievance. But states should press demands for change whenever they expect to gain from such demands. As system of rational actors should

[5] Lanteigne, Marc. In Medias Res: The Development of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization as a Security Community // *Pacific Affairs*, 2006, Vol. 79, No. 4, pp. 605-622.

[6] Buzan, Waever; De Wilde. Security: A New Framework for Analysis. Lynne Rienner Publishers CO, 1998. 240 p.

[7] Lanteigne, Marc. In Medias Res: The Development of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization as a Security Community // *Pacific Affairs*, 2006, Vol. 79, No. 4, pp. 605-622.

[8] Sahashi, Ryo. The Rise of China and the Changing Regional Security Architecture. Japan Center for International Exchange, 2011. 20 p.

[9] Acharya, Amitav. A Regional Security Community in Southeast Asia? // *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 1995, Vol.18, No. 3, pp.175-200.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Sahashi, Ryo. The Rise of China and the Changing Regional Security Architecture. Japan Center for International Exchange, 2011. 20 p.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Acharya, Amitav. A Regional Security Community in Southeast Asia? // *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 1995, Vol.18, No. 3, pp.175-200.

equilibrate the system over time and eliminate accumulated demands for change. Given that shifts in capabilities are anticipated, demands for change are granted as the dissatisfied rise in power. Grievances cannot accumulate to drive a major war.[14]

This phenomenon, as described by Kim and Morrow, suits well the East Asian region. The region is adaptive and dynamic, attempting to equilibrate the rise of China by the formation of "functionalist" all-encompassing integration mechanisms that pull both China and the US deeper into integration and further away from dominance in order to defer conflict.[15] The success of this method will be determined on the perception of cost in conflict, often difficult to ascertain as major wars often begin as low cost small conflicts. Conflict escalation occurs with the increased participation of outside actors which alter the perception of the conflict, have different goals, and increasing the war fighting capacities of different factions.[16] The two major points of conflict in the East Asian system are Taiwan and the South China Sea. However, Kim and Morrow explain that grievances alone are not the only criteria for an escalation of conflict.[17] This is evident as these grievances of China have existed for decades and have not escalated to war. The formation and expansion of the role of ASEAN is therefore an International Relations echo or reflection of the rise of China as it fulfills the equilibrating function not necessary with the previously weak China of decades past. If the stakes are at a low enough threshold, but grievances are a high enough threshold that China feels it has the ability to resolve the issues militarily, conflict is likely. The determining factor will be how successful the East Asian region will be, and so its adaptability, and also the success of ASEAN and foreign actors it has brought into the fold to create equilibrium.

The current architecture of regional security in East Asia is described as a "spoke and wheel" system of bilateral security relationships with the United States, former communist alliances, and the regional integration mechanism such as ASEAN.[18] However, the current paradigm of security architecture is in constant flux, caused by the rise of China as a political, economic and military actor, and the rise of "nontraditional security threats."[19] The rise of China is often viewed as nearly synonymous to the decline of the United States in the region and the world. While there is an obvious and unavoidable power shift away from US hegemony, further analysis reveals a more complicated situation. Therein lies too many complex and overlapping areas of shared interest between the United States, China and the smaller and middle-sized states of the East Asian system. It is because of this that all actors are seemingly avoiding "overt political and military confrontation… given the increasing complexity of their interest and the region's deepening dependency on China as emerging market..."[20] China is therefore incentivized to use its political influence to pursue its regional interest while simultaneously promoting institutions and negotiations to "conceal conflict" in the East Asian region overall.

Resulting from this contradictory dynamic, the rise of China is correlated to the rise of responsive "all inclusive institutions." ASEAN+3, and the East Asia Summit, includes the entire greater Asia-Pacific from India and New Zealand to Russia and the United States. US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's proposal to hold the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) every year rather than once in three years shows the extent of open dialogue and security interest integration in the entire region.[21] Singapore and Indonesia were initially very much against the addition of so many new members to the institutional frameworks of the East Asia Summit, but changed their minds when they viewed that such radical integration

[14] Kim, Woosang; Morrow, James. When Do Power Shifts Lead to War? // *American Journal of Political Science*, 1992, Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 896-922.

[15] Sahashi, Ryo. The Rise of China and the Changing Regional Security Architecture. Japan Center for International Exchange, 2011. 20 p.

[16] Kim, Woosang; Morrow, James. When Do Power Shifts Lead to War? // *American Journal of Political Science,* 1992, Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 896-922.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Sahashi, Ryo. The Rise of China and the Changing Regional Security Architecture. Japan Center for International Exchange, 2011. 20 p.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

keeps ASEAN as a central player in the region and distances the influence of the both great powers at play. This integrative phenomenon is described as "Functionalist Security Cooperation," which has no intention of developing alliances and allows for nations within the region with competing economic, political, and even territorial interests to simultaneously cooperate in areas of mutual security concern.[22] Likewise, the US wishes to balance the rise of China but "in an unprovocative manner" and being a member of the Pacific Rim and involved security actor in the South China sea, the United States was also equally keen to participate in the Functionalist Security Cooperation to de-escalate tensions while maintaining military capacity in the region.[23] Can the United States act as a balancer to China alone? Certainly the United States has the means to project military power across the world and has managed to do so for decades, but to what extent the United States has the ability to militarily influence China is open to conjecture. However, it can be argued, that the United States is a fundamental component of the overall East Asian security architecture, and if not alone acting as a balancer, it can act as a balancer in the employ of ASEAN states. Ideally, given the progressing "functionalist web" style security architecture, the United States can act as a balancer more passively and through cooperation and participation with China and ASEAN states. In the "Functionalist Security System," China and the US divert their attention from economic and political rivalry, instead to build connections through fighting cyber insecurity and promoting maritime security while emphasizing economic mutual dependence.[24]

China, like many of the littoral nations of East Asia, holds maritime security paramount and wishes to extend its influence more in the South China Sea, the primary theater of regional conflict among nations of South East Asia. While their reach is expanding, at the territorial loss of surrounding countries, the United States still remains the dominant naval power with its 7th fleet in the region. Smaller and middle-sized nations of the region are very in-

terested in preserving the American presence as a military balancer to China, to an extent previously unimaginable. One example of this is the opening of Cam Ranh Bay for the US and Russian military vessels, despite the long and horribly bloody war in Vietnam and recent rivalry between the US and Russia.[25] Vietnam is nonetheless strained in its relations with China over the South China Sea to the point that it integrates other military powers into its security strategy, inviting both Russian and American warships to offset the rise of Chinese Naval Power. ADMM and ASEAN allow for smaller and middle-sized countries of the region to improve their naval military capacities to secure regional stability against piracy while simultaneously arming themselves to offset China's rising military abilities in a non-inflammatory or provocative way. An example of this is the US-Indonesia comprehensive partnership RIMPAC or "Rim of the Pacific Exercise" in which Indonesia purchased 24 used F-16 fighters from the United States.[26] Not intentionally targeted at China, and intended to protect the Strait of Malacca from piracy, the program significantly arms ASEAN nations, increasing capabilities for potential conflict with China, but deliberately frames the conflict narrative. The narrative is further cemented by the participation of other actors, such as Australia and Japan, which have opened joint maritime security projects, and the visit of the Defense minister of Vietnam in Tokyo on collective regional security efforts.[27] The result is greater integration of all actors in the region, to offset any one actor's hegemony in the region, preserving autonomy for all ASEAN countries. Referring back to the work of Kim and Morrow, external powers, by supplying technology and capability to ASEAN countries, increase the cost of small scale conflict with China, thusly lowering the statistical likelihood of escalation. Not simply a choice of the US or Chinese alignment, the functionalist system diffuses power among many actors. This is described as "inclusive security trends."[28]

The United States currently spends roughly 4% of its Gross Domestic Product on military

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.

spending, while China spends only 2%. However, from 1999 the United States has increased its military spending by 66%, while China has increased its spending by 190%.[29] This illustrates the level of increased Chinese interest in security and defense of its interests in the region. Despite the rise of Chinas military capacity, the threat to small and medium-sized countries in the region is still relatively low.[30] Regime change or the likelihood of low-intensity conflict caused by China are not statistically substantial. The role of the US as a balancer utilized by the smaller and medium-size countries has intensified with the rise of China making the United States a more relevant actor, but simultaneously less important, as the overall structure of security integration has shifted from a spoke and wheel model, with the United States having individual relationships, to a web model of multilateral relations including China and the United States.

The Chinese strategy in the region is rather nebulous. Chinese self-perception and perception of the outside world is a difficult field and should be approached with trepidation. In what ways is the Chinese approach to International Relations different from the Western style? To what extent is the analysis of the land of China limited by the own social constructions of the Western analysts themselves? These are questions which are far beyond the scope of this note, but are insightful questions in determining the continued development of the East Asian Security architecture. The literature fails to go in depth about Chinese perception of the region and its role in the security needs. This is most likely due to the language barrier in research in addition to the more closed nature of the Chinese government, and also that the appearance of Chinese academics on the topic in the West is still relatively new.[31] Therein, also exist alternate Eastern approaches to International Relations, which could offer alternatives, the Power transition theory, and models of conflict. Obviously, it cannot be known if the rise of China will lead to regional conflict, but insights into the Chinese self-perception and its role in East Asia would add valuable contributions to understanding the overall system.

If conflict does occur, due to territorial claims in addition to transfer of power, and ASEAN fails to contribute to a reactive and adaptive system, China would be the dominant military, political and economic actor, up against a comparatively poorly equipped ASEAN states and a progressively reluctant United States. ASEAN countries would progressively lose their autonomy and China would become the arbiter of all regional conflict issues in the region. Escalation of the conflict to large scale war would be determined by the stakes of the conflict, and importantly the presence of external belligerents.[32] The likelihood of escalation after the start of action occurs independently of the various social and governmental constructs of the belligerent states, and the functionalist web model of East Asian security architecture may not prove viable to quell conflict, but instead work against it by bringing in additional foreign actors with their own independent security goals, thusly complicated the possibility for resolution and prolonging and intensifying the conflict.[33]

Although this is a dark depiction, it is not statistically likely. Positively, the rise of China is equivalent to the rise of inclusive institutions throughout the Asia Pacific, not by its own will, but as a reactionary force to its rising influence. The centrality but slow progress of ASEAN, the expansion of actors, the increase in the importance of the US alliances, and the formation of ADMM Plus, all contribute to the greater trend of "intra-institutional balancing." This works with and without support of China. Naturally, it is in China's interest to expand its influence in the region. However, as part of the greater regional security complex, China also

[29] Gill, Bates. China's Evolving Regional Security Strategy / in Shambaugh, David. (ed.), Power Shift: China and Asia's New Dynamics, 2005, pp. 247-265

[30] Sahashi, Ryo. The Rise of China and the Changing Regional Security Architecture. Japan Center for International Exchange, 2011. 20 p.

[31] Liu, Qianqian. China's Rise and Regional Strategy: Power, Interdependence and Identity. // *Journal of Cambridge Studies*, 2010, Vol. 5, No. 4, pp. 76-92.

[32] Kim, Woosang; Morrow, James. When Do Power Shifts Lead to War? // *American Journal of Political Science,* 1992, Vol. 26, No. 4 Pp. 896-922.

[33] Kugler, Jacek; Douglas Lemke, eds. Parity and War: Evaluations and Extensions of the War Ledger. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996. 400 p.

has an incentive to participate in the stability of the system as a whole, while simultaneously maneuvering to be the center of such a system. For this reason, China is active in the new functionalist and widespread security architecture. Instead, China acts progressively to become a greater locus of this web to promote its self-interest, without endangering the stability of the system. The future shape of the East Asian security structure will depend on the maturity of these locus points and the appearance of new points of power. It is my opinion, that ASEAN, an institution which has received a lot

of criticism by its slow progress and soft institutionalism, has not been explored in the proper context. When examined, it has proven to be remarkable adaptive due to the very elements that bring it criticism. However, despite being promising, the functionalist encompassing capacity of the East Asian security architecture is still not very mature. In the short term, the immediate future of the system is a question of US-China relations.[34]

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[34] Sahashi, Ryo. The Rise of China and the Changing Regional Security Architecture. Japan Center for International Exchange, 2011. 20 p.

Regional Conflicts in East Asia – a Role for China

James F. Gregg, BA in Political Science and Russian Studies, University of Florida; Masters Candidate at MGIMO University

Abstract: The Rise of China occurs in an adaptive and reactive regional system, giving impetus to the development of inclusive and expansive security architecture. This attempts to offset the statistical likelihood of conflict with the rise of a major power as capability outweighs conflict costs. China, in an effort to be a central player within this forming security architecture, contributes to its formation and participates in strategic narrative framing to defer from open conflict and sabre rattling, while maintaining an increase in capabilities. This functionalist system of "open regionalism" incorporates external powers, furthering integrating the security concerns of the East Asian system with the security concerns of the world.

Key words: China, regional conflict, United States of America, ASEAN, ADMM, power transition theory, regional security complex, regionalism, East Asia.

Региональные конфликты в Восточной Азии: роль Китая

Джеймс Ф. Грегг, выпускник Университета Флориды (политические науки и российские исследования), магистрант МГИМО МИД России (Факультет политологии)

Аннотация: Подъем Китая происходит в условиях адаптации и трансформации региональной системы, что способствует формированию инклюзивной и экспансионистской региональной архитектуры. Это способствует снижению статистической вероятности конфликта в результате консолидации региональной державы, поскольку в настоящее время преимущества сложившейся региональной системы перевешивают издержки конфликта. Китай, стремясь играть ведущую роль в формирующейся региональной архитектуре безопасности, принимает активное участие в ее создании, а также в формировании дискурса, направленного на предотвращение открытого конфликта и угрозы применения силы, в то же время наращивая свой силовой потенциал. Функционирование системы «открытого регионализма» подразумевает вовлеченность внерегиональных держав, что способствует дальнейшей интеграции региональной повестки дня в Восточной Азии с глобальной повесткой дня в сфере безопасности.

Ключевые слова: Китай, региональный конфликт, США, АСЕАН, теория перехода власти, региональный комплекс безопасности, регионализм, Восточная Азия.