

Research Focus

Reflections on regional architecture

Charles E. Morrison*

This article briefly covers four aspects of the regional architecture issues: What is architecture? Why is it important? What assumptions do we make about it? And what are some of the issues that we need to address in our PECC regional architecture task force?

Starting with definition, this is a relatively new term, hardly found 15 years ago and still rarely used in international relations books. But it is being used frequently by those in the policy world and among journalists, and in different ways, although often confined to organisational structures. But I believe it refers to the broader frameworks that order the interaction among states. These are not just confined to organisations, but include norms and well understood rules of the game – anything that gives order. This is very important in the 'anarchical' world of states. States are sovereign, and there is no hierarchical, political authority as there is within a nation.

Why is it important to address 'architecture' in the Asia Pacific region? Because the regional system is really quite new. The components, that is, the states, themselves are new. Some units are very old as nations – China, Japan, and Thailand, for example. But even for old nations, the modern domestic arrangements or constitutions are from the post World War II era, or even later. Moreover, the relations the units were defined for a couple of centuries by, basically, European colonial, powers – then by the cold war. So, the system of regional relations is still being created through an evolving process.

Second, the stakes are very high. They're high because, in historical terms, the Asia Pacific region has been moving from being in an area on the periphery to an actual core of the global international system. The core in the 19th century was Europe. The core in the 20th century, and probably still today, is the United States; but the core for the time ahead really will be the Asia Pacific, including East Asia and North America. So, the stability and quality of the relations of the countries in and across the Pacific is going to be very critical, not just to this region but also to the world.

A third important aspect is that we are really looking at a new paradigm of architecture. The European system had a structure where there were a number of states of fairly equivalent size, and the governing feature was a balance of power or sometimes a concert. The competition within the system caused power to be projected outward; and eventually caused a collapse. The collapse in the 1930's and 1940's was so profound that Europe started working toward a new architecture. The most important development of the 20th Century was the transformation of Europe from an area of quarrelling states to an area where young people growing up cannot even conceive of their countries in conflict with each other.

The more recent and continuing US-dominated system was also different from what we can expect in the future. As a single powerful country, the United States itself was a hub of architecture, and the architecture

surrounding it was one that privileged the United States. But that day is passing. So, with Asia Pacific, you have nations of different sizes—the United States, China, and Japan—currently at different power levels, but in a lot of flux. The architecture should take into account the current distribution of power, but also, how it is likely to change.

The fourth reason that this new architecture is important, is because we also live an era of globalisation and within increasing plural domestic societies. These facts suggest an architecture that is open—open beyond any particular region and take into account the pluralism at the domestic level.

Now let me turn to some assumptions that I would make about the future architecture for the Asia Pacific region. My first assumption is that the foundation stones, that is, the state themselves, are very important. In the European case—it was not really that the architecture failed, but there was change at the domestic level, with the establishment of fascist and communist regimes that did not accept the previous architecture. The foundation stones in the Asia Pacific case are still being, in many ways, consolidated.

The second assumption is that there will be no single architect. In fact, there are a lot of architects and they are all trying to arrange the architecture to fit their own particular interests. So, there is competition on what the architecture should be, and there is inevitably a need for compromise. It is not going to be built like the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

And the third assumption—very related—is that there is no single architecture. With all the architects, it will be 'jerry built'. Of course, our project hopefully will provide something of a 'plan,' but we know in practice that there will be a lot of experimentation.

Fourth assumption, and also again related, is that the architecture is always under construction. Issues change, and what is achievable changes. As result the architecture has to change.

And finally—we cannot take the architecture for granted; architecture is important. If the architecture as a whole were to collapse, this would be devastating for the region. We cannot take for granted that the architecture is stable even at the domestic level or at the international level.

Now, finally, some general issues. Some of these have already been raised. The first issue is how to be inclusive, but also get things done. In APEC you have 21 economies, many economies in the wings; and some that have been left out—the small Pacific island economies, for example, all being grouped in a kind of observer status.

How do we get anything done in an APEC or Asia-Pacific context with such a large set of sovereign countries? In the case of the U.N. global system, there is the U.N. General Assembly to represent everyone; the Security Council has a much smaller representative

number; and the permanent five are on the Security Council. This is one way of providing larger bodies focused on representation and smaller bodies focused on work.

Also in the international system, there is the G-8, representing originally the large 'free world' economies, and increasingly moving toward a more global representative body of large powers.

There are a couple of ways of organising the smaller groupings. One is based on geography. We have this in our region with ASEAN as a grouping; East Asia as a potential grouping. Another way is based on interests. We may need something like an Asia Pacific smaller grouping of systemically important countries – these might even include India – that would have a more intimate venue for their interaction.

The second issue is the connection between regional and global institutions. Usually regional institutions have come into being because global institutions have failed at some problem. The Asia economic crisis, for example, was perceived as a failure of global institutions and also Asia Pacific institutions, so it sparked an interest in East Asia institutions. Or regional institutions are created because the global institutions are less politically attractive; or regional institutions are established to try and move the global architecture. Regional institutions may

also deepen the global architecture. In my view that is where APEC should focus, in the trade area. It is not so much to create new liberalisation, but it is to deepen the adherence to the WTO process at the regional level.

The third issue is how to strengthen and develop new architecture? Some believe in a 'big bang' approach, others in incremental approaches. The problem with the big bang approach is that you may not get anywhere—lots of vision but no path to get there. The problem with the incremental approach is that you may have no vision and so you muddle along and, one way or the other, the architecture is built. But does it have intelligent design? The challenge is to have both vision and building blocks towards that vision, and we find stylistic differences in the region. In some parts, the traditions favour legalistic methods of building architecture. Others like much more informal mechanisms.

The last issue involves the connection between the economic and security architectures. The economic architecture, as weak as it is, is more developed than the security architecture, but both of them, really, at the moment, are still in separate spheres instead of together.

** Charles E. Morrison is Chair of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council. This article is based on a presentation to the PECC Annual Meeting held in Sydney on 1 May 2007.*

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Enquiries:

Australia-Japan Research Centre

Tel: (61-2) 6125 3780

Fax: (61-2) 6125 0767

Email: ajrc@anu.edu.au