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The Historical Exolution and Future Prospects of the Asia-Pacific Security Architecture **2025**



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Diplomats take part in the 31st ASEAN Regional Forum at the 57th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Vientiane on July 27, 2024. (Photo by Sai Aung MAIN / AFP) (Photo by SAI AUNG MAIN/AFP via Getty Images)

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF THE ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

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In the landscape of global geopolitics, the Asia-Pacific region has consistently held a pivotal position. The evolution of its security architecture profoundly influences the fate of regional countries and reflects global political and economic transformations. From the starkly defined ideological confrontations of the Cold War era to the emergence of post-Cold War multilateral mechanisms to the current dynamics of increasing complexity, the Asia-Pacific security architecture has undergone profound changes. In this process, multilateral security cooperation has become the common aspiration of regional countries.

Historical Evolution of the Asia-Pacific Security Architecture

During the Cold War, the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region was shaped by the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, prominently seen in the pattern of bloc confrontation. To counter the Soviet Union's influence in the Asia-Pacific, the United States actively established a series of bilateral and multilateral military alliances. Among them, the treaties signed between the United States and Japan and the US and South Korea, and the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization allowed the US to make key strategic deployments in Asia. The Soviet Union, in turn, supported its allied countries, such as North Korea and Vietnam, providing military aid, as well as political and economic support.

During this period, countries in the Asia-Pacific region were often drawn into disputes between the two major camps, with highly tense security situations and military confrontations becoming the norm. The most intense security conflicts were seen in the Korean Peninsula, with its division and the long-term standoff between North and South Korea, as well as in Vietnam, during its civil war. The sovereignty and economic development of countries in the Asia-Pacific region were affected to varying degrees, with many forced to get involved in the conflicts. The security order in the Asia-Pacific region lacked stability and autonomy.

Following the end of the Cold War, the disintegration of the bipolar world order precipitated a profound realignment within the Asia-Pacific security architecture. The United States emerged as the sole superpower, leading to a significant shift in its strategic objectives and security policies in the region (Baker 1991). In response to this new geopolitical landscape, the interactions between the United States and Japan and between the US and South Korea changed. The US–Japan alliance has undergone multiple rounds of redefinition since the end of the Cold War. In 1996, the two countries signed the US–Japan Joint Declaration on Security, expanding the strategic goal of the alliance from merely defending Japan's homeland to responding to “situations that may emerge in the areas surrounding Japan” (US Department of State 1996). Subsequently, cooperation in areas such as the research and development of military equipment, joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing has continued to deepen. The alliance between the United States and South Korea has also undergone profound changes. In the early post–Cold War period, the US–South Korea alliance briefly underwent a period of adjustment, but with the dynamic developments on the Korean Peninsula, the alliance quickly warmed up and once again became a key part of the United States' alliance system in Northeast Asia. In addition to consolidating relationships with traditional allies, the United States has actively expanded its strategic partnerships with countries such as Australia, building a broader system of allies and partners. The US–Australia alliance was established in 1951 with the signing of the ANZUS Treaty, and has continued to intensify since the end of the Cold War.

In the post-Cold War era, the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific became more complex, with the formation of a preliminary regional security-cooperation framework centred around ASEAN. Regional countries began to proactively explore multilateral security-cooperation

mechanisms to help them manage complex and diverse security challenges—both traditional threats, such as territorial disputes, and non-traditional threats, such as terrorism and transnational crimes, which are difficult for individual countries to handle alone. Moreover, a stable security environment is a prerequisite for economic development and can facilitate regional economic cooperation. Thus, Asia-Pacific states sought to establish multilateral security mechanisms to help promote regional economic development. Additionally, small and medium-sized countries hoped to balance the power of major countries through joint efforts and enhance their say in regional security affairs.

Finally, in the context of globalization—in which the demand for international cooperation is constantly increasing—countries in the Asia-Pacific region also needed to better integrate into the international system by establishing multilateral security mechanisms and promoting the improvement of global governance. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established in 1994, marked the first official multilateral dialogue and cooperation mechanism for security in the Asia-Pacific, initiating a new chapter in the resolution of security issues through multilateral mechanisms. Subsequently, additional multilateral security-cooperation mechanisms emerged, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2003 and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) in 2010, each playing a significant role at various levels and in diverse fields to contribute positively to the security and stability of the Asia-Pacific.



Dong Jun, China's defense minister, gives an address during the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, on Sunday, June 2, 2024. Photographer: Ore Huiying/Bloomberg via Getty Images.

In recent years, the Asia-Pacific security architecture has undergone complex transformations, particularly since the United States made the strategic pivot to the Asia-Pacific region, which led to a competition between the US-led system of bilateral and multilateral alliances and the emerging multilateral security-cooperation frameworks in the region (Tan 2020). The two systems have fundamentally different security concepts. First, the former centres on traditional security views, emphasizing forward-deployed military and deterrence, while the latter adheres to a comprehensive security perspective, focusing on inclusiveness, cooperation, and dialogue. Second, the United States, relying on its strength, aims to lead regional security affairs, whereas ASEAN strives to enhance its position within the regional security framework through multilateral mechanisms. Third, the US alliance system is concentrated in the military domain, and is therefore tight and exclusive, while the mechanisms promoted by ASEAN cover multiple fields, exhibiting flexibility and emphasizing trust-building. Fourth, the United States attempts to establish a hegemonic order centred around itself, while ASEAN is committed to creating a new regional order based on equality, mutual benefit, and joint decision-making. The bilateral alliance framework, spearheaded by the United States, has been undergoing an upgrade and a deepening process, continuously evolving toward a networked minilateral structure. The US has actively promoted initiatives such as the “Pivot to Asia” and the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” (White House 2022), establishing mechanisms such as the Quad (comprising the US, Japan, India, and Australia) and the AUKUS (Australia–United Kingdom–United States) pact, thereby constructing an “Indo-Pacific” security-alliance framework centred around the United States (Abbas, Qazi, and Ali 2023).

Current Challenges Facing the Asia-Pacific Security Architecture

The Asia-Pacific region stands as one of the most intricate and sensitive geopolitical arenas globally, characterized by the lingering legacies of the Cold War and the emergence of new security dilemmas. To date, a comprehensive regional architecture that encompasses all countries and facilitates shared security among all regional actors has yet to materialize. The principal challenges facing the current construction of the Asia-Pacific security architecture include the following:

First, there is a normative contradiction between the military-alliance system and the regional multilateral security-cooperation mechanisms. The military-alliance framework refers to a network of cooperative military relations formed by two or more countries to promote their common security interests and military-strategic goals through formal treaties, agreements, or other legally binding documents. It is inherently exclusive, emphasizing military buildup and deterrence. Regional multilateral security cooperation, by contrast, underscores inclusivity, balance, and sharing, with a focus on resolving security issues through dialogue, consultation, and collaboration. The dominance of alliance politics and bloc antagonism, especially the military-alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region, has undermined the principles of collective

security that are foundational to regional security governance, resulting in a normative contradiction that exacerbates institutional balancing and competition, and ultimately jeopardizes the long-term peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific (Li 2022, Koga 2023).

Second, persistent regional hotspots continue to threaten regional security. The security landscape of the Asia-Pacific remains one of the most scarred from the Cold War (Mearsheimer 1990; Slater and Wilson 2004). For instance, in recent years, the situation on the Korean Peninsula has spiralled into a cycle of confrontation with its future trajectory fraught with instability and uncertainty—provoking widespread concern within the international community. Similarly, the South China Sea has seen intermittent tensions between regional states, and negotiations on a “South China Sea Code of Conduct” have progressed with considerable difficulty. Additionally, some countries within the Asia-Pacific are grappling with varying degrees of political, security, and social governance challenges, while domestic political transitions and factional struggles also impact regional stability.

Moreover, non-traditional security threats, such as cyber security, terrorism, and climate change, are becoming increasingly prominent, interlinking with traditional security challenges and complicating the landscape of security governance. Cyber-security threats not only jeopardize national information and economic security but may also precipitate international conflicts. With the enhancement of artificial general intelligence capabilities, emerging risks are becoming increasingly apparent. Terrorist activities pose grave threats to social stability, to the personal safety of citizens, and to property within regional countries. Furthermore, issues related to climate change, such as rising sea levels and more frequent extreme-weather events, have profound impacts on regional security. Collectively, these factors pose significant challenges to the security-governance framework in the Asia-Pacific. The existing multilateral security institutions in the Asia-Pacific have their own focuses in addressing non-traditional security challenges and have achieved certain results. However, due to the complexity and dynamics of non-traditional security threats, as well as the diversity of national interests, these multilateral security institutions need to constantly adjust and improve their cooperation mechanisms, strengthen the integration of their resources and build capacity, so as to more effectively deal with these challenges and maintain security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Future Trajectory of the Asia-Pacific Security Architecture

Building on the current trajectory, Asia-Pacific countries need to adopt a perspective characterized by common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security. They should enhance communication and coordination to collectively confront diverse security challenges, in an effort to carve out a new path toward security that features dialogue, partnerships, and win-win scenarios over confrontation, alliances, and zero-sum games.

The first priority is to build a balanced, effective, and sustainable security architecture. The future security framework in the Asia-Pacific should embrace inclusivity and eschew Cold War

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mentalities—that is, a confrontational mindset that divides states into camps based on binary oppositions, prioritizes ideology, emphasizes military buildup, upholds zero-sum thinking and dismisses the possibility of win-win cooperation, and simplistically and crudely interprets international relations through the lens of friends and foes. Regional countries should be encouraged to collaboratively participate in the development of this security architecture. This can be achieved through the implementation of multilayered and multifaceted confidence-building measures that foster economic cooperation and cultural exchanges among regional countries, thereby enhancing mutual understanding and trust.

The second priority is to continuously strengthen multilateral security cooperation. As the interdependence among Asia-Pacific countries intensifies, multilateral security cooperation will emerge as the predominant approach to developing the region's security architecture. Countries should actively support and refine ASEAN-centred regional security-cooperation frameworks, thereby enhancing security dialogue and collaboration among regional countries in the “ASEAN way”—that is, characterized by consensus, inclusivity, and comfort. Existing multilateral security mechanisms like the ARF and EAS can be further strengthened to improve their capacity and efficacy in addressing regional security issues. Additionally, the region could explore new multilateral security mechanisms, rearrange overall regional security systems, or address specific security issues to respond to the continuously evolving security challenges.

The third priority is to jointly address non-traditional security threats. Given the increasing prominence of these threats, the future security architecture in the Asia-Pacific should place greater emphasis on confronting non-traditional security challenges. Regional countries ought to strengthen collaboration in combatting terrorism, addressing transnational crimes, managing climate change, mitigating public health emergencies, enhancing cyber security, and promoting the governance of AI, collectively developing strategies and measures for response. These countries should establish specialized and functional transnational-cooperation mechanisms to enhance intelligence sharing and coordinated actions, implement monitoring and early-warning systems, and conduct emergency-preparedness drills.

The Asia-Pacific region constitutes a shared homeland for China and its neighbours, and the maintenance of regional peace and stability is a collective responsibility. China is dedicated to the goal of constructing an Asia-Pacific community with a shared future and remains committed to contributing to regional peace and security.

Multilateral security cooperation represents an inevitable choice for the future development of the Asia-Pacific security architecture. China is committed to working collaboratively with regional countries to enhance multilateral cooperation mechanisms, establishing a security architecture that meets the needs of regional countries, and jointly promoting peace, stability, and prosperous development in the Asia-Pacific.

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COUNCIL FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

Established in 1993, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) is the premier Track Two organisation in the Asia Pacific region and counterpart to the Track One processes dealing with security issues, namely, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Plus Forum. It provides an informal mechanism for scholars, officials and others in their private capacities to discuss political and security issues and challenges facing the region. It provides policy recommendations to various intergovernmental bodies, convenes regional and international meetings and establishes linkages with institutions and organisations in other parts of the world to exchange information, insights and experiences in the area of regional political-security cooperation. www.cscap.org

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Design: Prueksachat Kongthong

Cover and back image: Photo by Hartono Creative Studio via Unsplash

ISBN: 978-1-0694173-0-5



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