

The impact of regional dynamics on US policy toward regional security arrangements in East Asia

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Abstract

This paper examines American policy regarding regional security arrangements (RSAs) in Asia. It argues that it is American perceptions of regional interest in such RSAs and of the compatibility of the goals of regional partners with those of the United States, which eventually shape American policy. After discussing the potential value and cost of RSAs, it suggests that actual policy choices are shaped largely as a reaction to regional states' motivations and policies. Since in Asia, there was limited functional pooling effect to be gained from RSAs, changes in American policies reflected much more a reaction to changes in regional interest in such arrangements. This interaction is demonstrated through a review of post-Cold War developments regarding US RSA policy, distinguishing between the early years of transition to unipolarity and the erosion of unipolarity since the late 1990s. These are also compared to earlier American policy regarding RSAs during the Cold War.

Introduction

Since the end of WWII, the idea of creating regional multilateral security arrangements to manage regional security has been on the table of American decision-makers. This regional strategy has been adopted in Europe, with the creation of NATO. It had been briefly tried in Northeast Asia, with the short-lived attempt to create a Pacific Pact, only to be replaced with a web of bilateral (BL) security alliances between the United States and regional states. Throughout the Cold War period, the United States maintained its reliance on the BL hub-and-spokes regional security structure. If in Europe, the United States played a crucial role in the initiation and maintenance of regional security cooperation via NATO, in Asia it was viewed as a spoiler that frustrated any such initiatives (Beeson, 2005). In the aftermath of the Cold War, and the end of bipolarity, renewed attention has been given to the regional option. Initial American hostility to regional initiatives for such forums was replaced since the 1990s with a growing willingness to take part in such arrangements. While in no way replacing the preexisting BL security arrangements, there is a clear shift in American policy with regard to regional security arrangements (RSAs) that needs to be explained.

The main argument of this article is that while various factors shape the perceived costs and benefits of RSAs for the United States, it is American perceptions of regional interest in such RSAs and of the compatibility of the goals of regional partners with those of the United States, which eventually shape American policy. RSAs can be potentially attractive, compared to BL arrangements, for several reasons. They can mitigate the costs of broad foreign policy commitments by encouraging pooling of regional resources; they can reconcile conflicting policy goals where other strategies may not; they can convey a powerful symbolic message of commitment to a region as a whole (rather than to specific states), and due to their multilateral component, such arrangements can provide greater legitimacy to the major power that is working through them. At the same time, regional arrangements also carry potential costs, as they may reduce the leverage of the United States compared to its leverage in BL (asymmetric) interactions with individual states. The attractiveness of the RSA option will vary depending on the balance between these costs and benefits.

I argue that in order to understand American preferences regarding RSAs, we need to examine the interaction between American national

preferences and regional preferences. While broad changes in the global distribution of power from bipolarity to unipolarity to an emerging multipolarity changed the types of threats faced by the United States in the region, its willingness to bear the costs of an active foreign policy there, and the ability of regional options to contribute to American goals, the attractiveness of regional arrangements for the United States always depended on American perception of the policy preferences of regional states and their compatibility with American goals. If in the late 1940s, limited regional interest in real regional cooperation undermined American interest, in the 1990s, growing regional interest in such cooperation pushed the United States to get involved. At the same time, the growing competition with China, and its presence in these regional forums, also implied that it was far from certain that a concerted regional action would necessarily be compatible with US goals. Hence, the support for enhancing cooperation through these forums remained limited. As regional initiatives became more prevalent and serious, the United States found itself in a new position, where new costs of nonparticipation emerged. If in the late 1940s, the United States was considered the primary architect of Asian security arrangements, the United States today is a central actor but no longer owns the architects' office. The United States finds itself ever more often reacting to regional initiatives. Its decision whether to join certain regional arrangements is important but is no longer synonymous to their survival as it was in the past. It is imperative, therefore, to examine the interactions between US preferences and the regional preferences and policies in order to understand American foreign policy toward regional security cooperation.

The article examines post-Cold War developments regarding US RSA policy by putting them in a broader historical perspective of earlier policy under bipolarity. While much has been written in recent years about the United States and regional security in post-Cold War Asia, the broader time perspective offered here is helpful in putting the PCW policies in perspective, looking both back to the bipolar period and forward to the emerging systemic shift with the erosion of unipolarity. Also, while existing work tends to focus either on the United States or on regional states, this article emphasizes the interaction and synergies between the two as crucial for understanding the evolution of RSAs (see also Gill and Green, 2009; Inoguchi *et al.*, 2011). This interaction, I argue, was always relevant, not just since the 1990s, but also in the late 1940s.

What makes regional security arrangements attractive?

The functional, political, and symbolic potential of RSAs

In general, RSAs can be attractive for functional, political, and symbolic reasons. Functionally, an important value of an RSA lies in its potential pooling effect, compared to a BL option. The pooling effect implies that the pooling of the resources of individual states generates benefits that go beyond the individual contribution of each state on its own. Such an effect can be achieved, for example, by encouraging greater military standardization, coordinated strategic and logistic planning, or a division of labor among the allies based on comparative advantage. This will make military cooperation more efficient and cost-effective. The existence of and potential size of this pooling effect depends on the specific goals of cooperation (Press-Barnathan, 2003, Chapter 1). For example, if the goal is achieving access to bases in different regional states, there is little added value for doing this through a regional arrangement. If the goal is effective military cooperation against an external enemy, then pooling is important in generating efficient large-scale cooperation among national militaries (e.g. in using standardized communication procedures, compatible equipment, etc.). This was central in the creation of NATO (e.g. Press-Barnathan, 2003, Chapter 4). If the goal is to address a transnational threat, working collectively may also become more significant, as traditional BL ties may prove insufficient in generating effective transnational cooperation. Pooling value also depends on the potential contributions of individual states. Very wide regional asymmetries, for example, which privilege the contribution of one or two regional states, do not create a strong incentive to pursue a regional (RL) strategy.

Politically, being multilateral yet at the same time also exclusionary due to their limited membership, RSAs enable states to continue playing power politics while institutionalizing this competition. This offers a politically attractive way of reconciling conflicting goals, or pursuing simultaneously what would otherwise appear as conflicting strategies. As a regional institution, such an arrangement can generate the standard functional benefits associated with international institutions, reduce transaction costs, increase transparency and flow of information, and lengthen the shadow of the future for participants. At the same time, unlike global multilateral

institutions, their limited membership can turn them into institutionalized means of balancing various common external threats (He, 2008). This was clear for example in the dual role of NATO in containing potential German resurgence while supporting German recovery to balance effectively the USSR. This strategy is also politically attractive because it allows leaders to choose not to choose.

Finally, beyond their functional and political value, RSAs can offer a powerful symbolic value. They can bring across the message of commitment to the region as a whole in a more public and dramatic manner than enhanced BL commitments can. Similarly, non-participation in such forums can also send symbolic messages regarding the state's status or interest in the region. This is an important potential cost of nonparticipation. This symbolic value appeared important throughout the time period examined here.

While these factors explain the potential intrinsic value of RSAs, the next section suggests that regional preferences and motivations regarding RSAs play a crucial role in shaping actual American policies. Clearly, the symbolic value of RSAs is very sensitive to regional desires, concerns, and preferences. But also pooling value can either be reduced if regional partners do not really wish to pool or can turn into a potential risk if actual regional pooling occurs and is then used as leverage against the United States and its agenda.

The impact of regional preferences and motivations regarding RSAs

While any foreign policy strategy entails some degree of strategic interaction, the attractiveness of RSAs is especially influenced by the preferences and policies of the potential regional partners and therefore cannot be understood without reference to this interaction. Compared to BL strategies (or the design of a regional hub-and-spokes model), where wide power asymmetry offers the great power greater leverage to shape policy, in a regional multilateral arrangement, other regional partners are likely to have greater 'voice' (e.g. Grieco, 1995). Therefore, their perceived preferences are of greater importance. The costs of this enhanced regional voice will be higher or lower depending on whether the potential regional partners want/not to pursue a regional strategy, and on whether their goals are perceived to be compatible with those of the hegemon.

		Regional interest in RSAs	
		High	Low
Goal compatibility With United States	High	I Support for RSAs (will vary given the expected pooling effect)	II Very limited support for RSAs, emphasis on BL cooperation.
	Low	III Opposition to exclusionary RSAs. Reserved support toward inclusive RSAs. Competitive security regionalization	IV RSAs not relevant

Figure 1 Expected impact of regional interest in RSAs on US policy.

Figure 1 illustrates the potential impact of RL interest in RSAs and their perceived goal compatibility on American interest in pursuing such arrangements. The costs of supporting a RL arrangement will be lower if regional partners appear self-motivated to invest in such an arrangement, therefore requiring less intervention and less side-payments from the extra-regional great power. Not less important though, if their goals are perceived to be compatible with those of the hegemon, then the risk of giving them greater voice is smaller because it is unlikely to clash with the great power's agenda. When regional interest in RSAs is high and the goals of such cooperation appear compatible, there is the greatest likelihood of the extra-regional great power support for RSAs (Square I). Its willingness to seriously invest in such an RSA will vary depending on the

expected functional value of this arrangement, as explained before. In Europe, for example, American insistence on the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty was based on the strong belief in the significance of pooling regional military resources for effectively balancing the USSR.

If regional interest in RSAs is limited or if there is regional opposition for such arrangements, then even if regional states' goals are compatible with those of the extra-regional great power, it will prefer to rely on its BL ties with regional partners. Depending on the expected functional, political, or symbolic value of an RSA, it may try to probe regional partners to explore such arrangements, but it will limit its efforts in light of the understanding that without actual regional interest, such RSAs are unlikely to hold much value (Square II).

Conversely, even if there are regional initiatives favoring such arrangements, if their goals are perceived to be incompatible, the extra-regional great power is unlikely to support institutionalizing their relations (Square III). This can be the case if regional calls for an RSA do not appear to be genuinely driven by a desire to cooperate with one another, or if the actual goals of such genuine cooperation are potentially conflicting. In dealing with regional challengers, the risk of encouraging regional cooperation (including them) is the greatest. Rising challengers (e.g. China) are more likely to choose to engage such institutions or use similar RL strategies to enhance their own influence and reassure others about their peaceful intentions. Under unipolarity, classic balancing against the hegemon is a difficult and risky strategy (Wohlforth, 1999), and therefore, potential challengers are more likely to explore such regional options in order to build their regional influence and perhaps as a pre-balancing strategy. We are therefore likely to see a growth in competitive security regionalization. This type of dynamics is identified by Kai He as 'institutional balancing', which refers to the use of both inclusive institutional arrangements and exclusive institutional balancing (He, 2008, p. 489). We can either expect a watered-down but persistent support for inclusive regional arrangements to engage the challenger while assuring that it cannot use the institution effectively to gain additional influence, a stronger support for RL arrangements excluding the challenger, and active opposition to exclusive RL arrangements excluding the hegemon. Beyond this opposition, such regional initiatives can push it to invest in RSAs largely in order to counteract similar moves by potential challengers. This can further lead to the process of competitive security regionalization. Competitive security

regionalization is a process of building or enhancing RSAs, which is driven by competitive motivations – either to counter the creation of an exclusionary framework created by a challenger (or by the declining hegemon) or to check and contain a potential challenge through interaction with it within an inclusive RSA.

This competitive element is enhanced by the growing incentives for smaller regional states to decrease the growing strategic uncertainty in face of the fluctuations in power distribution and in threat perceptions. For them, operating within RSAs allows a more effective hedging strategy. I argued before that RL solutions can be politically attractive because they enable leaders to pursue seemingly conflicting goals and to avoid making tough choices. Similarly here, such strategies enable regional states, at least in the short-medium run, to avoid a clear choice of strategy vis-à-vis the hegemon, or a choice between the hegemon and rising regional challengers. In the current setting in East Asia, China is the potential challenger and thus the reference point to such arrangements.

Finally, if there is no regional interest in creating an RSA, and regional states' interests appear as potentially conflictual, then we are not likely to find any initiatives on part of the hegemon regarding the creation of such RSAs (Square IV).

Global systemic conditions influence the actual and perceived American commitment to invest costly resources in providing security for its regional partners. Consequently, they are also likely to influence indirectly the strategic considerations of those regional states. However, systemic conditions on their own are not sufficient in order to explain variations in American RSA policies across different regions. This is evident in the different American policies in Asia and Europe in the aftermath of WWII. It is the interaction between the systemic considerations and the regional factors, as described earlier, which explains actual American policies (on this systemic-regional interaction, see for example [Katzenstein, 2005](#); [Acharya, 2007](#)). The review offered below of American RSA policies in Asia across the three post-WWII major systemic shifts – to bipolarity, to unipolarity, and away from unipolarity – demonstrates the importance of regional preferences and dynamics in shaping American policies. Regional preferences regarding RSAs stem from both an understanding of the global power distribution and its regional implications, as well as from various autonomous regional dynamics. The argument presented here does not seek to explain the source

of these preferences but rather to focus on their implications for American policies.

In order to examine the synergies between the preferences and policies of the United States and the regional states, I follow chronologically the evolution of these policies since the early post-WWII years. While indeed a very broad brush, this allows me to examine the ongoing influence of regional preferences on American RSA policies across broad periods of systemic shifts, as well as to explore the increasing importance and viability of regional initiatives and its implications for US policy. This provides us with a useful organizing framework to examine the evolution of RSA policy in Asia over time, as well as to improve our understanding of the complex interaction between global and regional factors in shaping American regional policy in Asia.

Post-WWII: the emergence of bipolarity

The emergence of bipolarity in the aftermath of WWII created the basic context of American postwar foreign policy. The direct impact of bipolarity was mitigated through its interaction with varying regional circumstances, leading to the multilateral North Atlantic Treaty in Europe but to the hub-and-spokes structure in Asia. We can trace its indirect impact on the fortunes of regional security cooperation in Asia. As neorealist scholars have noted, bipolarity induced intense competition between the two poles, creating strong pressures to expand foreign policy commitments by means of foreign aid or military commitments across the globe. This strong pressure, on the one hand, helped justify the costs of an expansive foreign policy but, on the other hand, also created pressures to find ways to lower these costs. President Truman faced strong pressure from Congress to extract maximal burden-sharing from America's allies. The 1948 Vandenberg Resolution stressed that America's interaction with its postwar partners must be based on principles of self-help and mutual aid. The same resolution also emphasized the value of RSAs, which were still compatible with the UN Charter, yet also beyond the Soviet veto power (Vandenberg, 1952, pp. 407–411). The reality of the Cold War meant that global collective security arrangements like the UN were defunct. The option of encouraging regional allies to work together in order to offer meaningful burden-sharing to the United States was initially attractive. Its logic was most clearly articulated in the discussions preceding the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty.

This logic of pooling resources to induce greater burden-sharing was not central on the Asian front because in early postwar Asia, power disparities among regional states were so wide that pooling had little meaning. The main goal was the revival of the one powerful pro-Western actor: Japan. American decision-makers faced the dual goal of reviving and strengthening Japan in order to effectively balance the Communist threat in the region, and at the same time preventing Japan from becoming a threat again and reassuring other regional states that Japan will remain contained.

The short-lived American attempt to create a Pacific Pact was driven by Congressional aspirations to lower the costs of American commitments in Asia, and a desire to reassure Japan's neighbors in face of the need to sign a liberal peace treaty with it. These political and symbolic motivations, however, were quite easily abandoned in face of the regional lack of interest in such an RSA ([United States Department of State, 1950](#), p. 1149; for a review of the Pacific Pact proposals, see [Mabon, 1988](#)). Japan, the central regional actor here, just emerging from defeat and occupation, was not interested in joining a RL security forum or in seriously investing in security ([Dower, 1989](#), p. 398). It preferred a BL security treaty with the United States, which allowed it to invest its energies in economic recuperation and development. Other regional states as well were uninterested in real regional security cooperation. Many of them were new states that were primarily interested in state-building, and many of these states were unwilling to cooperate with Japan just a few years after the war. This being said, the bipolar structure of the system did influence their leverage vis-à-vis the United States. The disproportional value of small allies in a bipolar system (see [Keohane, 1971](#)) enabled them to extract BL deals with the United States, which provided them with the military and economic aid they needed to deal with their primary challenges: state-building, economic development, and in many cases fighting domestic communist insurgencies. It was aid they desired, rather than building Asian cooperation. With lack of regional interest in joining a RL organization, the United States as well preferred the hub-and-spokes structure ([Press-Barnathan 2003](#), Chapter 2). The few calls that came early on from the region for an RSA were clearly intended to draw the Americans in, rather than invest in genuine regional cooperation. Cha describes the American concern over 'rogue allies' like Syngman Rhee's Korea that may want to drag the United States into unnecessary conflicts and thus may require tighter control. This demonstrates the potential danger of an RL arrangement, where such

control is more limited – a concern reflected in American reluctance to pursue these initiatives (Cha, 2009/10).

The second American initiative to build a regional forum, which culminated in the creation of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), came at the height of the Cold War and was also linked to the dynamics of bipolarity and what was perceived as the intensifying balancing challenge in Asia vis-à-vis China. Concern about the Chinese threat intensified in the aftermath of the French defeat in Indochina, leading yet again to pressures to expand regional security commitments. This pressure to expand commitments had to be reconciled with the fiscal conservatism of the Eisenhower administration (Arnold, 1991, p. 225). As part of the efforts to devise a cost-effective strategy, the New Look was developed. Eisenhower believed that the creation of a regional arrangement had important symbolic value to strengthen the viability of American regional deterrence commitments. Also, given the greater reliance within the new strategy on a mobile strike force, devising a regional institution involving America's allies in Southeast Asia would enable greater flexibility for American forces. Finally, in the long-run, Eisenhower did consider the important role of local defenses and regional burden-sharing (Fifield, 1973, p. 194). Still, the main value of RL over BL options in that case was as a symbolic statement of commitment, reassuring regional states that there was a deterrent to the Communist threat. The emphasis on nuclear deterrence in US balancing strategy at the time, and thus the psychological element it entailed, created greater symbolic importance to such a regional commitment and thus led US officials to assign a strong symbolic importance to SEATO (Gaddis, 1982, p. 153). This symbolic role was to reappear in the aftermath of the Cold War as well, when a symbolic show of commitment rather than actual pooling concerns influenced American policy choices. Despite being a regional organization, SEATO was never really thought of as a forum of regional cooperation. Regional members like the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan would have preferred BL security ties with the United States (Gaddis, 1982, p. 81), and the forum was perceived as a fig leaf to facilitate American unilateral action within the region. The huge power disparities between the United States and the Southeast Asian members further strengthened this impression (on the evolution of SEATO, see Buszynski, 1983; Press-Barnathan, 2003, Chapter 3).

Throughout the years falling under the label of global 'bipolarity', various changes occurred within East Asia – The Sino-Soviet split, the

American withdrawal from Vietnam and the consequent Guam Doctrine of President Nixon, the normalization of relations between the United States and China, the growing Soviet presence in the Far East region since the late 1970s, the dramatic growth of Japan's economy, as well as of those of SEA. And yet, the original BL hub-and-spokes security framework remained largely untouched (Green, 2002, p. 28; Calder, 2004, p. 146). The underlying global bipolar structure largely shaped the fundamental strategic logic of the United States, and its strong commitment to its BL alliances in Asia, and consequently did not create incentives for neither the United States nor regional states to embark on new RL security initiatives. Nixon's Guam doctrine, for example, reflected a shift away from active military involvement in Asia and indeed called for greater burden-sharing by America's regional allies. However, this was translated into greater burden-sharing within the existing BL arrangements, as seen in the 1969 Sato-Nixon Communiqué, rather than in initiating any broader regional arrangement. Expanding Soviet presence in the Far East in the late 1970s created a higher perception of common threat but led in turn to the 1978 new Defense Guidelines with Japan (e.g. Schaller, 1997, Chapter 12; Green, 2002) rather than to a discussion of an RSA.

Post-Cold War: the emergence of unipolarity and growing interest in RSAs

Looking at post-Cold War Asia, we find a notable increase in the number and scope of regional cooperation institutions and initiatives. Around ASEAN: the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1993, the creation of APEC in 1994, the creation of the ASEAN plus Three (Japan, China, and ROK) in 1997, the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005. Beyond ASEAN, we are witnessing greater regional cooperation among the great powers of Northeast Asia, greater Chinese involvement, and initiation of regional cooperation, exemplified most clearly by the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 1990s were considered by most IR scholars as the first decade of unipolarity. Given the traditional concern about the costs of foreign policy, the disappearance of the overwhelming Communist threat led to calls within the United States to reduce foreign policy commitments. The shift to unipolarity created new challenges for the United States, which made regional arrangements

potentially more attractive. However, in line with the argument presented here, the main significant change was in the incentives of the regional states themselves to consider regional security cooperation. None of the regional security frameworks mentioned earlier was initiated or led by the United States. Whatever change occurred in American RSA policy at the time was to a large extent a reaction to the regional changes and a more active regional interest in some form of RSAs.

The United States now faced a new challenge of maintaining regional stability and preserving its dominance. It therefore gradually came to acknowledge the potential role of RSAs as regional 'security management institutions' that would deal with security risks rather than threats. Such institutions require the development of rules and procedures to solve security dilemmas among the members, rather than to aggregate capabilities to deter a concrete enemy (Wallander and Keohane, 1999, pp. 25–33). While such institutional ties require a new political commitment, they are also likely to reduce the risk of having to get involved in regional, non-strategic conflicts, both by ameliorating regional security dilemmas and by creating/enhancing regional capabilities to deal independently with regional problems. Ensuring such stability, in turn, will reduce the risk that a challenger may take advantage in a time of regional crisis and turbulence to increase its power. Furthermore, participating in RSAs can also help the hegemonic state to maintain its dominant power position by using policies of accommodation and reassurance, as they appear more egalitarian and democratic, where smaller states have some voice, and they also demonstrate the hegemon's strategic restraint (Ruggie, 1993, p. 11; Ikenberry, 2001, pp. 45–46; Ikenberry later on suggests that a liberal grand strategy is based upon opening up, tying down, and finally binding other states via ML institutions. See: Ikenberry, 2008, p. 24).

However, it was not until regional actors began voicing interest in some form of RSA that the United States began to seriously consider such arrangements. The initial policy of the Bush administration, during the years of the actual transition away from bipolarity, remained loyal to the preexisting hub-and-spokes framework organizing regional security in Asia. Early ideas voiced by Canada and Australia in 1990 to consider a CSCE-like organization for Northeast Asia met American opposition. The Americans also opposed the Nakayama initiative of July 1991 – a Japanese idea to create a CSCE-like regional security forum around ASEAN (Midford, 2000). However, this traditional hostility to regional

strategies began eroding. In a 1991/2 *Foreign Affairs* article, Secretary of State James Baker was willing to concede that the United States should be more attentive to regional multilateral action, though not lock itself to an overly structured approach (Baker, 1991/92). In the same issue of *Foreign Affairs*, former American ambassador to South Korea, Stephen Bosworth, suggested that a regional forum that would deal with territorial disputes and arms limitation could help reduce the likelihood of a regional arms race as US military presence declines. He also suggested that it could address cost-sharing for regional security on an ML basis, rather than bilaterally, 'where it is inevitably a more contentious issue'. Finally, an ML approach could make it easier to 'blunt US domestic political opposition to any continued American contribution to Asian security' (Bosworth, 1991/92).

A consensus existed among American decision-makers and military officials that the preservation of regional stability in Asia required a continued American military presence. Yet, the adjustment from a strategy based on balancing the Soviet Union to a strategy of security management was not easy. This found expression over the pages of *Foreign Affairs* in the well-known debate between Joseph Nye and Chalmers Johnson with E.B. Keehn (Johnson and Keehn, 1995; Nye, 1995). Continued engagement in Asia also had to contend with mounting pressures from Congress for the reduction of US military costs in Asia and for greater burden-sharing on part of America's allies in the region. This cost-reduction goal, which can be directly linked to the shift to unipolarity and disappearance of a clear and present threat, found its immediate application in the 1991 decision to downsize American troop presence in the region (see data on force-reduction plans in: a Strategic Framework for the Asian Pacific Rim Report to the Congress, US Department of Defense, 1992). It is interesting that the initial hostility of the Bush administration to any RL security frameworks in Asia in early 1991 stemmed in part from the fear that such regional multilateral security institutions would provide Congress with an excuse to press for further draw-down of US forces in the region (Goh, 2004, pp. 50–51).

The shift in American approach to RSAs during this time period entailed first a new willingness to consider such arrangements as a potentially useful complementary to the BL security framework, and consequently the American joining of the ARF. This shift was largely reactive to the regional initiative to create the ARF, and based on a perception that its goals were largely complementary to those of the United States at the

time. It was also the ASEAN states that set the institutional framework of ARF, in the spirit of the ASEAN Way. The United States joined and worked within this framework, whose less-committing nature was also convenient as it entailed little potential costs. To understand the American shift, then, we need to look at the shift in the motivations of ASEAN states – the core of the ARF, and at the shift in Japan's interest and willingness to engage the region on security issues. As the lynchpin of American security strategy in Asia, Japan's growing role in regional RSAs was crucial at the time.

The end of the Cold War has dramatically raised the level of strategic uncertainty in Asia. This uncertainty was higher than the strategic uncertainty in Europe both because the preexisting level of regional institutionalization was lower and because there were three great powers whose behavior was hard to predict (for the implications of the systemic shift in Europe, see [Press-Barnathan 2006](#)). Would the United States retreat to its preferred offshore balancing strategy and limit its regional involvement? Would Japan choose to re-gain offensive military capabilities and how would that impact regional stability? Would the rising China prove to be a responsible status-quo player or a regional bully? In 1991, all these questions remained open, making strategic uncertainty perhaps the greatest challenge that regional states had to deal with. The growing regional interest in RL security cooperation was linked to this challenge.

As described earlier, when the Pacific Pact idea was raised, Japan opposed it. Throughout the Cold War, Japan exclusively focused on its BL alliance with the United States as its source of security provision, as well as the central source of regional stability. While the alliance was never challenged by neither side, the end of the Cold War created new questions and uncertainties that pushed Japan to think more seriously about the nature of its security cooperation with the United States. Concerns regarding the alliance were heightened in light of the serious trade disputes of the mid-to late-1980s between the two states, which now threatened to spill over into the security realm, given the new security environment. The Gulf War crisis made it clear that in the new system, the United States would demand much more burden-sharing for regional and international peace and security than in the past (on the fear of abandonment in the early 1990s, see [Shinoda, 2011](#), pp. 20–27). The 1996 Taiwan Straights crisis, which ended with the United States stationing its *USS Nimitz*, brought home most clearly the need to upgrade practical security cooperation with

the United States, as it made clear that the issue of Japan's role in a possible future US–China conflict surrounding Taiwan has to be discussed and thought through (see [Funabashi, 1999](#), Chapters 17–18). Japan's main focus remained the BL security relations with the United States and the territorial defense of Japan itself, but the more fluid security realities of the post-Cold War period implied that it could not ignore its role in the wider regional context (on those changing norms regarding collective defense, see [Sato, 2008](#)).

The reluctant yet growing Japanese willingness to discuss upgrading the BL security relations indeed interacted with the main thrust of American policy in the early 1990s, which focused on upgrading the alliance. Indeed, most of the American energy in the mid-1990s was put into redefining and upgrading the BL alliance with Japan, leading through the Nye Initiative to the September 1997 new guidelines for US–Japan Defense cooperation. These, for the first time, stated that Japan would aid the United States to deal with situations in the region (rather than in Japan itself). The BL strategy, however, had its limits and costs. There were limits to how far the United States could/should push the Japanese military to take upon itself a larger and more active regional role. This was potentially destabilizing for Japan's domestic politics and was also potentially destabilizing regionally in light of China's opposition to a larger Japanese military role. While the alliance was appreciated by many in the region as a stabilizing factor, increased Japanese military capacity was also seen as a threat by the Chinese, and thus as a potentially destabilizing factor ([Christensen, 2006](#), p. 110).

However, alongside with the upgrading of the BL security alliance, a new Japanese interest emerged in exploring RSAs. Interest in promoting an RSA only emerged in 1991, against the background of the systemic change, and the new fluid regional security environment. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggested that regional states need to seek a new approach to maintain post-Cold War regional stability beyond the American alliance system, which no longer could cope with it effectively ([Yuzawa, 2005](#), p. 465). Whereas in 1990, Japan still opposed any notion of an Asian CSCE, by July 1991, it was proposing an ML security dialog (see [Midford, 2000](#)). Consequent Japanese support for the creation of the ARF was based on their growing recognition that in order to reduce the level of regional uncertainties, it was necessary to create a forum that will promote military confidence building measures (CBMs), increase military

transparency, and hopefully will help clarify China's worrisome security policy (Yuzawa, 2005, pp. 467–470). The regional option, exemplified first by the ARF, allowed Japan to advance several goals. This was a way initially of further playing a meaningful role in Asian security and so to reduce the asymmetric relations with the United States and offer a more equal partnership; it was also a way of tying the United States into an institutionalized form of long-term engagement in the region, beyond the alliance. It was a way to foster some trust, on the basis of providing and sharing quality information about China, Japan, and the United States, without undermining the existing security arrangements, including the US–Japan alliance. As I argued earlier on, the RL option enabled Japan to choose not to choose. Kawasaki Tsuyoshi, for example, shows how Liberals and Idealists within Japanese policymaking circles could each perceive the ARF as a tool to promote different goals (Kawasaki, 1997). This means that while support for ARF may not have been driven by a clear strategic vision, it was politically convenient as it fulfilled many possible roles (a nicer way to describe the strategy of hedging on all the possible tracks is to describe it as 'multi-tiered'; see Ashizawa, 2003). Working through ARF was also a way for Japan to exhibit greater regional activity and responsibility, thus addressing part of the American criticism regarding its limited burden-sharing in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Especially, after the 1997 new defense guidelines, working through ARF was also a way for Japan to ameliorate regional concerns regarding its regional intentions, allowing it to play a more active regional role without raising regional concerns (Midford, 2000). Finally, promoting a RL multilateral security arrangement that would include China offered Japan an opportunity to engage China in a more constructive way. Dealing with the potential Chinese threat via the BL alliance entailed a high cost, as it greatly alienated the Chinese. They were alarmed by the upgraded alliance and especially upset about Japan's agreement to operate beyond its borders in regions surrounding it, that is potentially in Taiwan. This, combined with the lingering shadow of Japan's militarist past, created a higher threat perception in China and caught both China and Japan in a potentially destabilizing security dilemma (Christensen, 1999; in contrast, Kang argues that the security dilemma in Asia is relatively weak and therefore the importance attributed to the alliance system is over-rated; see Kang, 2007). The stakes vis-à-vis China have only risen since, in the third period discussed later, making Japan's interest in pursuing its dual strategy even greater.

This being said, it was clear from the start that such a multilateral track could not replace the BL track. While Japan's active involvement in the ARF also served the goal of reassuring its neighbors about its status-quo and benign intentions, the success of this reassurance, at least at this stage, rested on the continuation of its BL alliance with the United States. This alliance was always seen as the ultimate guarantor of Japan's future benign behavior. Therefore, its maintenance and its upgrading were crucial in order to minimize the regional negative repercussions of Japanese rearmament (Green, 1995, 2002; Samuels, 2007; for a detailed description of the changes in the alliance, see Funabashi, 1999). The BL alliance with Japan thus remained the cornerstone of American (and Japanese) security strategy in Asia.

In order to understand the emergence of the ARF framework and the American decision to join it, however, we need to move beyond Japan to the ASEAN states. The ASEAN states as well were very much influenced by the larger systemic shift. While most ASEAN states (with the exception of the Philippines and Thailand) were not tied to the United States via BL alliances, they appreciated its stabilizing role in the region and were clearly concerned about the prospect of American retrenchment following the demise of bipolarity. A recurring theme in the literature explaining the origins of the ARF is the desire of all countries involved to reduce or at least manage the high level of strategic uncertainty following the global shift to unipolarity. Concern in Southeast Asia over the rising likelihood of American withdrawal (i.e. abandonment) from the region was higher, given their relative lack of strategic importance to the United States at the time. At the same time, much was at stake given the open question of rising China in the early 1990s (Ba, 2003; Goh, 2007). ASEAN states needed to contend with the uncertainty regarding US regional intentions, as well as with the uncertainty regarding China's regional intentions (Johnston, 1999, p. 288), as well as with the uncertainty regarding the potential negative implications of Sino-American competition in the region. This gave a regional institution like ARF significant value, as a pact of dual restraint. As Goh nicely puts it, by enmeshing both the United States and China into regional institutions and norms, Southeast Asian states wanted to involve them actively in the region and in this way foster long-term regional stability. Through the regional security forum, they wished to manage and steer their preferred regional order (Goh 2008, pp. 368–369). Khong and Nesadurai argue that the global strategic shift created mainly a concern about the strategic uncertainty pervading ASEAN's

larger environment and that the creation of ARF was driven by the need for information and reassurance about East Asia in transition. For this reason, it was also important that ARF will have a broad membership to reduce uncertainty. This logic is very different from a logic of regional cooperation aimed at effectively balancing an external threat or regional cooperation aimed at creating an efficient division of labor with an extra-regional partner (as was the case in Europe). In paraphrasing the famous mantra about NATO, [Khong and Nesadurai \(2007\)](#) suggest that ASEAN saw ARF as a way ‘to keep the US in, China and Japan down, and ASEAN relevant and safe’ (pp. 58–60).

This regional concern regarding American commitment to the region in the post-Cold War new era did not go unnoticed in Washington. The Bush administration decided to explore the option of a regional security dialog largely as a means to reassure America’s friends and allies about its continued commitment ([Goh, 2004](#), pp. 52–53). This delicate shift found expression in the American endorsement of the ARF in 1993. This is reminiscent of the symbolic deterrent effect that Eisenhower associated with SEATO in the 1950s. But as a symbolic move, the United States made it clear that such multilateral dialogues would only supplement the BL alliances and not supplant them. The Nye Initiative as well included, beyond the strengthening of the alliance with Japan, the support for regional ML institutions ([Nye, 2001](#)). The United States, which in 1990 still opposed any RSA idea, has shifted its policy in reaction to a growth of interest in regional ML in Asia-Pacific. This regional interest also created significant reputational costs for the United States. As [Katsumata](#) argues, the need to maintain its status as a legitimate power in post-Cold War Asia required that it be attentive to the changing regional normative discourse ([Katsumata, 2009](#), pp. 122–131). At the same time, the specific nature of ARF, designed by ASEAN states, made it easier for the United States to join. The nature of the evolving institutions was closely linked to ASEAN’s enshrining the sanctity of sovereignty via the ‘ASEAN Way’. The entrenched intergovernmental nature of SEA institutions, with both its functional and normative ongoing implications, has led to two contradicting consequences. On the one hand, it made it rather easy and not very costly to expand security cooperation after the end of the Cold War to broader cooperation with the regional and extra-regional great powers, and for the United States to join at a low cost. On the other hand, it made it very costly and very unlikely to develop effective deeper regional

cooperation (for a skeptical view of ASEAN, see Jones and Smith, 2007, p. 184). While working through ARF may have had a symbolic value, as well as some functional value as a security management institution, the preexisting BL structure remained strong and relevant.

The Clinton administration (1993–2001) used stronger ML rhetoric, in part due to its own ML liberal values (Goh, 2004, p. 53), and in part, I would argue, due to a growing understanding of the potential of such arrangements. Department of Defense reports indicate the growing recognition of a possible role for the ARF. Joseph Nye, assistant to the Secretary of Defense at the time, acknowledged the value of ML security institutions to supplement America's BL alliances in the region in his 1995 *Foreign Affairs* article. The administration was more active within ARF and helped create several regional forums (for details, see Yu, 2006). Since 1994, the United States had tried to bring to the ARF agenda issues such as the South China Sea, the Korean nuclear problem, and issues related to arms control (Goh, 2004). If in the early 1990s, the United States joined ARF to symbolically express its continued commitment to the region and willingness to listen to regional initiatives, by the late 1990s, with the growth of Chinese power, ARF came to be seen by the United States (as well as its allies) also as a useful tool to promote the two contradictory goals of engaging China, socializing it and turning it into a responsible status-quo actor, and at the same time also containing any potential future Chinese threat or bid for regional hegemony. This is reminiscent of the American logic behind promoting regional arrangements in Europe, which allowed it both to promote German recovery and growth and at the same time to engage and contain Germany within a European framework to prevent a potential military resurgence. It also reminds us that while states may join RSAs for one reason, the motivations of staying in may change over time. The next section examines the impact of two important developments of the beginning of the second millennium: the 'rise of China' factor and the events of September 11 2001.

9/11 and the erosion of unipolarity

The first decade of the new millennium was characterized by two significant events. One was the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks. The events of 9/11 did not lead to a systemic change in the global distribution of power. However, they did change dramatically American global threat perceptions, leading the United States to pursue its 'war on terror' as the main

focus of its foreign policy under the George W. Bush administration. The second factor characterizing this decade is a culmination of a long process that in the early 2000s came to the forefront: the ‘rise of China’. China’s rapid and consistent economic growth, as well as its growing military modernization, was joined by greater Chinese activity on the regional scene in Asia during this period (see [Sun, 2010](#)), leading to a plethora of books on the so-called China threat. The rise of China was seen as demonstrating the emergence of a new multipolar system ([Layne, 2012](#), pp. 203–213). These two systemic inputs had a significant impact on American regional policies, but even more of an impact on the interest of regional states in RL cooperation. It was during this decade that the United States found itself for the first time facing regional arrangements it was not a member of. This section examines the impact of these systemic inputs on US and regional policies, and the interaction between them.

The G.W. Bush administration, in the aftermath of the events of 9/11, is often described as pursuing an aggressive unilateralist foreign policy, expressed especially in the war in Iraq. The focus on the War on Terror since 2001 and the growing entanglement in the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq also influenced America’s policy in Asia but less dramatically than may be thought. Given the major preoccupation with other areas, many argued that the American administration neglected Asia. This was most prominently expressed when president Bush canceled the first US–ASEAN summit planned for 2007, coupled with the fact that his Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice skipped the ARF meetings twice, in 2005 and in 2007. This created a sense of neglect within Asia, which was detrimental to the American position in the region ([Pempel, 2008](#)). However, on the specific issue of its attitude toward regional organizations and the allegation of US unilateralism, it should be noted that Bush’s global unilateralist approach was not translated into a unilateralist approach in Asia. Cha argues that the United States remained committed to existing regional organizations, while also working on creating new multilateral structures to enhance its BL alliance structure. This found expression in the six-party-talks, chaired by China, and the creation of the US–Japan–Australia strategic dialog ([Cha, 2007](#)). Contrary to Pempel, Green argues that in fact American Asian policy did not change much between the Clinton and Bush administrations ([Green, 2008](#), pp. 583–594).

Against this general sense of neglect driven by shifting global priorities, we need to consider the emergence of new nontraditional security issues in

Asia, especially after 9/11, but beginning earlier in Asia (in the aftermath of the financial crisis), including terrorism and anti-piracy. The transnational nature of these threats created a significant functional logic for building multilateral regional cooperation, which did not exist before, as effective intelligence sharing and coordination of activities among a large group of states stood to gain from ML institutionalization. The prominence of counter-terrorism (CT) as an American foreign policy goal after 9/11 created for the first time a real logic of pooling regional capabilities toward a common goal. This was translated into the August 2002 *ASEAN–US Joint Declaration on Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism*. It was followed by the creation of the Inter-sessional meeting on Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime in 2003, which met every year since then. A regional center for counterterrorism (SEARCCT) was also created. Bilateral cooperation was also enhanced. While this strong emphasis on CT cooperation may have generated ill-will among some in SEA, it did demonstrate that when the United States perceived that there was a real potential pooling effect (intelligence sharing, upgrading border security and maritime security via adoption of common standards, for example), it was willing to push forward regional ML initiatives (for details on CT cooperation, see Cronin, 2007). The United States also tried to lead a RL initiative to battle piracy (the Regional Maritime Security Initiative) in early 2004. This attempt illustrates the limits of American ability to create RSAs if regional partners do not wish to come on board. The initiative was met with opposition by littoral states like Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia and never materialized. At the same time though, it spurred intensified regional initiatives to combat piracy, as exemplified by the Regional Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia, signed in November 2004 and coming into force in 2006. Given a real regional interest in cooperating on anti-piracy measures, Japan and SEA states were able to work effectively to build cooperation, without the United States (see Fouse and Sato, 2006; Song, 2009, pp. 111–116).

The American focus on the war on terror also generated an additional interest of particular SEA states to use their specific assets to upgrade their relations with the United States. The American need to retain a forward presence close to a growing number of potentially unstable areas in the region, especially after the events of 9/11, led to the signing of new access agreements to allow it access to facilities, ports, and airfields in countries beyond Japan, ROK, and the Philippines, such as Singapore and Malaysia

(Williams, 2004, pp. 9–10). American bases in the Philippines were closed in 1992, but in the aftermath of 9/11, cooperation was enhanced again, and by 2012, the United States was permitted to use Subic Bay again. Regional states took advantage of this American need. States like Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia upgraded their BL relations with the United States by providing it with military facilities and providing access to the US navy and air forces, maximizing the leverage stemming from their local assets (Goh, 2008, pp. 366–367). The availability of such specific assets created a strong incentive for these states to also engage the US bilaterally.

While the United States was more active in initiating some of the cooperation, e.g. on CT, it now faced a much more active regional cooperative setting, the agenda of which did not fully complement its own agenda. Within the region itself, the interest in RL cooperation grew for two reasons. First, the dramatic 1997 financial crisis in Asia enhanced regional understanding regarding the need to cooperate more effectively to prevent such crises in the future. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the crisis, there was a sense of betrayal within Southeast Asia on part of the United States, contrasted with the constructive role played by China (Ba, 2003, pp. 635–636). This was closely linked to the evolution of exclusive regional forums like the ASEAN-plus-Three (APT). A second important factor was the growing Chinese interest in engaging regional forums. While the interest of ASEAN states to hedge against China's growth emerged in the region already in the 1990s, the new factor of the late 1990s was the growing interest of China itself in working through regional forums to advance its goals, leading to its successful cooperation with ASEAN until 2005, its active role in the launching of the EAS, its role in the APT, and its cooperation on the North Korean problem via the six-party-talks (Wu, 2009; Sun, 2010). As strategic rivals in the region, the growing interest of China in RL cooperation had clear implications for American policy. This inserted a new logic into American thinking regarding regional cooperation forums. If before an important factor was whether such a forum can provide actual added value (pooling), now a new competitive dynamics was added, as Sino-American competition was being played out through such forums.

The EAS initiative demonstrates this competitive dynamics well. The EAS initiative of Malaysian prime minister Badawi in 2004 won the strong backing of China, which saw in it an opportunity to influence East Asian

multilateralism to serve its broader strategic goals and to weaken US influence. This found more explicit expression when on the eve of the Summit, China proposed that the ASEAN-plus-three (APT) states would take the lead in this new forum (i.e. excluding the United States from the driver's seat). This proposal, in turn, met the opposition of Japan and Australia (Malik, 2006, pp. 208–211). The United States initially chose not to join, as it refused to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). In the debate within the United States regarding accession, some argued that while the EAS is a meaningless forum, the United States should still find a way to enter, but others viewed this as an American mistake that has led to diminished American influence in the region (Green, 2008, pp. 583–594; Parameswaran 2010). If the Chinese were to choose to continue a high profile activity in regional forums in Asia, then the costs of not being involved or maintaining a low profile for the United States would be rising.

The United States was reluctant to get sucked into competitive security regionalization. As late as May 2008, the ending days of the Bush era, Secretary of Defense Gates stressed that while the United States welcomed the search for a 'new security architecture', it did have some benchmarks. 'For starters', he said, 'we should *avoid an approach that treats the quest for a new security architecture as some kind of zero-sum game*'. The fact is the region as whole has benefited in recent decades because of cooperation on issues of common concern. The collaborative reality of Asia's security today is to *the exclusion of no single country* ... It is instead a continuously developing enterprise undertaken with allies, friends, and partners. But it can only succeed if we treat the region as a single entity. *There is little room for a separate 'East Asian' order* [Emphasis added] (Gates, 2008). However, the changing regional power distribution and its broader global implications generated powerful pressures for the emergence of this competitive regionalization process. These dynamics and the understanding of the strategic interaction between regional dynamics and American policy found their eventual expression in what ASEAN website describes as the 'seismic change' that took place in US–ASEAN relations since 2009, when the Obama administration came to power.

Shortly after Obama came into office, the United States made several moves that demonstrated a strengthened commitment to work with ASEAN and upgrade its participation in regional forums. In July 2009, it finally acceded to the TAC in Southeast Asia. In November 2009, leaders of ASEAN and the United States met for the first ASEAN–US

Leaders' Meeting in Singapore, adopting a joint declaration on Enhanced Partnership for Enduring Peace and Prosperity, and committing to enhancing cooperation on a broad set of issues. In early 2010, a permanent US Mission to ASEAN was established and the United States nominated a resident US ambassador to ASEAN. And in October 2010, the United States eventually joined the EAS. Beyond this, the United States concluded an agreement with Australia to station 2500 Marines and other service personnel at a training facility in Darwin, Northwest Australia, and in APEC, it promoted a new set of trade talks toward a broad Trans-Pacific Partnership. Secretary of State Clinton described this as a 'pivot' of US foreign policy toward East Asia (see Nye, 2011; Tsai, 2013).¹

While this policy shift may have been influenced by the arrival of a new, Democrat, administration into office, more adamant to pursue ML and recover American legitimate power in the world, I suggest that the shift in American policy is closely linked to the changing regional power distribution and erosion of unipolarity, and especially to the significant change in the regional interest and regional capacity to pursue RL frameworks also without American participation. These processes – namely the rise of China and development of a more dynamic autonomous regional cooperation process – began already during the Bush years. However, the fact that regional cooperation continued and developed even without American active involvement demonstrated that the United States was no longer the sole maker/breaker of regional cooperation. As was the case in the early years of the transition to unipolarity, by the end of the first decade of 2000, the perception of American decline, together with the perception of a more assertive China, raised concerns about the degree of American commitment to regional security. Concerns were heightened in the aftermath of the financial crisis in the United States in 2008, as fear grew that domestic fiscal pressures would lead to budget cuts and reduce American regional engagement. Indeed, to preempt such concern, the administration announced that whatever the outcome of the defense-budget debates, it will make sure it will protect the capabilities needed to maintain US presence in Asia-Pacific (Nye, 2011).

1 The focus here is not on explaining or assessing the pivot/ 'rebalancing' policy, i.e., the growing strategic emphasis on Asia in general, but rather the growing attention to regional security forums.

While SEA states recognized the importance of US presence in the region, there was ambivalence regarding its role. Among the ASEAN states, there were two competing visions of RSA – an inclusive vision (i.e. with the United States) held by Singapore and Indonesia, and an exclusive vision (excluding the United States) held by Malaysia (Acharya, 2009, pp. 180–1). Here, yet again the United States found itself in need of demonstrating its strong commitment to regional security in Asia, but this time, the costs of noninvolvement were higher, as regional politics continued to evolve within the new RL forums. And as before, joining RL forums like the EAS or upgrading participation in other forums had in itself a powerful symbolic value, expressing American commitment to the region. Participation was important. American concerns regarding the implications of signing the TAC were also resolved, as the United States exchanged side letters to allow it to circumvent the strict rule of non-interference that was central to the TAC and that potentially constrained its policy options vis-à-vis Myanmar (Park, 2012). Furthermore, after the November 2010 elections in Myanmar, the Obama administration shifted to an engagement policy to encourage further reform, establishing full diplomatic relations and visiting the country in November 2012. Similarly, joining the TAC had a powerful symbolic value of expressing American commitment to engagement in Southeast Asia and commitment to ML (Manyin *et al.*, 2009).

Beyond the symbolic value of participation, the active role of China in the EAS combined with concerns about its motivations and goals, strengthened the competitive element of American participation (or as described earlier – a logic of competitive security regionalization). While the growth in Chinese economic and military power was taking place throughout the whole decade, since 2009/10, the Chinese began adopting an increasingly aggressive approach in maritime Asia. This led to an enhanced Chinese threat perception, both for the United States and for other regional states. The growing American assertiveness in RL forums was perceived by most commentators, as well as by many Chinese, as directly linked to this ‘China threat’, as an attempt to contain China (Paal, 2011). At the same time though, the American administration stressed its desire to cooperate with China. Here again, the active engagement in RL forums enables the United States to simultaneously engage China and check its regional influence (Nye, 2011). Thus, for example, key issues like the South China Sea and freedom of navigation, which have a potential

explosive nature, are being discussed in such regional forums, with the United States involved but not as the main contestator. This dynamics was evident in the October 2013 EAS meeting, during which Secretary of State Kerry was pushing for a joint resolution on the South China Sea challenges and for the development of an agreed code of conduct. China, for its part, insisted that this should be resolved bilaterally vis-à-vis each regional state affected by the disputes (*Asia News*, 2013, 10 October 2013).

The need to exhibit commitment, in the context of growing competition with China, had a dual impact on the building of regional security institutions. On the one hand, it created a dynamics of competitive security regionalization, with each of the two states making an effort to promote forums through which they can exercise influence and limit the influence of the other. On the other hand, this same competition is also likely to water down any significant impact that such regional forums may have, beyond their more limited (though still important) role of managing this great power competition. The United States will not advance any upgraded powerful regional security forum within which the Chinese may end up advancing competing goals. At the same time, less multilateral, task-oriented RSAs are also being created, to deal specifically with concrete issues, such as the Six-party-talks, the Tsunami Core Group, and the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue among the United States, Japan, and Australia. These more limited regional frameworks were created for functional purposes, but they as well reflect the growing regional competition (see also *Taylor and Tow's*, 2009 description of a competitive geometries model, p. 343, and *Gill and Green's*, 2009 discussion of competitive unilateralism, p. 25).

Conclusions

The main argument of this article was that throughout the years and across varying changes since the end of WWII, American policy regarding RSAs in Asia was heavily influenced by its perception of regional preferences for RSAs and of their policy goals within them. The broad historical review demonstrates the close synergy between regional interest in cooperation and American policies. If in the early 1950s, the lack of any genuine local interest in regional cooperation (beyond tying down the United States) served to reduce American interest in the option, by 2014 the growth of independent regional cooperation initiatives forced the United States to increase its engagement in such forums. While clearly regional

dynamics interacted with American policies and the United States remains a central player, it is no longer a veto player when it comes to RSAs. Therefore, it faces a relatively new situation where it has to consider the potential costs of not participating in such existing RL forums.

The United States was only willing to actively initiate and push for RSAs when actual pooling value existed, as was the case in Europe with the creation of NATO. In Asia, this potential has been limited over the years – stemming either from the broad regional power disparities in the late 1940s, which led to a focus on cooperation with Japan, or limited actual value of pooling for deterrence purposes in the 1950s, or a focus on base rights/access agreements in the late 1990s, which could be achieved bilaterally. With the rise of nontraditional security threats after 2001, new potential for pooling emerged. However, the actual value of joining or working through RSAs was shaped by regional dynamics. Actual pooling potential was also shaped by a perception of the willingness of regional states to invest in such regional cooperation. At the same time, the extent to which regional states' goals in cooperation were perceived as compatible or competing with those of the United States had a major impact. If there was regional interest in RSAs, which was not aimed against the United States, then mere participation was useful even without meaningful pooling. Regional preferences and policies influenced the perceived value of RSAs for symbolic (commitment, status) purposes. Given that neither the United States nor its regional partners gave up on the preexisting BL security structure, the stakes of participation in RSAs were not high. However, if and when regional goals seemed to potentially compete with those of the United States, the Americans did not remain indifferent. Such competing goals largely appeared as China became more active in regional fora. The United States opposed exclusive RSAs that did not include it. It became more engaged in inclusive RSAs to check and engage the Chinese and compete over regional issues. And it was creating additional smaller, task-oriented arrangements, with regional partners.

In the early Cold War years, brief American attempts to explore an RSA were aborted as regional states did not wish to cooperate among themselves. It was then that the United States created the formative regional hub-and-spokes security framework for non-Communist Asia, which remains central to this day. In terms of Fig. 1, that time period was located in square II. After the collapse of the USSR and the global shift to a unipolar system, new incentives were created in East/Southeast Asia to invest

in RSAs. The initiatives and vision of ASEAN states, as well as of Japan, led to the creation of the ARF. The United States, which stated clearly its continued reliance on its BL alliance system, joined along to reassure its regional partners of its commitment to the region. The goals of ARF participants at the time appeared rather compatible. The United States was largely interested in maintaining regional stability and reassuring regional states. Japan was similarly interested in promoting CBMs and preventive diplomacy through ARF, while upgrading its BL alliance with the United States, and ASEAN states were interested in keeping the United States in and hedging China. No significant actual pooling of resources was expected by the Americans, yet at the same time, ASEAN created the boundaries of activity within the ARF based on the ASEAN Way. Consequently, American participation was seen as not costly. In this period, we witnessed movement to Square I. By the late 1990s and especially after the events of 9/11, concern over CT and anti-piracy (as opposed to a goal of deterring China, for example) created actual potential for pooling. And indeed on these issues, the United States was trying to more actively encourage regional cooperation. The anti-piracy issue, however, demonstrated the limited ability of the United States to create and lead new RSAs in the region. At the same time, the most interesting development in the past decade has been the impact of the growing Chinese role in regional institutions and the growing perception of a China threat in the United States and among other regional states. This, I demonstrated, generated a dynamics of competitive security regionalization, with both the United States and China using regional forums to manage their competition, while other regional states try to use the same institutions to manage their relations with both powers (Square III in Fig. 1). If during the Cold War, the United States and the USSR engaged in competitive security regionalization where each built exclusive security arrangements within its respective spheres of influence, today this competition takes place in large part within common forums, within the same region. Such competitive regionalization is further driven by the concern over prestige and status, as reflected in the importance of symbolic gestures as described earlier. This dynamics entails growing competition within inclusive RSAs, it creates greater motivation for the United States to join exclusive RSAs it could not abort (both these dynamics were exhibited in the EAS), and it creates motivation to build new, narrower, arrangements, to deal with specific security issues.

Twenty years ago, John Mearsheimer warned against the pernicious effects of the false promise of international institutions and suggested that American decision-makers were holding on to this false promise to mitigate their unease about the actual Realist dynamics of international politics (1994/5, pp. 47–49). American policy regarding RSAs in Asia reflects a more sophisticated approach. Neither the United States nor its regional partners or challengers assume away the centrality of preexisting American alliance system in the region. At the same time, as regional states are investing in RSAs as an important additional tool to manage their own relations, as well as to manage relations with the United States, and as America's main challenger in the region – China – is working through these regional institutions to increase its influence and legitimacy, these regional frameworks may prove significant for the United States. They provide a venue to compete with China on issues related to regional order and mitigate its regional influence (e.g. on the South China Sea). This venue clearly does not replace, for example, the central role of the alliance with Japan or the importance of access to bases in SEA states. However, ignoring it comes with a meaningful cost – in terms of American regional status, its projected commitment to the region, and conversely the ability of China to increase its legitimacy in the region. Finally, on transnational security issues such as CT, the United States clearly stands to gain from enhanced regional cooperation. While BL cooperation remains crucial on such issues as well, it cannot on its own generate the optimal cooperation to deal with regional terrorism, an effort that requires actual pooling of regional intelligence efforts. Here as well, however, the United States is limited in its ability to create such effective frameworks if regional interest in them is limited.

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