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TOWARDS AN ASIAN SECURITY COMMUNITY?

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Japan's announcement that it would accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN in Tokyo next month has been portrayed by the regional media as amounting to signing a security pact with the Southeast Asian states. It is actually something less than that. In fact Japan is playing catch up with two other Asian powers – China and India – which had acceded to the TAC at the ASEAN Summit in Bali last month. By so doing they had committed themselves to working for peace and stability in the region by seeking cooperation and eschewing force in settling disputes, through such instruments as a High Council of the parties to TAC.

The TAC has come a long way since its signing by the Heads of Government of the ASEAN Five in Bali in 1976. At that time it was seen as a limp response to the communist victories in the Indochina states – Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos – supported by the communist bloc powers – the Soviet Union and China; while the United States withdrew its forces from mainland Southeast Asia. The TAC, along with the subsequent Treaty on Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone, SEANWFZ, was open to accession by powers outside the region; but that was essentially a pious hope of its founding members. Still, accession to the TAC became the de rigour requirement for regional countries seeking associate status, like Papua New Guinea, or ASEAN membership, starting with Brunei in 1984.

The changed global configuration since 1990, especially the demise of the Soviet Union and the economic rise of China and India, gave the TAC a new significance. It has become a benchmark treaty for promoting peace and security in the Asia Pacific, which countries both in and around the region acknowledge as a basis for their engagement.

ASEAN took this process a step forward by creating the ASEAN Regional Forum involving all ASEAN members and dialogue partners in a security framework. Though lacking in military bite or enforcement powers, the ARF has proved to be a useful mechanism for bringing the USA, Russia and China in a multilateral forum to discuss security issues of regional concern.

The expansion of ASEAN to include all ten Southeast Asian states in the late 1990's and the upgrading of their dialogues with Japan, South Korea and China to summit level, brought a new dimension to their cooperative relations. It raised the prospect of an East Asian Community comprising Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia which would provide a combined market of 3 billion people and GDP of trillions. While this aroused fears of an economic grouping dominated by Northeast Asia, ASEAN moved to balance it by inviting India to join as a summit-level partner and thereby opening the prospect of creating a pan-Asian Economic Community.

True to form, to assuage these fears, China took the lead in offering to establish a Free Trade Area with ASEAN in 10 years with some early harvest in agricultural products. Japan followed suit by proposing a Comprehensive Economic Partnership with ASEAN. Not to be outdone India came forward with a Framework Agreement for closer economic cooperation that would pave the way for a FTA with ASEAN in 10 years.

These regional and inter-regional frameworks were matched by a parallel movement towards intra-regional cohesion by ASEAN. It adopted a target to bring about an ASEAN Economic Community by 2020, based on the implementation of AFTA in two stages. However these economic communities are not likely to be as strongly welded together as the European Community with its institutional trappings and single currency. What shape and substance the ASEAN Economic Community, East Asian Community or Asian Economic Community will take remains to be seen.

However ASEAN has recognised the need for any economic development and cooperative framework to be underpinned by a framework for political, economic and security relationships in which they would work together to ensure peace, security and stability. Accordingly the ASEAN Heads of Government signed in Bali a second Declaration of ASEAN Concord committed to the establishment of an ASEAN Community comprising three pillars of political and security cooperation, economic cooperation and socio-cultural cooperation to ensure durable peace, stability and shared prosperity in the region. They reaffirmed the TAC as the key code of conduct for states in the region and the ARF as the primary forum for enhancing political and security cooperation, and a bigger role for ASEAN in furthering cooperation in the ARF.

ASEAN Community framework

The ASEAN Leaders adopted a framework to achieve the ASEAN Community comprising three pillars – ASEAN Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. The 12 principles of the ASC, among other things, reiterate that existing political instruments such as the TAC, the Declaration on ZOPFAN and SEANWFZ Treaty, would continue to play a key role in confidence building measures, preventive diplomacy and approaches to conflict resolution. In this regard the ASC would fully utilise existing institutions and mechanisms within ASEAN to strengthen national and regional capacities to counter terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking and other transnational crimes, and would work to ensure that Southeast Asia remained free of all weapons of mass destruction.

The Bali Summit was also notable for the signing by both China and India of the protocols acceding to the TAC, besides committing themselves to strategic partnerships and economic cooperation and free trade areas with ASEAN. India also signed a joint declaration with ASEAN for cooperation to combat international terrorism. China had signed a similar declaration on cooperation in non-traditional security issues last year. Both undertook to continue consultations on their intention to accede to the Protocol to the Treaty on SEANWFZ. Not to be left behind Japan has now decided to accede to the TAC to strengthen political and security relations, as well as economic ties, with ASEAN.

The network of overlapping frameworks for security cooperation among the countries of Northeast and Southeast Asia and South Asia, usher in an era of non-military but interlocking security networks of security cooperation across Asia, while not precluding defence and security cooperation with non-Asian powers such as the United States. Indeed this development reflects a growing trend towards less reliance on military alliances and bases by the major powers and more emphasis on cooperative arrangements to work for the common security of countries big and small across the world. It reflects the decrease in conflicts and security threats from states and an increase in threats to all states from non-state actors such as international terrorists and insurgents, and which call for a matching response by a network of states which want peace, security and prosperity for their peoples.

Such a momentum could bring about an Asian Security Community that enhances intra-regional peace and stability while ensuring peaceful engagement with other security communities across the world. The decision by Asia's three major powers to accede to the TAC and enter into strategic partnerships with ASEAN signal a new enthusiasm by them for such a Security Community dedicated to building peace, security and stability based on mutual respect, non-aggression and peaceful settlement of disputes. If this vision is realised it would well owe its success to the modest Treaty of Amity and Cooperation that the leaders of five ASEAN members signed in Bali in 1976.

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