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Admiral Blair's Gospel

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Reprinted from the Asian Wall Street Journal, 19 January 2001

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Asia-Pacific Defense FORUM

Spring 2001

After the Berlin Wall fell and communism collapsed in Europe, the United States at first scorned the view that the Asia-Pacific region required its own security organization, Washington clung to the belief that its existing bilateral alliances with key allies the so-called hub-and-spokes arrangement would take care of trouble in the post-Cold War era. One American analyst went so far as to declare that one of the biggest threats to Asia was the political science establishment propagating useless alternative schemes.

But President Bill Clinton's administration, which took office 1993, came to accept that what was being proposed wasn't "academic solutions in search of problems," as the analyst had cynically described them. And so the Association of Southeast Asian National Regional Forum [ARF] was formed in 1994. Today it consists of 23 members, including Japan, Russia, and China as well as the U.S. Washington maintains its alliance structure, as ARF engages in simple confidence-building measures and struggles to find common ground among allies and former foes.

Now, the U.S., represented by its commander-in-chief of Pacific forces, Adm. Dennis Blair, is urging the formation of "security communities" in Asia. Under this radical proposal, countries would concentrate on shared interests in peaceful development and actively promote diplomacy and negotiation to resolve disagreements. The shift in U.S. opinion in the past decade is little short of breathtaking.

Since Adm. Blair began spreading his gospel, it has become apparent that the notion of a security community isn't widely understood. Like most theories in international relations, it is West European in origin, fathered in the 1950s by Karl Deutch, a German-born scholar who spent much of his adult life teaching in the U.S. He and his associates were seeking to explain the emergence of cooperation among the developed states of the North Atlantic.

Basically, the concept of a security community rejects a balance-of-power approach, where major players that pack economic and military punch maneuver continually to offset each other. It answers the question of how long-term rivals become friends, by accepting that force is no longer legitimate in solving disputes. Arms races and contingency planning are ruled out. Countries don't have to become bosom buddies, or pretend that they don't have differences. Rather, they accept that they have a common interest in settling them without resorting to war.

"I am not naive on this score," Adm. Blair tells me. "But I am more optimistic than most. If pursued skillfully, I believe efforts to change mindsets in Asia over time will take hold and build durable security that will support prosperity and improvements in the standard of living of Asians. It is a worthy goal for those who live in, are engaged in, and care about the region."

Adm. Blair, who took over the Honolulu-based U.S. Pacific Command in [February 1999], has sold his vision forcefully in the past year, in interviews, speeches and articles, and in talks, with regional governments and military establishments. He has received public backing from outgoing U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen and, he says, from many others in the Pentagon and State Department. Arguing that no treaties are necessary to encourage "habits of cooperation," Adm. Blair has set out to put his ideas into practice.

His initiatives include broadening previously bilateral military exercises, improving communications among the armed forces of the region and focusing foreign assistance on capabilities to contribute to joint humanitarian and peacekeeping operations, in addition to national defense. Singapore, for example, participated last year in the annual Thai-U.S. war games known as Cobra Gold. And in October, the U.S., Japan, Singapore, and South Korea staged a submarine rescue exercise, observed by seven other navies, among them former enemies of the West, China, and Russia.

Amitav Acharya, a Canadian security and Southeast Asia specialist, credits Adm. Blair with "moving the boundaries of debate and discourse" by promoting the security community's concept. For instance, by choosing a multilateral setting, the U.S. is able to introduce a Japan that still isn't fully trusted by its neighbors. "I think the admiral has something there that is much more profound than most people realize," says Mr. Acharya.

But skeptics abound, among them ironically, Western academics from the “realist” school of international relations, who tend to think that this military man is hopelessly idealistic. A seminar at the U.S. Defense Department-sponsored Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Adm. Blair's backyard in Hawaii last year declared that a security community is “inappropriate” at this stage. The European theory “appears to have been reverse engineered to fit the peculiarities” of the Asia-Pacific region, participants said.

Even some partners wonder if Washington has ulterior motives. One Southeast Asian official, whose government supports American forward deployment of 100,000 military personnel, muses that Adm. Blair's comments may simply reflect the confidence of the U.S. as top dog, or its belief that U.S. troop numbers can be reduced by working with others. It's also possible, the official adds, that the U.S. is preparing for the day when it might want to put together an anti-China network.

Understandably, the Chinese have the most serious reservations, since they consider the U.S. alliances with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and Australia a collective Cold War “relic.” Beijing has agreed to send officers to programs in Honolulu and is receptive to some humanitarian overtures, but hasn't joined U.S. led training drills. “Strengthening military alliances and engaging in joint military exercises aren't conducive to promoting peace and stability,” a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said in September.

Adm. Blair cheerfully acknowledges that he had never heard of Karl Deutch when he first advocated security communities. But now that he has read the literature he is even more convinced that there is little alternative to developing “shared expectations of peaceful change.” He identifies the enemy: “It is zero-sum, balance-of-power mindsets and ambiguous intentions, fueled by ethnic and religious zeal and historical fears and grievances.” His advice: Stop measuring differences and start measuring progress.

Making a start to meeting the transnational challenges of terrorism, drug trafficking, piracy, and weapons proliferation, as well as cooperating to assist those in distress at sea and victims of natural disasters, can be only positive. But the real test for the viability of security communities is China's involvement, especially in military matters. Until Beijing extends it imprimatur, they will continue to be somewhat suspect, seen as perhaps a cover for a self-serving American maneuver.

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