

Great Power Relations, Regional Multilateralism, and International Relations of East Asia

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The principal intent of titling the article in the above way is to highlight two important dimensions of international relations of East Asia, i.e., the changing nature of great power relations and the genesis of regional multilateralism. The role and relations that govern the great powers had undoubtedly been at the heart of East Asia's discourse in the past, continue to be central in the present, and may become even more important in the future if the current trends are any indication. What is different today when compared to the Cold War era is that regional political and economic relations are being increasingly conditioned by new rising powers, which in turn are leading to the realignment of forces among great powers to ensure regional power balance. There is also a new element, that is, regional multilateralism that is beginning to make its mark towards which the attitudes of great powers have varied from skepticism to strong support to sheer indifference. It must, however, be mentioned that regional multilateralism is still in its infancy and its future remains uncertain. Capturing this dynamic in the larger context of fundamental changes, both economic and politico-security, that are occurring in the region would provide us with useful pointers on the nature and direction of the current international politics of East Asia. Surely, East Asia is an integral part of the global system, and it is not immune to events at world level. Nevertheless, perhaps the changes that

are sweeping this part of the world will have implications far beyond the region. This is what makes this region special and significant.

While the Cold War era of East Asia was dominated by the super powers, in the aftermath of which we are still in search of a paradigm though more than a decade and half has elapsed we still talk in terms of a post-Cold War era. This, in a nutshell, exemplifies the fluidity and flux that characterize the current period, a period of enormous transition and change. The change is best manifested by the metamorphosis the great powers are undergoing in terms of their power, role, and attitude.

The article proposes to discuss, aside from an overview of major trends across East Asia, aspects of two triangular relationships that have been talked about: one involving China, Russia, and India, and the other, the United States, Japan, and India. There is, of course, another great power triangle that has been talked about consisting of China, Japan, and India as the future determinant of regional relations concomitant with their near simultaneous rise, an entirely new and unprecedented development. However, that triangular relationship is yet to fructify in any concrete fashion, though its dynamics is clearly manifesting in many ways. The logic and rationale of these triangles in the context of a fast-changing East Asian political environment needs a closer look and deeper examination. Secondly, the article also examines the role and viability of regional multilateralism, both economic and security, in influencing the international relations of East Asia.

East Asia: A Region of Focus and Transformation

There are several crucial aspects of the changes the world is witnessing that are influencing international relations. The geoeconomics, contrary to the previous geopolitics that dominated much of the debate, has come to the fore in a big way. No power, small or big, can any longer ignore the critical role that economic factors play in shaping and influencing relations with other countries. Similarly, nontraditional security issues, from terrorism to WMD proliferation, never considered serious issues of security in the past, are emerging as dominant issues of global politics. Yet another dimension that is influencing relations among countries is the phenomenon of globalization. Notwithstanding the enormous and ongoing debate on whether or not it is good, it has come to be recognized as

something unstoppable. Thanks in part to globalization, the great powers especially are forced to forge cooperative relationships among themselves. As a result, one sees in a relative sense the best of relations among global great powers despite lingering suspicions and rivalry.¹

As noted, in East Asia, great powers historically had played a vital role in shaping relations not only within the region but without, as well. The fact that India and China exerted enormous influence since ancient times culturally, religiously, linguistically, and economically is well documented and is still visible. Once these powers became weak after the onslaught of colonialism, the European powers started having complete sway over regional affairs. Towards the end of colonialism, the newly rising powers, the United States and Japan, began to have an enormous impact on the region greatly. During the Cold War, the bipolar order that dominated the world was reflected in East Asia, too. The post-Cold War period is characterized by the rise of new power centers within the region.

The current changes have to be seen in the context of the transformation the region is undergoing even as the global shift of focus to East Asia in both economic and security terms continues. The region remains the most promising economically—the rise of new economic powerhouses, huge foreign exchange reserves, vibrant consumption patterns, rapidly expanding markets, and, more importantly, an unparalleled demographic advantage. Regional security, however, continues to be a cause of concern, as exemplified by the developments in Northeast Asia. In the East Asian context, issues of security and economic development are not mutually exclusive; they influence each other either in the promotion of peace and prosperity or in imperiling them. Two, the subregions of East Asia, Southeast, and Northeast Asia, whose linkages during the Cold War were relatively tenuous, are being strengthened, and hence the segregation of issues of security and economic development between them is no longer valid.

A major hallmark of East Asia today is that the regional major powers, China, Japan, and India, are becoming more assertive and are at the center of a new regional economic and security architecture that is unfolding. The impact of a rapidly rising China as a military and economic power, India's attempts to catch up and match China's might,

¹ David Sadler, "A Study in Harmony: The Great Powers in Asia and the Pacific," *Global Change, Peace and Security* 17, no. 3 (2005): 299–314.

and Japanese determined moves to become a “normal” country are yet to be fully felt. How relations among these powers evolve will be a critical element in the shaping of regional security.

The issue that most visibly looms larger in East Asia at present is the rise of China on which opinions are divergent, although most countries in the region feel that it is both an opportunity as well as a challenge. Dubbed as the world’s factory for manufacturing, China’s economy is the second largest in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms and may become the largest by leapfrogging the US in less than three decades if it manages to maintain the current momentum. It can create huge opportunities for a variety of goods and services for other countries. China has already become the largest trading partner of most of the East Asian countries, notably for two of America’s closest political and economic partners, Japan and South Korea. The rapidly expanding Chinese market and prosperity are also providing vast investment opportunities. In fact, much of the phenomenal surge in China’s trade is investment driven. Despite unabated skepticism about the sustainability of double-digit growth rates for prolonged periods, growing income disparities among people and between provinces, increasing incidents of social unrest, and mounting concerns about overheating, the Chinese economy has demonstrated a remarkable resilience, and signs of major disruptions in the foreseeable future appear rather remote.

China, however, is also a challenge as it becomes a magnet for investments at the cost of others. Growing wealth is also allowing China to spend more on defense, enabling it to rapidly expand its military capabilities. The lack of transparency especially in defense expenditures and attempts at rapid modernization of its armed forces at a time when it hardly faces a military threat are already ringing alarm bells. Both the US and Japan time and time again have expressed their anxieties about China’s military modernization. Suspicions of this kind can lead to a debilitating arms race. On a different plane, if history is any indicator, an economically and militarily rising power not only tends to fundamentally alter the existing balance and equilibrium, but also becomes more assertive even as its interests grow. Thus, China is redrawing the map of economic and political relations in East Asia. The implications of these are too obvious. Japan, which used to be the biggest economic player

since the early 1970s, feels it is being pushed to the margins.² A comparison of ASEAN's trade with Japan and China in the last decade is revealing: between 1995 and 2004, ASEAN exports to Japan declined from 14.4 percent to 12.1 percent, and imports, from 24.7 to 15.8, whereas ASEAN exports to China increased from 2.1 percent to 7.4 percent, and imports jumped from 2.2 to 9.4 percent.³ It is little wonder that the Southeast Asian countries have become so conscious of the China factor in their economic and political calculations. Beijing's deft diplomacy, often called a "charm offensive," especially since the 1997–1998 financial crisis, has further contributed to its growing stature.

Either because of China or pressure from the US or propelled by the desire to play a larger role, Japan, too, is transforming, and the numerous moves that Tokyo has made in the last few years are indeed profound. The decision to extend logistical support to the American counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan by sending war ships to the Indian Ocean, the dispatch of troops for the first time since World War II to Iraq, a combat zone, in support of the US, the participation in the development and deployment of ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems with the US, attempts at amending its constitution so that its armed forces can become a regular military and participate in collective defense activities, openly coming out with a joint statement with the US that Taiwan was a common security concern, naming China and North Korea as potential threats, etc., are some measures that are likely to have considerable implications for East Asia. With conservatives at the helm, Tokyo's quest for "normal" power status will continue under Abe Shinzo's leadership, which means Japan will become more assertive and can be expected to assume a larger security role, which some Southeast Asian leaders feel may not be such a bad thing after all. In an interview, for instance, Indonesian defense minister Yuwano Sudarsono stated that "a forceful and assertive Japanese security role in East Asia security would be welcome. I think it would provide good balance." India is also beginning to figure prominently as a

² URATA Shujiro, "Declining Importance of Japan in East Asia: Are Free Trade Agreements the Answer?" *NRB Special Report*, no. 5 (2004): 29–34, <http://www.nbr.org/publications/specialreport/pdf/SR5.pdf>.

³ *Asean Statistical Yearbook 2005*, chap. 5, <http://www.aseansec.org/SYB2005/Chapter-5.pdf> (The data exclude Laos and Vietnam); "Countries turn to China: Japan marginalized as APEC focuses on terror," *Japan Times*, October 22, 2003, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl5?nn20031022b7.htm>.

potential partner in the changing Japanese security policies after a series of steps that these two have taken starting from the eight-point initiative agreed upon during Koizumi's visit to India in April 2005.⁴ Japan also appears to be desperately trying to regain its economic supremacy by supporting East Asian integration attempts and in the creation of an Asian currency unit.

Not to be left behind, India, too, is intensifying its efforts to identify and integrate itself with East Asia through the "Look East" policy. This has since evolved into a multifaceted policy encompassing political, economic, and strategic dimensions. Strongly underpinned by a variety of institutional and bilateral linkages to promote economic cooperation, India's political and strategic interactions with East Asia are extensive. Reciprocally, the countries of East Asia can no longer overlook an increasingly confident, assertive, and rising India. Many look at India not just as an economic opportunity but as a potential countervailing power to China.⁵ As Singaporean minister George Yeo stated, "We in Southeast Asia have no wish to become merely an adjunct to the Chinese economy."⁶

The US continues to be a major factor although its overall importance appears to be on the wane, partly because of its preoccupation with its war on terror and its involvement in Iraq, and partly because of its changing policies especially relating to forward deployment of its troops. While the US security partnership with Japan is strengthening, its relationship with South Korea is beginning to unravel. Growing differences between Washington and Seoul on tackling the tricky North Korean nuclear problem and mounting opposition to US troops in South Korea will have considerable impact on regional security. Growing ties between China and South Korea and between China and Russia would further increase Japanese consternation, which in turn might force it to undertake drastic measures.

Russian fortunes in East Asia have always fluctuated although much of Moscow's focus has traditionally been on Europe and to a lesser extent,

⁴ *Eight-fold Initiative for Strengthening Japan-India Global Partnership*, April 29, 2005, Japan-India, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/partner0504.html#eight>.

⁵ Anindya Batabyal, "Balancing China in Asia: A Realist Assessment of India's 'Look East' Strategy," *China Report* 42, no. 2 (2006): 179-197.

⁶ Philip Day, "Singapore: Dancing with Giants," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 167, no. 14 (2004): 44-45.

Central Asia. Russian engagement with East Asia began, one, with the emergence of China as a communist country and a close ally and later as a major antagonist; two, with the existence of the so-called weakest link in its Far East theater and hence militarily the most vulnerable; and three, with border and territorial disputes involving fairly large tracts. However, Russia managed to maintain good relations with two important countries, India and Vietnam. The disintegration of the former Soviet Union had a more profound effect on its Far Eastern region than others, and it took nearly a decade and half for it to realize the import of East Asia. Thus, Russian reengagement is a recent phenomenon, and it is still not deep enough to warrant great attention. Nonetheless, one should recognize important developments in order to appreciate its likely enhanced role in East Asian relations in the coming years. One such development is that the strategic partnership between Russia and China is increasingly being cemented by large quantities of modern defense hardware supplies to China. It also helps that they share common political views on a range of issues, especially on the US-led unipolar movement. Russia is also emerging as a major supplier of defense equipment, not just to its traditional markets such as India and Vietnam, but also to several other countries in Southeast Asia like Malaysia, Indonesia, and possibly even South Korea and the Philippines. Finally, energy is emerging as a major link between the Russian Far East and East Asia. All the three major energy consumers in the region—China, Japan, and India—are eying a share of the vast reserves of oil and gas in the Russian Far East. Russia also has institutional linkages with ASEAN as a dialogue partner, is a member of the ARF and APEC, is part of the six-party talks on North Korea, and more recently, was invited as an “observer” to the inaugural East Asian Summit (EAS) in December 2005. Nonetheless, Russia is likely to be more preoccupied with Europe and Central Asia than East Asia in the nearer term and hence is not yet a major factor in the East Asia security calculus.

East Asian Multilateralism

The other discernible trend in East Asia is regional multilateralism, and invariably, ASEAN figures prominently in any discourse on this. Despite not being monolithic and differences on a range of political and economic

issues remain, Southeast Asian countries have managed to create and sustain many multilateral structures to enhance their own collective influence and, importantly, to engage the great powers. Both ASEAN as an organization and Southeast Asia as a region are under focus as a result of certain recent developments thus casting doubts on ASEAN's ability to lead these multilateral institutions. Further, the ASEAN region as an economic entity has become less attractive when compared to larger and faster growing economies such as China and India. In PPP terms, the combined GDP of the entire Southeast Asia is about 60 percent of India's and less than one-third that of China. Importantly, the gap will further widen if the current trends continue.

In security terms, in the overall context of East Asia, the focus is shifting away from Southeast Asia to Northeast Asia and to a lesser extent to the Indian Ocean region. Southeast Asia does not command the same political attention it did during the Cold War, notwithstanding the dispute in the South China Sea and growing concerns about terrorism. There is no question that far more serious security issues lie in Northeast Asia. The deadlocked North Korean nuclear issue could have serious repercussions if unresolved, triggering a domino effect with a potential nuclear arms race between China and Japan (and India and Pakistan). Unabated tensions between Japan and China and the simmering Taiwan question are other issues that could have far-reaching impact. Additionally, there is considerable uncertainty because of changing American military strategy towards East Asia even as it prepares to reorder its military in Northeast Asia, and the EAS is the first occasion on which the US is not involved.⁷

All these developments are having a combined effect on ASEAN and its ability to manage regional economic and security affairs. Both Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), although they still exist, have clearly lost their sheen. Waning American⁸ and Japanese⁹ interest will further reduce their role and

⁷ See for instance Daniel Sneider, "Asia's Polite Response Masks Declining US Influence," *Yale Global*, November 17, 2005, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=6531>.

⁸ Evelyn Goh, "The ASEAN Regional Forum in United States East Asian Strategy," *Pacific Review* 17, no. 1 (2004): 47–69.

⁹ YUZAWA Takeshi, "Japan's Changing Conception of the ASEAN Regional Forum: From an Optimistic Liberal to a Pessimistic Realist Perspective," *Pacific Review* 18, no. 4 (2005): 463–497.

importance, not that the track record of ARF's achievements (for that matter, even APEC's, as discussed below) is particularly impressive. ASEAN would have to devise ways to accommodate the interests of India, China, and Japan rather than a regional agenda dominated by terrorism and religious radicalism and issues of domestic stability. Perceived clashes of interests along with the persistence of historical animosities and mutual suspicions among the great powers will persist for ASEAN to grapple with. The American attitude toward China has vacillated from Bill Clinton's "strategic partnership" to Bush's initial "strategic competition," whereas China-Russia strategic cooperation is deepening. As the row between Japan and China reaches new highs, Tokyo sees strategic convergence with New Delhi. Suddenly, India appears to be in demand, wooed by all these major powers because of its potential to tilt the balance decisively in the East Asian emerging balance of power. India is paying enormous attention to ensure that its rise and its recent improvement of relations with both the US and Japan are not either directed at or at the cost of China.

Russia-China-India Strategic Triangle

Relations among major powers are witnessing a peculiar phenomenon. On the one hand, they are forced to cooperate to deal with certain issues of common concern, terrorism, illegal transfers of WMD material, a number of maritime security issues, disaster management, for instance, but there is also a fair amount of distrust among certain major powers, on the other. It is this dynamic that has given rise to the idea of strategic partnerships contrary to the alliance partnerships of the Cold War. It is not the purpose of the article to deal with bilateral strategic partnerships or alliances but to focus on the changing contours of major power relations, especially what are popularly called "triangles" that have often come up. There have been several of them, however. In the post-Cold War East Asian context, the first one mentioned included Russia, China, and India, the second one was the US, Japan, and China, the third consisting of China, Japan, and India, and the fourth and most recent comprising the US, Japan, and India. Here, it is proposed to examine two triangles—Russia-China-India and US-Japan-India.

When in December 1998 Evgenii Primakov, then Russian prime minister, proposed the creation of a strategic triangle with China and India, it was received both with skepticism and bemusement. It was promptly interpreted as Russian frustration with and fear of a US-led unipolar movement, particularly in the light of two events: one, the eastward expansion of NATO into what the Russians had traditionally considered their backyard, and two, NATO's unilateral military action in Kosovo. Russia was also obviously concerned about a lack of balance vis-à-vis the US and hence sought to bring together China and India who appeared to share a similar concern. As these countries tried to find some common ground apart from the US, it turned out that there were three global issues on which they shared some interest although certain differences on details remained—one, the emerging global system, two, Islamic terrorism, and three, America's ballistic missile defense (BMD) program.

Firstly, it appeared all three countries were uncomfortable with the idea of global unipolarity. As a result, they started advocating the concept of multipolarity wherein the global order is characterized by several centers/poles of power although not necessarily to the same degree. When it became apparent that such an idea was increasingly becoming unrealistic (partly fueled by a severe economic downturn in Russia), some Indians started advocating the idea of a "polycentric" world, which while not disputing the preponderance of the US, sought to underline the existence of several poles of power of various kinds. With the dramatic improvement in relations between India and the US, New Delhi's perception of the US has undergone a fundamental change. Resultantly, India is much less vociferous about global multipolarity. These views are obviously out of sync with either Russian or Chinese thinking.

Two, all the three countries faced the problem of terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism to varying degrees in Chechnya, Kashmir, and Xinjiang. Although no apparent and direct connection between these problem areas could be established, there was a common concern about greater radicalization of these movements after the Taliban's emergence in Afghanistan with Pakistan's support. While India and Russia had been more strident in castigating Pakistan and the Taliban for fomenting terrorism, China was more circumspect in accusing Pakistan for obvious reasons.

Three, the BMD issue, at least until India changed its stance in 2001, seemed to provide a strategic consensus in opposing it. These three

countries had a different set of reasons to oppose American plans to pursue BMD research and deployment. Russia was more concerned about unilateral abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which might further accentuate the strategic disparity with the US and supremacy in space, and China quite unexpectedly turned out to be the most vocal opponent of BMD because of Japan's participation. In Chinese thinking, BMD deployment in Northeast Asia would, on one hand, make its nuclear deterrent ineffectual and make the incorporation of Taiwan into the mainland all the more difficult if Taiwan was brought under the BMD shield. India, too, initially opposed it on the grounds that it would trigger a nuclear arms race in Asia as China would try to counter BMD by further accelerating the build-up of its nuclear arsenal, and India (and Pakistan) would invariably be affected by this. India has since made an about-turn as it is interested in erecting some kind of missile defense, possibly with American assistance, primarily because of the political uncertainties Pakistan is now facing and the real danger of some WMD falling into the wrong hands.

Despite not having a tangible agenda or consensus even on those issues where there is some convergence, the foreign ministers of Russia, China, and India have been holding their annual meetings. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov in an interview to an Indian newspaper claimed that:

it is about shared values on how to approach international relations these days. It's about our common belief that multilateral approaches are the best solution to global problems and regional conflicts. It's certainly our belief that our three countries can do a lot together to keep and promote stability in the Asia-Pacific region, Eurasia in general and in the United Nations.¹⁰

It must be mentioned, however, that there are limitations to this triangle, although bilateral relations have witnessed considerable progress. There are, for instance, several problems that plague Sino-Indian relations such as the intractable border dispute, China's policy toward Pakistan, and wariness about each other in East Asia. Similarly, China is also concerned about the new bonhomie between India and the US and between India and

¹⁰ Sergei Lavrov, interviewed by Amit Baruah, *The Hindu*, October 11, 2004, <http://www.thehindu.com/2004/10/11/stories/2004101104331000.htm>.

Japan. Any attempt to increase its role in South Asia by China is viewed with suspicion in Delhi, and similarly, India's forays into Central Asia would make Beijing uneasy. India-Russia relations, too, have undergone a fundamental shift in recent years. It is not premised on shared ideology or threat perception as during the Cold War but mostly based on mutually convenient military cooperation. On the contrary, Sino-Russian relations have improved remarkably primarily based on their shared concern about the US, and also their strong defense cooperation. Thus, the Russia-China-India triangle is a stillborn idea beset with too many problems to become a viable idea.

US-Japan-India Strategic Triangle

Currently, the much-talked-about triangle is US-Japan-India, and obviously, this will have a far greater impact on East Asian international relations and regional security. An instant reaction to such a major power triangle is that it is aimed at China, but this is not the sole reason as there are also several other dimensions to it, including the management of the transition that the region is undergoing. A factor that has greatly contributed to such an idea is the astonishing pace with which India-US relations are progressing. Much of the acrimony that marked the relationship during the Cold War was due to extraneous reasons, such as India's close links with Moscow, the American attitude toward Pakistan, Washington's policy towards nuclear nonproliferation, etc. Surprisingly, there was no major bilateral dispute between the two. Hence, it was easier to quickly forge close links once the Cold War strategic divide ended. Of course, India's nuclear tests in 1998 were only a temporary setback. Relations, however, quickly bounced back once Washington recognized the sensitivity of the nuclear issue in India and security challenges it was faced with and the potential India has as a global player. Starting from President Clinton's visit in early 2000 to India, relations have witnessed a remarkable turnaround. Right from his campaign days, President Bush had underscored the importance of improving relations with India. His administration's decision "to help India become a major world power in the twenty-first century" represents the grand transformation. Relations are driven by the intrinsic value of each country to the other and their shared interests, such as commitment to democracy, countering terrorism,

and nuclear proliferation, and preserving a stable balance of power in Asia. Growing defense and economic cooperation and nearly four million highly educated, super-rich ethnic Indians are also making an impact on the decision making process. The biggest and most important (and controversial, too) agreement so far between the two is the July 2005 agreement that includes nuclear civilian cooperation.

In a remarkable coincidence, India-Japan relations, too, have started improving in a big way alongside Indo-US relations. Contrary to Tokyo's relations with rest of East Asia, which have been marred by historical issues, the people of India and Japan have always had a good opinion of each other. Once again, the Cold War environment rather than any bilateral problems was responsible for creating a big political divide between the two countries. Even as relations started showing considerable improvement beginning from the mid-1990s, they nosedived following India's nuclear tests in 1998. The momentum was quickly regained with Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro's visit in 2000 and the announcement of a "global partnership" with India. Whereas the 2001 Indian prime minister's visit further cemented relations, the landmark visit was by Koizumi Junichiro in April 2005, which resulted in the most comprehensive bilateral agreement ever signed between India and Japan. The eight-fold initiative covered vast ground, importantly including defense cooperation. Thus, a new "Japan-India strategic partnership" started taking shape. Undoubtedly, China looms large in Japanese attempts to seek closer relations with India. China's rise obviously poses serious challenges to Japan. It not only severely undercuts Japan's role and influence in the Asia-Pacific region but there is a direct clash of interests, too. For the first time in the last several centuries, Japan has to contend with the rise of a new power center in its vicinity and its impact on the regional order in East Asia. It would be too simplistic, however, to link the new-found Japan's interest in India to its concerns about China. There are other motives such as economic, maritime and a number of non-traditional security issues, and, of course, the future architecture of Asian security.

The new US-Japan-India triangle is going to be much more substantial and important in the coming years than probably any other triangle, impacting not only on East Asia but on the world at large, as well. For the first time, the three large, well-established democracies have more convergence than clash of interests. This trilateral relationship is likely driven by a range of factors not necessarily limited to the management of

China's rise. It is necessary to differentiate the changed nature of these partnerships from Cold War threat-based to post-Cold War interest-driven. Thanks to globalization and growing interdependence, no major power can afford to openly antagonize any counterpart. Any conflictual situation is simply too heavy a price to pay. Thus, notwithstanding the acrimony, rancor, and suspicion, either Japan and China or the US and China or China and India have to find ways to address each other's concerns. The common interests that govern the US-Japan-India triangle are democracy, respect for civilian liberties, rule of law, terrorism, WMD proliferation, export controls, maritime security, disaster management, management of Asian security, etc. As Richard Armitage, former deputy secretary of state, rightly pointed out:

India is a very young country, and will soon have the largest and fastest-growing middle class in the whole world. India is going to be a tremendous power in the world. India's society is open, free, and transparent, so it poses no threat to the international community . . . The US and Japan should be working closely together to deepen ties with India. The point is not to contain China. The point is to embrace India as a nation with which we share common values of democracy and openness. India is looking East, and political leaders in Washington and Tokyo should embrace that.¹¹

A similar sentiment was expressed by Shyam Saran, a former foreign secretary of India:

India and the United States could contribute to a better balance of power in the Asian region at a time when a major process of realignment is taking place on the continent with the emergence of China as a "global economic power house" and New Delhi poised to be a major player, as well. The US, Mr. Saran claimed, had been very careful to put across that it wasn't engaged in any containment policy regarding China. And, I wonder if that's at all practical, given the scale of the US-China engagement, especially on the business and investment side."¹²

¹¹ "Armitage on Asia," *PacNet*, March 23, 2006, <http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/pac0612.pdf>.

¹² Amit Baruah, "India, US can Contribute to Better Balance of Power in the Asian Region: Shyam Saran," *The Hindu*, November 29, 2005, <http://www.thehindu.com/2005/11/29/stories/2005112919470900.htm>.

What it signifies is that India has become for the first time in several decades a factor and player in East Asian international relations. India was neither consulted nor involved in the deliberations leading to the creation of regional multilateral mechanisms, both economic and security related, in the early 1990s. When the first East Asian Summit was proposed to be convened in late 2005, India could no longer be ignored despite reservations by some countries.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, relations among major powers will to a large extent determine the nature of East Asian international relations and regional security even as the region hogs the global spotlight. This unprecedented economic dynamism is, however, accompanied by enormous political uncertainty. The great power relations are undergoing a major transformation wherein there are both competitive and cooperative elements. The emergence of nontraditional security issues, particularly terrorism and nuclear proliferation as major global concerns, along with globalization are having a profound effect on the way the major powers interact with each other. There are elements of wariness about the rise of new powers and their impact on redrawing the regional political and economic architecture, and hence attempts at “balancing” by employing the strategy of “hedging.” At the same time, they need to cooperate because of strong economic stakes and commonly shared interests and concerns. The US needs Chinese cooperation to rein in the recalcitrant North Korean regime on the nuclear question and to maintain peace across the Taiwan Straits. China needs the US for markets, capital, and technology and to ensure that Japan does not embark on a militaristic path once again. Japan needs China for its economic recovery and China needs Japanese investments, technology, and aid. Japan also needs the US as a security guarantor, and the US wants Japan for its forward deployment and as an alliance partner for its East Asian strategy. The US and Japan look at India both as an economic opportunity and to counterbalance China, where as India wants their capital and technologies and a potential partnership to enhance its security and political standing. There is also a limit to India and China in maintaining an antagonistic relationship. China needs a friendly India so that it will not become a part of the coalition to

contain China. Similarly, India wants a friendly China because of its leverage with Pakistan. This does not mean there is no competition among them, nor have the suspicions about each other gone away. The emerging pattern of relations among Russia, China, the US, and India thus becomes important. The strengthening of relations between China and Russia and between India and the US (and Japan) is an indication of a new permutation of power balancing.

What is noteworthy is that a rising China and India are emerging not just as megamarkets and economic powerhouses but also as military powers equipped with nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. With Japan poised to play a larger political role, the regional political architecture will undergo a major change. For the first time in history, the region has to contend with the prospect of three powers simultaneously aspiring to play a larger role. They can offer numerous opportunities for the region to significantly improve its economic prosperity but can also pose serious challenges if they start competing with each other or if they perceive that their interests are becoming undermined due to these changes. The recent tense relationship between China and Japan is a good example. Thus, there are, on one hand, economic imperatives pushing the entire region to reap the benefits of economic cooperation, but political and security factors, fueled by historical suspicions and mistrust, are emerging as impediments that can potentially jeopardize economic cooperation attempts, on the other. A greater appreciation of the nature of evolving great power relations thus becomes crucial to understanding the East Asian dynamic.

The ostensible principal purpose of regional multilateralism is to promote economic cooperation and politically engage the major powers to encourage dialogue and transparency in security and military matters. The results, however, have been mixed. Due mainly to these structures, attempts to economically integrate the region and thus increase their interdependence so that it will reduce the chances of conflict and increase stakes have made some progress, but they have not been able to mitigate security concerns altogether. The ARF, for instance, has not been able to shed the image of a talk shop since it has not made much headway in addressing any regional security issue, such as East Timor or the North Korean nuclear crisis. Both in Washington and Tokyo, interest in the ARF is waning, although Beijing is more upbeat whereas in the case of India and Russia, their stakes are limited anyway. Multilateralism either at the

global or the regional level will succeed only as long as major world powers extend their full support, and this will happen only if they perceive that their interests are advanced in such an initiative. There is obviously no uniformity of opinion on the role of security multilateralism in East Asia, whereas there appears to be greater enthusiasm for economic multilateralism despite areas where differences persist.

Among the many strategic triangles involving major powers, two seem to have drawn considerable attention: the earlier Russia-China-India triangle and the present US-Japan-India triangle. The first, which came about as a Russian initiative primarily to counter US-led unilateralism and on certain shared values, has failed to make progress primarily because of a lack of shared political perceptions and continuing mistrust between China and India. The second triangle seems to be more promising as the constituents face fewer contradictions. There are, of course, limitations for any triangle because of other imperatives.

Insofar as India is concerned, the “Look East” policy will remain one of its top priorities, which will result in further engagement with East Asia. Started with the limited objective of reestablishing relations with Southeast Asia, it has since evolved into a comprehensive policy. India has some advantages unlike other regional powers since it neither has the historical baggage that plague other nations nor any land or maritime disputes in Southeast Asia. Hence, it has been relatively more successful in forging defense cooperation relations with several countries of the region. India is also striving to become a major economic player. What is certain is that, along with its increased engagement, India has become an inalienable part of the East Asian political and economic calculus.

In any case, East Asia will have to grapple with competing interests of major powers as its international relations will be largely determined by the nature of inter-major powers relations. Asia’s future will not necessarily have to be Europe’s past, but the political flux that characterizes the region will continue for the foreseeable future.