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Constructing dynamic security governance: institutional peace through multilateralism in the Asia Pacific

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ABSTRACT
The world is experiencing a dramatic transformation. Many security challenges, from territorial disputes to climate change, are threatening political stability and economic prosperity in the world. One interesting puzzle in the Asia Pacific is the so-called “Asian exceptional peace” phenomenon, i.e. there has been no military conflict in the Asia Pacific since 1979. By engaging the debate over the “Asian exceptional peace” puzzle, I introduce an “institutional peace” argument, which suggests that Asian countries have constructed an institutional framework of “dynamic security governance” to manage three types of security challenges in the region. I also discuss three future challenges as well as how to sustain this “institutional peace” in the Asia Pacific.

KEYWORDS
Dynamic Security Governance; Asian exceptional peace; institutional peace; institutional balancing

1. Introduction

The world is experiencing a dramatic transformation. Many security challenges from territorial disputes to climate change are threatening political stability and economic prosperity in the world. One interesting puzzle in the Asia Pacific is the so-called “Asian exceptional peace” phenomenon. Scholars have asked similar questions, such as “Can East Asian peace survive?” “Is the ‘Long Peace’ of East Asia Exceptional?” or “Will Asia’s past be its future?”

Since 1979, there has been no major war between states, or major military conflict in the Asia Pacific. Here I define the Asia Pacific region as East Asia plus Southeast Asia, not including South Asia, especially India and Pakistan. Peace does not simply mean the lack of major wars, but a significant negation of the use of force, the lack of conflict involving more than 1000 casualties and the situation of interstate nonviolence. It should be noted that the Asian peace argument does not deny that there are some crises, small-scale conflicts (1974, 1988, 1990) or humanitarian issues or domestic disturbances (such as...
after the financial crisis). The so-called East Asian peace is significant from a comparative perspective because East Asia accounted for 80 percent of world’s battle deaths in the period 1946–1979.\(^5\)

In the post-Cold War era, despite the rise of China, there is no arms race among Asian countries. Although arms races seem unavailable among security-driven states under anarchy, the extent of arms races is closely related to the stability and peace in the region. Some empirical research suggests “arms races are strongly associated with the escalation of disputes to war.”\(^6\) One popular measurement of arms racing is to examine the proportion of military spending in the GDP. The higher the proportion, the severer the arms racing. Examining the proportion of military spending in GDP of major Asian countries in 2016, we will find out that it was roughly half of what it was in 1990 and was similar to the military spending/GDP ratio in Latin America.\(^7\) Although some analysts worry about a coming arms race in Asia due to China’s increasing military budget in 2018, a close look at the defense/GDP ratio shows that the increase of defense spending in Asia is mainly commensurate with the region’s economic growth.\(^8\)

According to mainstream IR theory, such as realism and power transition theory, Asia should have been “ripe for rivalry” because of the rise of China.\(^9\) Although China’s so-called assertiveness seemingly caused regional suspicions and apprehensions after the 2008 global financial crisis, most Asian countries have not chosen a “chain-gang” strategy or a strategy of hard balancing against China.\(^10\)

When Trump came to power in 2017, US-China relations entered a new phase as Trump named China a major strategic competitor in his 2017 National Security Strategy.\(^11\) In 2018, the United States waged a “trade war” against China by increasing tariffs on Chinese products. China also retaliated with tariffs on US exports to China. However, it should be noted that Trump seemed to target the whole world instead of China alone. Interestingly, the Asia Pacific countries did not follow suit with the United States to challenge China, economically or militarily. Instead, most Asian countries have intended to maintain a good relationship with both the United States and China. In other words, Trump might indeed wage an economic war or even a Cold War with China. However, it is less likely that Asia will have a new Cold War against China.

What explains this interesting international phenomenon, which I have called “Asian exceptional peace,” especially in the post-Cold War era? To understand if the East Asian Peace can be sustained, we need to analyze what the major reasons are behind this peace and how their effects can be prolonged. Scholars and policy analysts have provided different explanations for the “East Asian peace” phenomenon from different theoretical and analytical perspectives by focusing on the role of power, economics, and culture in sustaining peace among Asian countries.

\(^5\)See Tønnesson, “Can the East Asian Peace Survive?”
\(^6\)Sample, “Arms races and dispute escalation.”
\(^9\)Friedberg, “Ripe for Rivalry.”
This paper addresses the dynamics of security governance in East Asia as well as how to sustain the East Asian peace in the future through an institutional perspective. The goal is to shed some light on security challenges and institutional governance in the Asia Pacific. First, I discuss three prevailing and existing arguments and analyze their strengths and weaknesses in accounting for the “East Asian peace” phenomenon. Second, I introduce an “institutional peace” argument, which suggests that Asian countries have constructed a “dynamic security governance” framework to manage three types of security challenges in the region. The last section discusses potential new security challenges faced by the region as well as how to sustain this “institutional peace” in the region using a security governance framework.

2. Three existing arguments on “Asian exceptional peace”

As some scholars point out, Western IR theory is sometimes “getting Asia wrong.” Regarding the “Asian exceptional peace” phenomenon, it is clear that unlike Europe, East Asia is not a zone of “democratic peace” since democracy is by no means the dominant form of government in Asia. Asian countries experienced their economic take-off in the 1980s, and it so happened that some countries became democracies during that same time. However, as many critiques have pointed out, Asian democracies are different and some feature “crony capitalism” with soft authoritarianism. Therefore, if not democratic institutions and liberal ideals, what makes the East Asian peace possible?

2.1. Balance-of-power peace

Different theories resort to different causal arguments and three popular ones are highlighted in this section. First is the “balance-of-power peace” thesis, which entails two variants. One is the “unipolar peace” argument and the other is the “bipolar peace” thesis. The unipolar peace argument suggests that Asian exceptional peace is built on US hegemony because the US benign hegemony provided a security guarantee and stability to the region. The logic of this “unipolar peace” argument is similar to “hegemonic stability” theory, but it focuses on the security stability provided by unipolarity. After the end of World War II, the US hub-and-spoke system of alliances constructed a stable security architecture in the region, in which Japan, a former revisionist state in World War II, was both protected and deterred by US hegemony. Although there are many rising powers in the region, especially China and Japan, the United States has maintained the largest economy with the largest defense budget for decades. The unparalleled military power of the US has played a “pacifier” role in the Asia Pacific.

12Kang, “Getting Asia Wrong.”
13For democratic peace theory see Russett, Grasping the Democratic Peace.
15In a special issue in Global Asia in 2015, a group of scholars broadly debated the causes of East Asian peace from different perspectives, emphasizing the roles of developmental states, dependence, gender, religion, etc. Some of these arguments can be broadly included into the realist, liberalist and cultural camps. This paper will not go into a discussion of the gender and feminist scholarship, which are important in pointing out the unique gendered cultural practices exemplified in Confucianism.
Ikenberry points out, “The hub and spoke alliance system remains the single most important anchor for regional stability” after World War II. In Robert Ross’s words, “East Asia seems to be the major beneficiary of pax Americana.” Another version of the unipolar peace argument is related to the status competition among states. Wohlforth suggests that the huge power gap between the hegemon and other states has discouraged other states to engage in “status competition” in the system. This lack of status competition has also contributed to a relative peaceful situation in the unipolar world since the end of the Cold War.

Some scholars challenge this “unipolar peace” argument and suggest that the so-called “unipolar moment” will be illusory. As Christopher Layne argues, new powers will rise up and eventually challenge US hegemony. Graham Allison also warns the world that the United States and China might fall into the “the Thucydides Trap,” in which a ruling power seems doomed to fight with a rising power throughout history. China is certainly becoming more assertive, particularly under the new leadership of Xi Jinping, and it seems to fulfill the prophecy that realists, especially power transition realists and offensive realists, have argued for decades. Therefore, some scholars propose a “bipolar peace” argument, which contends that the United States and China have dominated two separate geographical domains in Asia, i.e., the maritime Asia for the former and the mainland Asia for the latter. The power equilibrium in a bipolar system has helped Asia to maintain peace and regional security for decades and will perform the same function in the future.

2.2. Developmental peace

The second argument is called the “developmental peace” thesis, which argues that Asian countries are focusing on economic development after the Cold War and security concerns or competition among them are by no means their national priority. This argument follows traditional economic liberalism, which suggests that increasing trade and economic activities among states will reduce the possibility of wars and conflicts between them. Into the 1970s and the 1980s with Japan at the lead, the Asian economic miracle took off with a relatively high economic growth rate across the region. The major economies in Southeast and Northeast Asia all turned to prioritize domestic economic development over security competition. Many states modeled Japan’s export-oriented economic growth approach and focused on expanding international trade and
attracting foreign direct investments. Given the increasing levels of inter- as well as intra-regional trade, to these countries it seemed irrational to sacrifice their economic profits by fighting wars against one another. As Benjamin Goldsmith points out, “increased volumes of trade among East Asian states served to dampen the chances of conflict escalation between them.”

2.3. Cultural peace

The third argument is called “Asian cultural peace,” which highlights the importance of the peace-rooted culture in Asia, especially ancient Confucianism as well as cultural norms that emphasize diversity and peaceful coexistence, as exemplified in the Bandung Spirit. It suggests that the dominating Confucian philosophy was peace-oriented and so was the dominating religion of Buddhism in the region. Even though Indonesia is the largest Muslim country, it is a model of moderate Islam whose state ideology emphasizes national unity, social justice, and religious diversity. Therefore, despite a large Muslim population in the region, there is no large-scale religious and culturally-rooted conflict in Southeast Asia as we witness in the Middle-East.

Another variant of argument in the “cultural peace” school is led by constructivists who emphasize the role of ideas and norms in shaping state behavior, especially in the ASEAN way that highlights consultation, consensus, and peaceful resolution of disputes in the region.

2.4. Analytical problems

All of these popular arguments reveal some elements of truth. However, there are some unaddressed analytical problems. First, it is true that the US hub-and-spokes alliance system is important for regional security in Asia. However, under a similar and even more comprehensive US alliance system in the form of NATO, there have been many military conflicts in Europe after the Cold War, e.g. Bosnia, Kosovo, Georgia, Ukraine, etc. Similarly, the Middle East is by no means peaceful under the unipolar system.

Second, the “developmental peace” thesis is right to highlight the importance of trade and economic interdependence in preventing military conflicts among states due to the high economic costs and risks. However, trade and economic development alone will not stop nations from fighting for national interests, especially regarding territorial disputes. Moreover, economic interdependence might increase the possibility of friction and conflict because one country’s policy failure and economic meltdown might spill negative influences onto its neighbors, as seen from the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, the 2008 global financial crisis, as well as the current trade war between the United States and China.

Last, but not least, the “Asian cultural peace” thesis needs to clarify some conceptual questions first and clearly define what “Asian culture” or “Asian value” means as well as

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27. See Tan and Acharya, eds., Bandung Revisited; Acharya, “Studying the Bandung Conference from a Global IR Perspective”; and Acharya, Whose Ideas Matter?
31. Copeland, Economic Interdependence and War.
the scope of utility of the ASEAN way in world politics. If it is Confucianism, then why have there been so many bloody wars between and among East Asian countries in history? In addition, there are different variations within Confucian practices. Moreover, Asia has very diverse cultural traditions and is rich with different religious practices as well. It is true that there has been no religious war among Asian countries so far. However, it does not mean that moderate religious beliefs can fully account for the Asian peace phenomenon in general. The hard question for the cultural peace thesis is to identify the causal mechanism between the so-called Asian cultural values, moderate religions, as well as unique diplomatic practices on the one hand, no matter whether they do exist or not, and sustained peace and stability of the region on the other.

3. Institutional peace – dynamic security governance in the Asia Pacific

In this paper I propose a new argument – institutional peace – to shed some light on this “Asian exceptional peace” question. I argue that after the Cold War, Asian countries have constructed an institutional framework of “dynamic security governance” to manage various security challenges in the region. This “dynamic security governance” is fluid in nature and is by no means perfect. It will face new challenges in the future, especially with the rise of populist leaders and the potential power transition in the international system.

Before I explain the “dynamic security governance” framework, I would like to first discuss a new typology of security challenges in world politics. As we all know, there are many ways to classify security issues in the academic and policy fields, such as traditional vs. non-traditional security issues, human security, economic security, etc. Here, I would like to propose a typology by examining the “roots” of security challenges.

3.1. Three security challenges

The first type is called “security threats.” It is rooted in a human being’s desire or “lust for power.” Traditional territorial disputes and military invasion or conquest of another nation are all seen as “security threats.”

The second type of security challenge is called “security dilemma,” which is rooted in a lack of mutual trust between states. It is a “dilemma,” because two states originally may not harbor ambitions to conquer or invade one another. However, because there is no overarching authority to protect states from possible invasions from others, all states have to prepare for the worst, i.e. a possible invasion from others at any time. Therefore, when one state strengthens its military capabilities, thinking it is for self-defense purposes, its behavior is easily perceived and taken as a military threat in the eyes of others, especially close neighbors. Consequently, other states will also increase their own military capabilities, which might put the first state in an even worse security situation. One vivid example of the “security dilemma” type is an arms race among states.

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32 He, “Institutional Balancing and International Relations Theory”; He, Institutional Balancing in the Asia-Pacific; and He, “Contested Multilateralism 2.0 and Regional Order Transition”.
33 Morgenthau, Politics among Nations.
35 Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma.”
The third type of security challenge is “security spillover,” which refers to the unintended consequences of certain threats. For example, climate change, transnational crimes, and natural disasters are originally not “security” issues per se. However, due to spillover effects, these transnational problems have become a threat to the wellbeing of human beings and even the survival of states. Therefore, these transnational threats are “security spillover” challenges. One example is the haze pollution in Southeast Asia. Although the haze pollution from Indonesia seems an environmental issue, it has caused serious and multiple risks to the well-being and security of people in Southeast Asia. It is why the ASEAN states have worked together in order to cope with this trans-boundary threat that spills from Indonesia to the whole region. It is worth noting that “security spillover” is similar to the definition of non-traditional security or human security. Here, I use “security spillover” to highlight the transnational and spillover impacts of a certain threat, which is not originally seen as a “security” issue by nations.

### 3.2. A dynamic security governance model

The reason for highlighting the roots of these three types of security challenges is to locate a proper solution to address these challenges. For example, if one problem is a “security spillover” issue, military approaches might not be the right means to address this challenge. In the same vein, some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) might be able to help with some “security spillover” issues, such as climate change and trans-boundary pollution, but they will not be as instrumental or effective in resolving territorial disputes among states.

The major function of this “dynamic security governance” framework is to utilize the right tool to address the right problem. One key assumption is that the world is facing multifaceted and complicated security challenges, and there is no one country or one approach that is able to address all these challenges. Therefore, a dynamic governance model with close cooperation among states is necessary to address security issues and maintain peace in the region.

This dynamic security governance model consists of three layers, which interact with one another. The first layer is the UN multilateral collective security mechanism and bilateral alliances. I argue that these two security architectures do not contradict each other. Instead, they can reinforce and balance each other because both aim to achieve a “balance of power.” This layer of security governance is to address the so-called “security threat” problems in the world. As I mentioned above, the “security threat” problem is rooted in a human being’s “lust for power.” In the international system, this “lust for power” might lead to power competition among states, especially between ruling states and rising powers. Graham Allison has warned that China and the United States might fall into the so-called *Thucydides Trap*, because a war is more likely to take place between a rising power and a ruling state when their power gap narrows. The key to

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37 Thomas and Tow, “The Utility of Human Security.”
38 Nguitragool, *Environmental Cooperation in Southeast Asia*.
40 For collective security and the UN, see Claude Jr, “Peace and security”; and Thakur, *The United Nations, peace and security*.
41 Allison, *Destined for War*. 
addressing this type of problem is to rely on military power to deter bad and malign behaviors. It should be noted that bad and malign behaviors could be conducted by both rising powers and ruling state. Deterrence is the operating logic of this first layer of security governance.\(^\text{42}\)

In the Asia Pacific there are many unsolved territorial disputes, such as the South China Sea disputes between China and some ASEAN states as well as unfinished wars (there is only a cease-fire agreement for the Korean War) among states. Therefore, I argue that the deterrence function of both the UN collective security mechanism and US bilateral alliances are indispensable to maintain the peace and stability in the region. Even though Asian countries might sometimes get involved in diplomatic flare-ups and even crises in some territorial disputes, and North Korea constantly provokes other states with its nuclear and missile tests, all countries have shown some degree of restraint in their behavior and will think twice before making decisions to use force as a result of the military deterrence effect from this layer of the security governance framework.

The second layer of the security governance framework consists of “multilateral security dialogues and fora,” which aim to build confidence and reduce distrust among states. It addresses directly the “security dilemma” challenges. I label the logic of this layer of security governance a “balance of trust.” The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD), as well as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), can be seen as institutional efforts at this layer of security governance although the ARF is a government-level security dialogue, the Shangri-La Dialogue is semiofficial, and the CSCAP is a track-II academic effort.\(^\text{43}\) All three are important and play different roles in enhancing strategic trust and reducing misunderstandings among states.

For example, ARF is the only multilateral security dialogue mechanism including all major powers in the Asia Pacific. The ARF has played an important role in constraining and socializing China’s behavior in the 1990s and the 2000s, especially in the South China Sea.\(^\text{44}\) Although it is widely seen that China has turned to “assertiveness” in the South China Sea since the late 2000s, it cannot deny the important utility of ARF in building confidence and enhancing trust among Asian countries in the post-Cold War era. The diplomatic flare-ups in the South China Sea, however, might suggest that the ARF will need to be reformed in order to cope with new challenges in the region.

The third layer of security governance is “issue-driven cooperation networks.” The major purpose is to address the “security spillover” problems. Unlike the first two types of security challenges, the “security spillover” problems are normally well recognized by states as common threats. However, due to the lack of trust and cooperative mechanisms, it is not easy for states to work together. It is a typical “collective action” problem.\(^\text{45}\) It is why institutional cooperation is very important to address these “security spillover” problems. One example of the “issue-driven cooperation networks” can be drawn from the international coordinated efforts to fight SARS (Severe acute respiratory syndrome) in 2003 through the World Health Organization (WHO) with the assistance of the Global

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\(^{42}\) For deterrence and security threat, see Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*.


\(^{44}\) See He, *Institutional Balancing in the Asia Pacific; Johnston, Social states*.

\(^{45}\) Oye, “Explaining Cooperation under Anarchy.”
Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN) and its constituent partners made up of 115 national health services, academic institutions, technical institutions, and individuals.\textsuperscript{46}

The operating logic of this layer of security governance is a “balance of cooperation,”\textsuperscript{47} i.e. cooperation on one issue will generate more cooperation or cooperation on another issue.\textsuperscript{48} Although nation states are still the major actor to solve these problems collectively, NGOs can also play an important role in enhancing global awareness, identifying focal points, and facilitating state cooperation through multilateral institutions.\textsuperscript{49} I would like to emphasize the independent role of multilateral institutions in encouraging nation states to cooperate with one another at this layer of security governance.

\subsection*{3.3. Interactions and dynamics of security governance}

These three layers of security governance do not function alone. Instead, they interact and reinforce one another. It is why I have called it a “dynamic security governance” framework. The “balance of power” layer of security governance is the foundation of world peace and stability. It is why military-oriented security issues, such as the Korean nuclear crisis and various territorial disputes, are the most challenging security threats to regional peace and stability. Although both the UN collective security system and multilateral/bilateral alliance systems are rooted in the logic of deterrence for security, they can also check and balance each other.

For example, the US military alliance alone cannot address North Korea’s nuclear issues. The Singapore meeting between Kim Jong-Un and Trump did not come as a result of the US “maximum pressure” policy, but rather the joint efforts of the UN system and cooperation from China. Hypothetically speaking, without the UN Security Council system the North Korean nuclear crisis might have taken a different path to a different outcome, for better or for worse. This “balance of power” layer of security governance is to ensure that no country has unchallenged authority to do whatever it wants although this is unquestionably a hard goal to achieve. Absolute power leads to absolute corruption, which is true in world politics as well as in domestic politics.

The “balance of trust” layer of security governance is the key to reducing misunderstanding and distrust among states. Successful efforts at this layer will definitely help in reducing tensions among states at the first “balance of power” layer of security governance. In the same vein, without a solid balance of power mechanism at the first layer of governance, multilateral security dialogues will become difficult, if not impossible. One vivid example is the achievements as well as limitations of the ASEAN Regional Forum. Some ASEAN scholars suggest that the ARF is a great success because it provides a platform for states to discuss and exchange views on security issues as well as to


\textsuperscript{47}It is worth noting that I use the word “balance” artistically in defining “balance of trust” and balance of cooperation.” Balance means a harmonious situation with perfect design and proportion. In contrast to traditional “balance of power” – i.e., states fight for power, “balance of trust” and “balance of cooperation” suggest that states can pursue mutual trust and cooperation in a harmonious and coordinating way.

\textsuperscript{48}Axelrod and Keohane, “Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy.”

\textsuperscript{49}Keohane and Martin, “The Promise of Institutionalist Theory.”
build norms in the region.\textsuperscript{50} Others criticize that the ARF in particular and ASEAN-oriented multilateralism are only “making process,” but not “making progress.”\textsuperscript{51}

It is true that the ARF and ASEAN-led institutions seem incompetent in solving territorial and maritime disputes, especially in the South China Sea. However, I would like to argue that the real function of ARF is not really to solve the disputes \textit{per se} but to build “trust” among states although the ARF “mistakenly” sets “conflict resolution” as the last phase of its three-stage goals after “confidence building” and “preventive diplomacy.” In my view, it is unrealistic to demand that the ARF solve territorial disputes among states. As I mentioned before, a territorial dispute is a “security threat” problem rooted in a human being’s “lust for power” as well as self-constructed, uncompromised nationalism. This type of security threat cannot be easily solved by any institution.\textsuperscript{52} The best we can do is to constrain and deter bad and malign behavior, as I have discussed earlier.

The “balance of cooperation” layer of security governance is the most concrete step for states to address everyday problems. States do not always fight with one another militarily although they might have to prepare for it. They also have to deal with many issue-driven, “security spillover” problems, such as drug trafficking, transnational crimes, and natural disasters.\textsuperscript{53} As mentioned above, military means will not be useful for states to cope with these “security spillover” challenges. States have to work with one another as well as with various NGOs to find solutions to address these concrete problems.\textsuperscript{54}

These “security spillover” issues may seem trivial in comparison with territorial disputes and military conflicts. However, the myriad patterns of cooperation among states on concrete issues will help nurture and establish confidence and mutual trust among states. To a certain extent, this “balance of cooperation” layer of security governance mutually reinforces and is reinforced by the other two layers although it is by no means easy for states to work together at this layer either.

4. New challenges to “Dynamic security governance”

Although Asian countries have constructed an institutional framework of dynamic security governance that ensures a relatively peaceful environment in the region for decades, this system of dynamic security governance will face three major challenges in the future.

The first challenge is the rise of populist leaders and policies, particularly exemplified in the reckless foreign policy of the United States under Donald Trump.\textsuperscript{55} As a populist leader, Trump intends to make America great again. Although it is too early to tell whether Trump has made America great again or not, one thing is clear, namely, his foreign policy has made Asian countries more confused than ever.\textsuperscript{56} The escalating trade war with China will damage both Chinese and American economies although it might

\textsuperscript{50}Katsumata, “Establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum.”
\textsuperscript{51}Jones and Smith, “Making Process, not Progress.”
\textsuperscript{52}For different functions of institutions in security, see He, “A Strategic Functional Theory of Institutions and Rethinking Asian Regionalism.”
\textsuperscript{53}For non-traditional security cooperation, see Caballero-Anthony, “Non-Traditional Security and Infectious Diseases in ASEAN”; Arase, “Non-Traditional Security in China-ASEAN Cooperation.”
\textsuperscript{54}For challenges of non-traditional security cooperation, see Caballero-Anthony, Emmers and Acharya, eds., \textit{Non-Traditional Security in Asia}.
\textsuperscript{55}Patrick, “Trump and World Order.”
\textsuperscript{56}See Chong, “Deconstructing Order in Southeast Asia in the Age of Trump.”
hurt the former more intensely than the latter. It might also negatively influence other Asian countries as well as the whole world.

More importantly, Trump’s highly volatile foreign policies have also eroded US credibility in the region, especially in the security arena. It is not clear whether and for how long the United States will honor its security commitments, especially its bilateral alliances, in the region. Trump’s unpredictable policies and twitter messages have seemingly driven the whole world crazy. It is Trump who called off the scheduled military exercises with South Korea without prior consultation after his summit with Kim in Singapore. It is also Trump who labeled China a US strategic competitor and ignited trade wars with the US’s major trading partners at the same time.

The United States can change the “balance of power” layer of security governance in two disruptive ways. On the one hand, the United States can embrace isolationism in foreign policy by weakening its security commitments or even withdrawing from the region. The strategic vacuum left by the United States will lead to instability and potential conflicts in the region. On the other hand, the United States might further stretch its strategic commitments from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean by forging a new “containment united front” against China, such as the so-called Quadrilateral Security Dialogue including the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. The escalated competition between the United States and China might drag US allies or the even the whole region into unnecessary and reluctant conflicts and even a new Cold War in the region.57

The second challenge is the uncertain future direction of a rising China. As a rising power or even a potential hegemon, China’s foreign policy will also define the peace and stability in the region. As we all know, China’s foreign policy has turned in an assertive direction after the 2008 global financial crisis although scholars still debate over the nature as well as the extent of China’s assertiveness in diplomacy. There are many domestic and international reasons for China’s assertiveness in foreign policy, especially in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. As a rising power, it is natural for China to redefine its national interests as well as its foreign policy orientation.58 Assertiveness does not mean aggressiveness. However, it will be dangerous if China defines its national interests extensively and adopts an expansionist foreign policy especially when its military and economic capabilities continue to grow rapidly.59

The US alliance system can be a constraint to China’s ambitions and behavior in the region. However, the key is to keep a balance between the US alliance system and China’s increasing power. In other words, the United States needs to make a balanced choice between accommodation and containment regarding a rising China.60 If the United States intends to turn its alliance system into a containment tool against China’s rise, China might act defensively and even aggressively. It is hoped that the UN collective security mechanism can be further strengthened so that it can offset the potential uncertainty and volatility caused by China’s rise as well as the US-China competition at the “first layer” of security governance. However, it is by no means easy because both

58 He and Feng, “Debating China’s Assertiveness.”
59 Friedberg, A Contest for Supremacy.
60 For an accommodation policy toward a rising power, see Paul, ed., Accommodating Rising Powers.
the United States and China have the capability to upset the UN system should they so prefer.

The last challenge is a consequence of inactivity, i.e. the “wait-and-see” behavior of other states in the region. Although the US-China competition seems to be dominating the headlines of global media, it does not mean that other states can only adopt a “wait and-see” policy or a hedging strategy. It is in these countries’ interests that the United States and China get along with each other. However, a mere wait-and-see position will not lead to a desirable outcome. Moreover, some states, especially US allies and China’s old friends, might be forced to pick sides between the United States and China. This puts these countries in an even more difficult situation.

Therefore, a passive “wait-and-see” or hedging policy will not work. Instead, these states need to work together to strengthen the mechanisms of “balance of trust” at the second layer and “balance of cooperation” at the third layer of the dynamic security governance framework. Through boosting multilateral institution-building, they can encourage both the United States and China to engage in multilateralism in the region so that the strategic competition between these two nations can be alleviated and channeled through institutional competition. In addition, deeper cooperation on “security spillover” issues among state actors as well as non-state actors in the region will foster a norm or even a habit of cooperation from low politics to high politics. Though cooperation on low politics will not directly address the strategic competition as well as the strategic distrust issues between the United States and China, it will form a solid foundation for society-to-society and people-to-people linkages between the two nations.

5. Conclusion

Recalling my previous puzzle: why is there an Asian exceptional peace after the Cold War? I would like to suggest that Asian countries have constructed a dynamic security governance framework to address three types of security challenges in the region. These three security challenges are the “security threat” rooted in human “lust for power”; the “security dilemma” stemming from the lack of trust in the anarchic international system; and “security spillover” – the unintended consequence of transnational dangers and risks.

Although this dynamic security governance framework has worked well in the past three decades since the end of the Cold War, it is facing three challenges in the future, which are the reckless foreign policy of the United States under Trump, the uncertain direction of a rising China, as well as the passive “wait-and-see” attitude of other states during the potential order transition period in the Asia Pacific.

I argue that the existing collective security system in the United Nations should be strengthened in order to alleviate strategic tensions caused by a potential power transition between the United States and China in the future. Other major states should not just adopt a passive hedging strategy to wait and see an order transition in the international system. Instead, they should actively enhance multilateral institution-building in

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62 He and Feng, “Leadership Transition and Global Governance.”
the region in order to deepen mutual trust as well as address non-traditional security challenges. The world is experiencing constant transformations due to the deepening economic interdependence among states and expanding social networks among people. No country or organization can address these multifaceted security challenges alone. Cooperation among states, collaboration between states and NGOs, and the participation of all societal actors, including academics, are the keys to addressing these security challenges in the Asia Pacific of the 21st century.

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