Economics and security: foundations for comprehensive regional security

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Abstract

Asia's economic and political security has been shaped by and achieved with deep regional integration and cooperation. The reemergence of great-power rivalry, the disruption of the geopolitical status quo and a protectionist United States represents the biggest economic and political challenge to Asia since the end of the Cold War.

Governments have resorted to traditional security responses—unwinding economic interdependence, prioritising military deterrence as a means of avoiding conflict, weaponising economic interdependence for coercive purposes or securitising economics to protect from its weaponisation and threatening military force to achieve political ends—and that risks global political and economic fragmentation, or worse.

Renewed commitment to Asian regionalism could set a course that reinforces international political stability and economic prosperity. This will require rearticulating the goals, principles and commitments of that regionalism.

Regional security and prosperity can be achieved with a shared goal of comprehensive regional security: a vision of collective security for the region's states that draws upon the antecedents of comprehensive national security that have long found expression in ASEAN-based cooperation processes and national policy in Asia. Based on the three pillars of peace, prosperity and resilience, comprehensive regional security elevates economic and 'non-traditional' security considerations in regional security cooperation as mutually-reinforcing elements of national security, alongside traditional military considerations.

The reassertion of the principles of comprehensive regional security in Asia could help bolster global defence against the breakdown of the multilateral order.

In the transition to a multipolar global order, multilateralism, open regionalism, equal treatment within a rules-based system and interdependence will be important contributors to

regional peace, prosperity and resilience. Those principles that have served East Asia in the past are now more, not less, important.

1. Introduction

The economies of East Asia have achieved collective economic and political security by embracing open markets, a multilateral rules-based system and deep regional cooperation. The economic integration in East Asia — the group represented by the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) of the ten Southeast Asian states, China, Japan and South Korea in Northeast Asia and Australia and New Zealand — and across the Pacific with North America, was built on the confidence of a rules-based order, the principle of equal treatment and backed by the post-war and post-cold war security architecture.

In the process of its integration, East Asia managed to balance and navigate political and security challenges with the ballast of deep economic interdependence. Commitment to openness and non-discriminatory trade led to a deepening of regional value chains and a form of regional economic integration that came to be characterised by open regionalism, not at the expense of economies external to regional arrangements but by deepening East Asia's economic integration into the global economy.

There will always be tensions and risks in the regional and global system. But political decisions by major powers in the past decade have seen the value of interdependencies increasingly contested and subject to the logic of zero-sum geopolitical competition and the weaponization of economic relations. Economic interdependence—secured by consensus efforts and agreed rules—can be a source of mutual benefit and carry a peace dividend that significantly outweighs the vulnerabilities it is sometimes seen to produce. Politically, multilateralism diffuses power and preserves strategic space for states to pursue policy options in their interest. Economically, open, contestable and rules-based markets likewise blunt the ability of countries to use trade and investment ties as tools of coercion against others. But the decline in strategic trust between the big powers today has corroded the multilateral foundations of the postwar order.

Multilateral values underpinned a generation-long effort of Asian regionalism that was a critical ingredient in the dramatic raising of average living standards across the region and the peaceful management of political tensions, including through ASEAN in Southeast Asia.

The conditions, assumptions, norms and rules that have driven the achievement of Asian regionalism are being challenged in a way that threatens East Asian economic and political security.

These circumstances require a new agenda for the achievement of economic and political security in East Asia and the Pacific. This chapter outlines the idea of *comprehensive regional security* that builds upon the long history of comprehensive security in Japan and ASEAN. It encompasses all dimensions of security and the interrelationships that sustain it, and sees security as only being achievable through multilateralism and positive-sum cooperation.

The argument in this chapter aims to serve as a prologue to the other chapters in this book which explore the idea of comprehensive regional security, where it came from in regional policy thinking, some of its important regional dimensions and how it may be relevant to dealing with the turmoil on international economic policy and security affairs that confront the region now.

A comprehensive regional security framing provides the catalyst for collective action and cooperation in East Asia. ASEAN-centred collective action can encompass Northeast Asia and connect to European and other efforts in defending and buttressing global public goods in which there is now a major US leadership deficit reflected in the uncertainty in global trade, economic and security policy. Washington is preoccupied with domestic divisions and no longer sees value in the global institutions of which it played the major role in creating.

Why ASEAN is cast in this role will seem to many passing strange. It is organisationally weak. It lacks leadership structures for strong coordination and innovation. Its intellectual base for policy initiative is shallow and spasmodic. Yet, somewhat remarkably, it has agency with the major powers because of its largely neutral geopolitical posture and its growing regional weight. It geoeconomic position, as a significant region the success of whose development is closely bound to global openness and engagement with the major industrial powers, makes it deeply dependent on the multilateral economic order, more so that any other part of the world economy in terms of trade and economic dependence (measured for example in terms of trade to GDP shares). ASEAN's capacity to play the role in which it now is cast is a question to which the chapters of the book will return.

A vision of comprehensive regional security based upon multilateralism; the peaceful and rules-based management of political differences; the development and security benefits of economic integration and interdependence; and the overarching importance of addressing climate change and other environmental challenges; could provide regional ballast against global uncertainty.

The chapter will first examine the idea of comprehensive regional security as a way to reinforce multilateralism and interdependence in light of shifting strategic realities. It outlines some core principles and logic that might underpin comprehensive regional security, emphasising how the concepts of comprehensive *national* security which are already familiar in the region provide the foundation for comprehensive regional security. It then explores the options for operationalising the concept of comprehensive regional security and how the principles of Asian regionalism can be reaffirmed within a regional framework of comprehensive regional security. Finally, the chapter outlines the possible elements of crafting a new political agreement among East Asian states—one that builds upon the existing ASEAN-centred regional cooperation architecture, with comprehensive regional security as its conceptual basis.

1. The logic of comprehensive regional security for Asia

An overemphasis or focus on national security that risks neglecting development or prosperity is not a sustainable approach to achieving economic or political security. That approach takes economies towards the North Korean corner solution of putting military security above all else. It would unwind economic interdependence that is a source of security. Nor is it sustainable to overemphasise development and prosperity while neglecting national and political security.

National interest is not one dimensional and at its core has three components—security, prosperity and social cohesion (de Brouwer, 2023). Social cohesion or social harmony, inclusion and wellbeing are important for maintaining economic and political security.

Getting domestic rules, institutions and policy frameworks right is a necessary but not sufficient condition for balancing objectives and the successful pursuit of a national interest that brings security, prosperity and social cohesion. The other necessary condition is openness to the international economy and international cooperation backed by multilateral rules to preserve the external policy space for countries to pursue economic policies that promote both prosperity and security (Armstrong, 2023).

Japan and ASEAN have demonstrated recognition, through their explicit adoption of comprehensive security, that national security in the pursuit of the national interest is broader than the challenges to state sovereignty from invasion, attack or military coercion by other states. A comprehensive approach to security in that context elevates economic interests; continued availability of food, energy and resources; border security and migration; social cohesion; and resilience to environmental and human health threats to a level of importance similar to that of military security. The next section explores how the idea of comprehensive *national* security can be adapted to the goal of comprehensive *regional* security.

a. The genesis of an Asian approach to security

Nowhere has comprehensive security been more explicitly defined or incorporated into policy thinking than historically it has been in Japan. A fuller discussion of that experience is developed in Chapter 3. Anxieties about resource scarcity and postwar constitutional limits on its military encouraged policymakers in Tokyo to consider the country's national security objectives more broadly. Safeguarding access to offshore supplies of natural resources for Japan's economy—and eventually access to markets for Japanese exports—became central elements in Japan's diplomacy.

Japan's approach to comprehensive security—*sogo anzen hosho*—was explicitly embedded in policy in the wake of a landmark report commissioned in 1979 by the government of prime minister Masayoshi Ōhira.[1] It broadly defined security as 'protecting the people's life from various forms of threat' and noted that it would require tripartite efforts: to ensure the international environment was favourable; to ensure sufficient self-reliance to address threats; and to work in solidarity with countries sharing the same ideals and interests. The Japanese concept of comprehensive security went beyond just military capacity and explicitly encompassed energy security, food security and countermeasures to natural disasters and emergencies, including earthquakes.

In Southeast Asia, ASEAN and its member states' embrace of a similar understanding of national security interests has been analysed under the banner of 'non-traditional' security (Caballero-Anthony, 2016). ASEAN's membership includes states that govern ethnically divided societies, often with porous borders and patchy state capacity. Violent insurgencies stemming from a variety of unresolved ethnic, ideological or regional disagreements have afflicted some Southeast Asian states.

Accordingly, ASEAN's own approach to security reflects the widespread concerns within the governments of its member states with such 'non-traditional' security issues. ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) sought 'to promote perpetual peace, everlasting amity and cooperation' among members, including non-ASEAN signatories, since 1976 (ASEAN, 1976). The 2009 ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint envisages ASEAN as 'a cohesive, peaceful, stable and resilient region with shared responsibility for comprehensive security', and references to comprehensive security have been a common feature of the statements emerging from the ASEAN Regional Forum since it first met in Bangkok in 1994 (ASEAN, 2009).

[1] For a summary of the final Ōhira report, which was delivered in 1980, see Barnett, Robert W. (1980) *Beyond war: Japan's concept of comprehensive national security,* Pergamon-Brasseys, Washington.

ASEAN's post-Cold War embedding of the concept of comprehensive security into its security cooperation frameworks was backed up by second-track initiatives, including a Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) working group that focused on canvassing options for its operationalisation as 'an overarching organising concept for the management of security in the region' (CSCAP,). CSCAP's language mirrored the prevailing ASEAN understanding of comprehensive security in describing it as 'the pursuit of sustainable security in all fields (personal, political, economic, social, cultural, military, environmental) in both the domestic and external spheres, essentially through cooperative means'.[2]

b. Today's challenges to comprehensive security

Any attempt to advance the concept of comprehensive security in today's security environment benefits from a strong regional tradition of integrating non-military (or 'non-traditional') security concerns into national and regional security approaches. Yet the high-water mark of comprehensive security's prominence as a guiding principle for regional cooperation came at a moment when post-Cold War optimism about the future of multilateral management of Asia's security challenges was at a peak. The region now faces different and much bigger challenges, which any effort to strengthen regionalism will have to overcome.

Security perspectives increasingly proscribe economic decisions, in a way which only questionably enhances either economic prosperity or strategic stability. Major economic powers, principally the United States and China, are locked into a self-reinforcing process of 'decoupling', or the promotion of 'dual circulation'. These measures are justified by policymakers using the language of economic security, but ultimately they subordinate key national interests to a process of geopolitical competition that is zero-sum for participants by its very nature, and will often be negative-sum, for others too. This undermines the economic openness, growth and adaptable supply chains which form the foundations of comprehensive security in an interconnected global economy.

Until recently the great powers still adhered to the rhetoric of multilateralism—but their practices rarely reflect it now. The United States under President Donald Trump's second term has dropped that rhetoric altogether. Even though the United States' 2022 *National Security Strategy* notes that 'the prospect of a freer and more open world… requires reinforcing the multilateral system', it provides examples focused on new US-led initiatives

[2] Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) (n.d.) *Memorandum 3: the concepts of comprehensive security and cooperative security.* Available at: http://www.cscap.org/index.php?page=memoranda

with limited membership rather than engaging with existing institutions and forums.[3] Similarly, Chinese leader Xi Jinping's speech to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasises 'true multilateralism' and opposes 'hegemonism and power politics in all their forms'.[4] Yet both countries' actions towards the other reflect zero-sum competition that forces other countries to choose sides. China and the United States have taken to frequently intervene in international markets and disregarding the interests of smaller countries, both limiting and distorting international trade.

The United States' CHIPS and Science Act and Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 exemplify such actions under the Biden administration. Under the second Trump administration there has been a wholesale attack on the global trade regime (*East Asia Forum*, 2025).

The United States is large and powerful enough to be a rule-maker, rather than a rule-taker and its size and influence mean that Washington's decisions reverberate across the global system to a unique extent. China has engaged in similarly damaging behaviour (with Australia, South Korea and Japan being notable targets in the region) of informal trade sanctions levelled as retaliation for national policies that were perceived as hostile to China's 'core' interests. As emerging regional economies deepen their trade and investment relationships with China, there are concerns that China will continue to use informal sanctions for coercive purposes. China remains, globally, a rule-taker more than a rule-maker; its experiments with economic coercion have not had the same structural effects on the global trading system as has the United States' political turn against the system. Indeed, China's economic retaliation in the context of diplomatic disagreements has generally been attempted in line with the letter of agreed trade rules—though in blatant violation of their spirit. China may currently have less institution-shaping weight than the United States, but its actions are nonetheless damaging to the functioning and political viability of trade and investment rules. Moreover, a raft of problems that the role of the state in the Chinese economy (such as the role of SOEs and industrial subsidies) pose for the operation of the trade rules, have undermined trust by the United States and others in the global trade regime. Within some of China's closest economic partners, China's actions have empowered political constituencies who argue that trade and investment ties with China are a potential security liability.

The second Trump Administration has dropped any pretence or rhetoric of being a global leader of the rules-based system and is instead actively overturning global rules, norms and institutions that favour a world of 'might is right'.

The consolidation of domestic political mindsets that paint free and open trade and investment as sources of vulnerability—rather than resilience and security—is to East Asia's

[3] White House (2022) *National Security Strategy:* 18

[4] Nikkei Asia (2022) 'Transcript: President Xi Jinping's report to China's 2022 party congress', *Nikkei Asia,* 18 October: https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-s-party-congress/Transcript-President-Xi-Jinping-s-report-to-China-s-2022-party-congress

detriment, given its large dependency on international trade. While the self-interested calculations of national governments initiated the economic openness that drove much of Asia's growth after the Second World War, multilateral institutions and the political support for those institutions through international and regional cooperation underpinned that economic order. Thinking about the goals of comprehensive security in Japan, for instance, provided context for the formation of APEC. By bringing economies closer together, facilitating dialogue and building habits of cooperation and consensus-building, East Asia's economic architecture has been constructed on the deeply overlapping regional interdependencies on which its continuation relies.

c. Comprehensive regional security for the times

Comprehensive regional security elevates economic, existential and military elements as integral parts of national and regional security. It builds on 'non-traditional' security concepts but extends them to uphold the indispensability of cooperation and interdependence. It adopts economic and existential considerations as integral part of national security frameworks, rather than requiring that policy decisions in these arenas be guided by traditional or 'hard' security concerns.

Comprehensive security seeks to expand the scope of the concept of security that underpins national policies and multilateral security initiatives, rather than forcibly apply a traditional security lens to non-traditional security decisions. Separating military and non-military security into separate conceptual spaces with separate policy processes and goals risks downgrading the importance of the non-military elements. However, elevating the status of the non-traditional security elements in national security does not entail a downgrading of essential military security needs, rather ensuring that the non-military considerations are not underplayed in the pursuit of narrow military goals.

Operationalising and formalising comprehensive security goals has thus far been effective in Southeast Asia, but there is a question about whether this formula can be effective in present circumstances as well as a distance to go in securing their application more broadly in the East Asian region.

A starting point towards achieving this objective is coalescence around a key set of principles that define comprehensive security. There is ample flexibility in the scope of issues that might be folded into the framework, and this could be subject to dialogue and collaboration among government-level stakeholders in any efforts to formalise comprehensive security as the basis for regional cooperation.

Some key principles that will make the concept useful for these purposes can nonetheless be sketched out. The first of these is identification of the key elements of comprehensive regional security and their interrelationships. In the 21st century, comprehensive security is usefully seen as a tripartite concept comprising three pillars—peace, prosperity and resilience. Rather than being considered separately, these pillars are best integrated into one concept of comprehensive regional security. No one pillar should automatically dominate the other in importance; instead, in the national, regional and global policy frameworks that give effect to comprehensive regional security, the pillars should complement and reinforce one another, rather than being framed as substitutes or competing interests.

International cooperation that sustains the pursuit of economic, existential and military pillars of comprehensive regional security will also require domestic policies to maintain social cohesion and human security.

Today, East Asia is a primary arena for great power competition. Economically interdependent countries are being tacitly and explicitly encouraged to choose a side in this competition, eroding their autonomy and limiting their ability to ensure their comprehensive security. Ultimately, the intrusion of a geopolitical divide risks fracturing East Asia's economic architecture and eroding half a century's efforts to ensure a free, open, inclusive, prosperous and politically stable region. Against this backdrop, the securitisation of the economy forces economic exchange into the logical framework of zero-sum competition that only works for narrow military or geopolitical competition: one country's military advantage might come at the expense of another, but the logic of positive-sum cooperation means that only collaboration can best secure a country's economic prosperity, and its safety from the social and security impacts of health and environmental threats. Securitisation is not a path toward comprehensive security.

The idea of comprehensive security in Asia resonates with thinking and policy in Japan and Southeast Asia—indeed, the concept emerged from the practice of regional diplomacy rather than the other way round. The region—East Asia, the Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific—though, is far more complex and economically interconnected than its proponents anticipated in the post-Cold War optimism about the liberal order in the region, and these circumstances demand a refresh and redirection of the concept. Comprehensive regional security—regional states' mutually-reinforcing attainment of economic, existential and military security, achieved through rules-based multilateralism—is more than an intellectual enterprise. The concept is the starting point for a process of rehabilitating its prominence as a goal within the regional security framework and offering a vision of the security order that, while initially focused in Asia, might attract sign-on from international partners.

2. Reaffirming the principles of Asian regionalism

Comprehensive regional security provides the foundation for a new regional framework that can reinforce the importance of multilateralism, economic interdependence and open regionalism, and an inclusive and integrated approach to collective security.

The principles of consensus, cooperation and open regionalism, progressively strengthening the relationships between ASEAN members and ASEAN's dialogue partners, can become self-enforcing through cooperative processes and practices. The substance and process of a comprehensive regional security framework could take inspiration from—and can be directly derived from—ASEAN's existing instruments of cooperation, notably the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) (ASEAN, 1976; CSCAP).

Achievement of comprehensive regional security would most effectively come from within existing institutional frameworks, drawing on ongoing ASEAN efforts to shape a regional political and security architecture that takes into account the requirements and capabilities of its diverse membership. ASEAN is and should remain the custodian of this architecture. ASEAN centrality allows cooperation with and among diverse dialogue partners, including China. The starting point of any new arrangement should be leadership and ownership from within the region and should build upon norms and practices underpinning open regionalism.

Similar to the manner in which ASEAN's establishment fundamentally redirected economic development priorities across the region,[5] ASEAN's embrace of comprehensive regional security goals would refine regional priorities and efforts. ASEAN members, and ASEAN dialogue partners, have diverse experiences, backgrounds, circumstances and knowledge—integrating this diversity into the regional security architecture, would reflect all elements of the security challenges facing the Asia Pacific.

a. Existing architecture

ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) is the natural starting point for achieving comprehensive regional security. In particular, the purpose outlined in Article 1 of TAC 'to promote perpetual peace, everlasting amity and cooperation… which would contribute to their strength, solidarity and closer relationship' is at the centre of any concept of comprehensive regional security. Many of the issues that are intrinsic to the comprehensive regional security concept are already enshrined in TAC, and continue to be reflected in ASEAN-centred initiatives.

[5] Drysdale, Narjoko, St Maria, p 6

The guiding principles outlined in TAC, for example, are relevant to contemporary challenges, most prominently those enshrined in Article Two regarding: 'a. mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations'; 'b. the right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion'; and 'f. effective cooperation among themselves.' Similarly, principles including inclusiveness and support for the global rules-based economic system, multilateralism and non-discrimination are prominent in ASEAN, APEC and RCEP and are central organising principles for comprehensive regional security. TAC also reflects ASEAN's method of socialising external dialogue partners into its processes and institutions, something which is key to any processes for institutionalising comprehensive regional security as the ideational basis of collective security in Asia.

While the principles embedded in TAC aptly define proper conduct between states, TAC itself is a product of its time and in practice does little to govern the behaviour between its signatories. The present-day perception of TAC is that it is symbolic, and it has not been amended to address the critical economic and security challenges that now undermine the region's aspirations.

Moreover, the design and structure of TAC membership limits its utility as the basis of a truly multilateral mechanism for Asia-Pacific relations. TAC, fundamentally, is a non-aggression pact that operates on a multilateral basis among ASEAN members and between ASEAN and external signatories. Yet the treaty does not encompass interactions between its non-ASEAN signatories ('high contracting parties') but instead has a 'hub and spokes' logic with regard to its core ASEAN membership. A new framework to achieve comprehensive regional security could be institutionalised with ASEAN centrality, and sit alongside TAC, but evolve beyond its hub-and-spoke structure in favour of a genuinely multilateral mode of operation among its signatory states. Multilateralising the TAC among the non-ASEAN signatories in East Asia is an objective that would take some time but the process and efforts to achieve such a goal would contribute to comprehensive regional security. It would be a step-by-step process, in which some external middle powers would have incentive to join, even if as is likely the big powers would have insufficient incentive or motivation to.

In addition to this structural background there are specific features of TAC that limit its utility, in its current form, as a vehicle to renew regionalism in the manner contemporary circumstances demand. Notably, while TAC is legally binding, it is rarely enforced. While the treaty's principles provide modern ASEAN with its foundational basis, non-ASEAN TAC membership offers symbolic commitment to the region rather than its being an operational policy instrument[6]. Australia's decision to accede to TAC in 2005, for example, was made explicitly to legitimise its attendance at the East Asia Summit and made reference to TAC

[6] https://www.eria.org/ASEAN_at_50_4A.3_Yamakage_final.pdf

having 'considerable symbolic importance'.[7] Despite TAC including a Ministerial Council for conflict resolution between members, disputes have been channeled either through the International Court of Justice or the World Trade Organization (WTO). While this may be an appropriate assignment of responsibilities, it is one that needs proper delineation.

In addition to the political processes embodied in TAC being underutilized and under-defined, TAC is focused on traditional elements of inter-state behaviour, which are narrower in scope than those necessary for comprehensive regional security. TAC is an exemplary expression of the principles of inter-state conduct, to be sure. Yet the concerns to which the treaty was responding were of a qualitatively different nature to those which the region faces today. Established in 1976, TAC was designed to address a different, though not necessarily more benign, set of geopolitical circumstances. Almost 50 years later, the treaty has not been modernised to consider the new challenges to state and human security from climate change, new technologies, nor the weaponisation of economic power in a far more economically advanced and integrated regional political economy.

Comprehensive regional security might build on the spirit and the letter of TAC, embracing TAC's vision of a peaceful and cooperative order as well as the principle of open regionalism that has marked the process by which TAC has been expanded over the years. Comprehensive regional security would apply the successful elements of TAC to a broader range of emerging non-military security priorities including digital, environmental, energy, maritime, social and human rights security. The wider application of the successful elements of TAC would give more concrete effect to the ambitions outlined in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which expanded recognition of Southeast Asia's mode of inclusive political security cooperation across the Indo–Pacific. Both TAC and AOIP provide valuable direction which, if entrenched and operationalised, would contribute to regional comprehensive security.

b. Practical prerequisites

In order to continue to reflect the diversity of ASEAN and East Asian economies, and its subsequent range of priorities, three key principles will need to characterise the process of achieving comprehensive regional security. These are principles that have served regional cooperation and the ASEAN-centred regional architecture well for more than fifty years.

First, all of the pillars of comprehensive regional security are equal and integral to its achievement. Any structure to advance comprehensive regional security should integrate

[7] https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Completed_Inquiries/jsct/9august2005/chapter3

military, economic, human, social and environmental factors into new and existing platforms and processes. Comprehensive regional security therefore needs to reject the subordination of non-military security to military approaches and making broader considerations subject by default to military goals.

Second, all participants in comprehensive security arrangements should have equal weight. Any formal framework and process for advancing comprehensive regional security should be based on the ASEAN principles of consensus and equality among parties, without a country's influence over the process being proportionate to its economic or strategic weight. Naturally, countries with experience may emerge as intellectual leaders. But a central goal of comprehensive regional security rests on the principle that security is a collective enterprise: that the region will not be secure unless all of its members are and feel secure.

Third, membership of comprehensive security arrangements should be non-exclusionary and multilateral. The multilateralisation of comprehensive regional security over time will need to be initiated by participants who are genuinely committed to the process. This founding group should be responsible for suggesting the initial membership of any formal process, and of setting requirements for membership, but these requirements should not be exclusive. The requirements should follow the principles of open regionalism which have been at the centre of East Asia's political and economic integration. Observer or participant status should be available for interested parties, including international organisations and non-regional economies, at the discretion by consensus of existing membership. Most importantly, such a framework would operate on a genuinely multilateral basis: an agreement to join is an agreement with all existing members.

These three principles reflect the ethos of equality, non-discrimination and open regionalism that have been the hallmarks of ASEAN's political, security and economic cooperation platforms over the years, as well as other key multilateral forums that complement it, such as APEC. These are not just ASEAN principles; they are principles that draw on the founding principles of the postwar international order (the UN Charter and its antecedents), but honed to the circumstance and development of Asia.

Comprehensive regional security is not a new concept for the region. Any chance of success rests on the existing ASEAN-based architecture and the existing agreements between members and dialogue partners.

While the existing architecture is a strong base, it was not designed to address geopolitical challenges on the scale that now confront the region. An ambitious approach to regional agreements, with multilateral membership and scope, will be necessary to match the scale and

breadth of policy and security challenges currently in play. This will require deepening and extending the existing architecture and building on the principles already enshrined in ASEAN, TAC, AOIP and similar arrangements.

3. From concept to framework

The key pillars of comprehensive regional security—defined here as peace, prosperity and resilience—are already reflected within ASEAN's existing mechanisms for inter- and intra-ASEAN cooperation, including the ASEAN Economic Community, the ASEAN Political-Security Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. The architecture is in place to better coordinate ASEAN's pillars with the ASEAN Coordinating Council but it is dormant and needs to be activated to fulfil its potentially important role in today's circumstances.

Embodying these principles within a negotiated compact entails taking commitments already enshrined in existing agreements, including the ASEAN Charter and Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), the WTO Marrakesh Agreement, the UN Sustainable Development Goals and Convention on the Law of the Sea and TAC, and adapting and combining these to form a set of principles that allow the mutual attainment of comprehensive regional security.

On prosperity, the compact would commit to utilising the economic growth of the region to enhance the economic development and living standards of all countries in the region, including through expanded trade and interdependence.

Second, the compact would address the challenges to resilience in the Indo-Pacific arising from the potential for active conflict and the emergent existential threats posed by climate change, pandemics and resource depletion.

Finally, while taking into account the diversity within the region on the nature and sources of social cohesion, the compact should recognise the role that the rule of law, democratic political processes, and protections of the rights of individuals and minority groups play in building social cohesion, as well as the role of independent civil society, academia, and media in informing effective domestic and foreign policy.

A comprehensive regional security framework can build upon and acknowledge the goals and commitments made under existing mechanisms. This should be consistent across all pillars and all signatories.

The institutional arrangements that underpin comprehensive regional security will be crucial to its success. Comprehensive regional security will encompass existing ASEAN and ASEAN-centred substructures such as RCEP, the ASEAN+3 financial cooperation arrangements CMIM and AMRO.

RCEP, which integrates an important economic and technical cooperation pillar, could be one instrument for action on comprehensive regional security. Areas of cooperation that RCEP could deal with include, but need not be limited to, multilateral trade, governance and cross-border interests. RCEP's economic and technical cooperation pillar is able to facilitate ongoing dialogue between developmentally disparate states in a manner where all parties participate with equal membership. It provides a vehicle for discussion of long term and emerging considerations, reaching regional agreements on some matters and small group consensus on those matters which are within the governance of institutions. RCEP's existing ministerial and leader-level processes would allow political commitment from all member states without requiring additional architecture. Most importantly, RCEP can provide a platform for the region to deal with looming global trade issues.

ASEAN and its partners should maintain an ambition for regional development in pursuit of economic prosperity. It could aspire towards the vision for 'development and prosperity for all' expressed in the AOIP, towards Article 7 of the TAC's agreement to 'adopt appropriate regional strategies' to 'achieve social justice and raise the standards of living' and towards the regional achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The region should further maintain the aspiration for a region which remains resilient to all emerging threats. A starting point would be AOIP's vision 'of a region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry'. AOIP's call for 'respect for international law, such as the UN Charter, the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and other relevant UN treaties and conventions, the ASEAN Charter and ASEAN's treaties and agreements and the East Asian Summit's Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations (2011)' are important elements of comprehensive regional security.

The most promising forum for progressing comprehensive regional security is the ASEAN-centred RCEP because of the binding economic rules and reform it requires among its members that seek to deepen integration and cooperation and its inbuilt institutional infrastructure that includes a political cooperation process through ministers and potentially leaders.

A vision of comprehensive regional security could seek to reach consensus on key issues of cross-border concern. This could include cooperation on existential challenges, including climate resilience, accessibility and affordability of green energy, cooperation to address

emerging health threats and food and resource security. Cooperation could also encompass efforts to enhance connectivity and digitalisation to achieve a 'seamlessly and comprehensively connected and integrated region'. Efforts could also aim to upgrade migration frameworks to support the regional mobility of skilled labour and ensure access to higher education and training.

Strengthening multilateral economic rules and their adherence, especially where they intersect directly with national security, should be a priority. That includes joint advocacy of WTO reform, including agreement for members to engage with and consider joining the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Agreement (MPIA) as an interim measure to ensure trade disputes are able to be meaningfully addressed. National security restrictions should be codified for trade and investment, including moving to best practice in the region for transparency around and constraints upon the use of the WTO's national security exception.

Regional financial safety net and monitoring work through AMRO and CMIM could be elevated with cooperation on debt management, including apolitical regional dispute mediation and settlement functions.

a. The urgent challenge

An immediate challenge is the disruption to global trade from the United States in Donald Trump's second term. US tariffs will likely exacerbate the surge of Chinese manufacturing exports that had already been causing adjustment challenges for ASEAN economies since the China-US trade war started in President Trump's first term. Chinese goods unable to enter the US market have increasingly been flooding into ASEAN, threatening protectionist contagion. No matter how flexible markets are, how rapid growth is and how good the social protections are, a sudden flood of cheap Chinese imports diverted from US markets will cause adjustment difficulties in Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asian nations need to develop a joint and common response. Great powers prefer to deal with countries individually, if they think of them at all. Indonesia is relatively large compared with its partners in the region but will have more weight and leverage working with ASEAN which has larger influence than the sum of its ten Southeast Asian member parts. Acting together, ASEAN can exercise more effective agency and leverage globally, and that will be crucial in responding to the United States.

ASEAN and its member states have a strong interest in responding with the tools and institutions it has available, within the regional and multilateral commitments that it has negotiated in its own interests. Existing trade remedy mechanisms protect domestic industries against surges of imports and unfair pricing. These measures are allowed in international

trade agreements and do not assign blame to other countries. They are about protecting domestic industry from injury due to rapid surges in imports that result from deflationary or structural pressures. Such measures buy time to deal with the adjustment costs over a more manageable timeframe and provide space for countries to assess how to best support their manufacturing sector.

Acting collectively will be crucial to protect economic security and policy options and can be the basis for comprehensive regional security. That collective action can and should involve dialogue partners and provides the platform for ASEAN to also engage China. Dialogue with Beijing can develop an understanding of the legal, legitimate safeguards that will be needed in response to surges in import trade, as well as finding enduring solutions that avoid escalation of protectionist measures, like investing in resilient supply chains.

Collective action by ASEAN that is open to its dialogue partners could:

- reaffirm the interests in a well-functioning, open and rules-based multilateral trading system with a functioning WTO at its core;
- agree to avoid tariff retaliation or emulation and, in cooperation with partners, use and strengthen trade remedy instruments such as anti-dumping and safeguard duties that are consistent with agreed commitments against import surges; and
- agree to avoid beggar-thy-neighbour policies where individual countries introduce protectionist measures that harm other ASEAN member states and partners.

ASEAN is not yet one market. And despite ASEAN's decades-long efforts to increase economic integration among its members, eventually creating a 'single market' among them, only a little over 20 per cent of ASEAN trade is with other ASEAN countries, whereas around 40 per cent of North American trade is with other North American partners and 60 per cent of European trade occurs within Europe.

But ASEAN cannot — and should not — make the intensity of trade among its members the benchmark for success of its integration process; indeed, ASEAN's mode of integration has always rejected the inward-looking closed-shop approach typified by the EU or NAFTA/USMCA. ASEAN's own long-term plans for the achievement of the ASEAN Economic Community — as its single market ambitions are labelled — emphasise the importance of integration as a tool of creating a base for ASEAN's integration into the global economy.

The open regionalism character of ASEAN economic integration is a strength, not a weakness.

b. Spurring concerted unilateral action

Asia, comprising some of the largest and most dynamic economies at the heart of global economic disruption, has the cause and capacity collectively to defend the multilateral order and to attend to its worst problems, including climate change, while the United States goes absent from the provision of these global public goods. But there's no obvious leader.

Cooperation in Asia was significantly through non-binding and voluntary cooperation around the understanding that trade and investment reform was beneficial for individual countries, and the benefits would be compounded if done in concert. Countries committed to a common cause and acted in their own self-interest, benefiting others. The organising goal was the 'Bogor Goals' agreed to at the APEC summit in 1994 in Bogor of free and open trade and investment by 2010 for industrialised economies and by 2020 for developing countries.

The Bogor Goals spurred concerted unilateralism in East Asia and the Pacific. That brought collective action in Asia among a very diverse group of countries with political differences and rivalry. What's needed now is a new organising goal, or 'Bogor Goals 2.0'.

The green transition imperative may be able to work as the new organising principle with concerted unilateral action solving the collective action problem. Free trade and investment in green goods, credits, technology and financing can be achieved through cooperation to harmonise regulatory settings across borders to unlock private investment in the technologies and climate mitigation strategies that are needed to make Southeast Asia's growth sustainable (Armstrong and Drysdale, 2025)[8].

The goal of a Single Green Market would bring together the domestic and behind-the-border green transition agenda with the regulatory reform and trade policy agendas. Working towards consensus on a goal like this would help the coordination of national and regional policy efforts and offer a pathway for long-term collaboration and engagement between ASEAN and the broader multilateral system.

4. Summary

Asia has a number of mechanisms for dialogue, cooperation and rule-making that encompass issues across the three key pillars of comprehensive regional security—peace, prosperity and resilience. What is missing is an overarching political consensus among regional stakeholders to commit to these forums and mechanisms as the basis of resolving conflicts, in the pursuit

[8] https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/12/15/making-australia-a-partner-in-the-global-asean-vision/

of prosperity through open trade and investment, and the forging of rules about trade and investment that strike the right balance between prudent considerations of national security while promoting fundamentally open and competitive markets that secure peace through interdependence.

The reinvigoration of Asian regionalism faces challenges that are greater than they have been in many decades. It is nonetheless an urgent goal to incorporate all regional stakeholders into a strengthened system of multilateral rule-making, dispute resolution and cooperation, as the collapse in trust between the two Asia-Pacific great powers—the United States and China—and the uncertainty about their confidence in, and support for, the rules-based multilateralism and economic interdependence that has promoted peace and prosperity in the Asia Pacific over many decades.

The circumstances that confront the region are the product of political decisions made within the intellectual constraints of a particular rationality, but can be ameliorated through forward-looking political leadership that appeals to another, with more positive outcomes.

Accepting the challenge of such leadership offers opportunities for all of the key players with a stake in the future of Asian regionalism.

At its core, ASEAN is an open region that promotes, strengthens and relies on the multilateral trading system, a system in need of reform and modernisation. ASEAN has already established a powerful tool for operationalising the economic elements of comprehensive regional security: RCEP, which has a trade liberalisation focus, an economic cooperation mandate and a built-in platform for political consultation.

An ASEAN-centred comprehensive regional security arrangement will need to encompass East Asia and actively build habits of cooperation with the trans-Asian interests of bringing an economic underpinning to the Indo-Pacific idea and to manage the increasingly fraught trans-Pacific relationship.

While the leadership of ASEAN's core membership and of its dialogue partners will be essential to the success of the vision outlined here, there are powerful reasons for ASEAN's middle power partners, and even for China and the United States, to play a constructive role in efforts on this agenda. For China in particular, recent years have been marked by a serious deterioration of trust and cooperation with key partners with which it has been involved in diplomatic and trade disputes—leaving aside the strategic rivalry which it now confronts with the United States. For its part, the United States has dismayed even some of its closest allies—those with whom it shares anxieties about China's growing influence—by abandoning its traditional leadership role in building out multilateral institutions and their rule-making

functions. The United States is now a source of great uncertainty for ASEAN and East Asia and there is perhaps incentive in mobilising Asia's agency via ASEAN to secure its global interests.

5. Outline of the book

The chapters that follow in this volume examine important aspects of the idea of comprehensive regional security that have been raised in the discussion above.

The challenge for ASEAN in mobilising around an agenda for comprehensive regional security to better deal with the geopolitical and economic problems it now faces is non-trivial. In Chapter 2, Rizal Sukma situates that challenge in a region in which national identity and security had historically to overcome deep ethnic and other divides and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of others was critical to securing the external environment. The principles and practice of diplomacy within and by ASEAN is now being undermined by the return of great power politics. The contest for influence in the region between the United States and China in all theatres has internal implications for Southeast Asian states. Security is increasingly becoming a zero-sum contest rather than a win-win cooperative undertaking. In this situation, the weaponisation of economic policy is becoming a real threat as states turn attention more to the military dimension of security. The comprehensive nature of security is under pressure. This emerging reality requires the reconceptualisation of security thinking in the region, both within ASEAN and beyond. ASEAN succeeded in building the security architecture informed by ASEAN's security thinking, norms and practices. The danger is that that architecture and those practices are being undermined by great power rivalry. While it may be time to bring back comprehensive security to the forefront of policy discussion, the question is how that can be done successfully.

Elsewhere in the region, the idea of comprehensive national security found early expression in the approach to policy strategy in Japan. In Chapter 3, Tomohiko Satake and Arata Kuno trace the origins of Japanese policy back to the Ohira administration in the late 1970s when a major paper commissioned from the Nomura Research Institute first set out the concept of comprehensive security and how it might help shape Japanese diplomacy in a time of major change in the international environment. This was the period after the first oil shock, a period that saw the ascendancy of North-South issues and when Japan was navigating the beginning of transition in its status in its postwar relationship with the United States. Non-traditional security concerns were on the rise. The importance of the multilateral order and Japan's role in it were central to strategic interests. In the past two decades, the rise of China and the contest between the major powers has dramatically changed the international environment in which Japan must secure its national interests. The notion of economic security that now dominates thinking is different from that of comprehensive security. But, Satake and Kuno

suggest, in a period of deep and complex regional interdependence, the precepts of comprehensive security retain their importance in managing Japan's global circumstance and are a basis for common cause with its regional partners.

More than any other region in the world the security of Southeast Asia's economy is threatened by US-China geopolitical rivalry and Trump's trade war, In Chapter 4, Nguyen Anh Duong and Vo Tri Thanh spell out these dangers —trade fragmentation, the weaponization of trade policy, the breakdown of cooperation on climate change —and how they might be best dealt with. The cost of Trump's trade war for countries like Vietnam and the other economies in ASEAN will be very large. Support for multilateralism and commitment to multilateral solutions will be difficult but it is the first reference point. Next, RCEP offers a vehicle for leveraging East Asia's regional and multilateral interests. Finally, consolidation of production and consumption in the regional economy can also provide a counterweight to Trump's trade shock. Engaging the big powers from a regional base, Duong and Vo argue, provides a counterweight and the best strategy.

The overarching threat of climate change and managing the transition to a carbon neutral economy is now a central element in achieving comprehensive regional security. In Chapter 5, Hiroshi Matsushima and Chi Ta observe that the transition to a renewable energy future fundamentally changes the linkages between energy and other elements of regional security. While the vulnerability associated with dependence on fossil fuel imports characterizes the carbon energy era, for example, the transition to a renewable energy future confronts the sovereignty of energy policy issue and demands closer cooperation through regional energy trade and the building of complementary infrastructure. Their modelling of the transition to a zero carbon economy in ASEAN, highlights the importance of regional cooperation through expanding cross-border energy trade, collaborative infrastructure development, and specialization according to
comparative advantage, can significantly reduce energy transition costs.

Geopolitical tensions have heightened concerns about resilience to uncertainty in the supplies of minerals that are considered critical to the manufacture of goods embodying new and digital technologies, Chandra Tri Putri and Dionisius Narjoko review the relationship between critical minerals, geopolitical risk, and regional policy responses in Chapter 6. Using a framework adopted by the European Union, they examine the cases of the US imposition of tariffs on aluminium imports (in 2018) and the Chinese export ban on antimony (in 2024) and how these measures reconfigured global trade and the assessment of critical risks, observing that measures that were intended to enhance domestic mineral security may create complex ripple effects throughout global supply chains, that increase vulnerabilities elsewhere in the value chain rather than reduce them. They argue that critical mineral vulnerabilities can be mitigated through collaborative approaches that leverage complementary resource endowments

and industrial capabilities across the East Asian region and propose a framework for enhancing resilience to critical minerals vulnerabilities specifically designed for ASEAN and East Asia.

As with trade, foreign investment flows with which trade supply chains are inextricably linked are highly sensitive to the pressures towards geopolitical fragmentation. In Chapter 7, Archanun Kohpaliboon and Juthathip Jongwanich analyse the structure of investment in semiconductor supply chains in response to rising geopolitical fragmentation. While China remains a large investment destination, ranking fifth as a destination for foreign investment in the semiconductor industry, smaller players in East Asia, such as Malaysia, have risen up the investment rankings in response to strategies to diversify around concentration on Chinese supplies and avoid barriers to Chinese exports in the US market. The role of Southeast Asian production is soaring and the region offers opportunity for further rapid growth if US policies to constrain Chinese inputs into regional production bases if push back against US decoupling strategies can be restrained successfully.

China plays a central role in East Asian supply chains for electronics and, increasingly, a range of other high value products like motor vehicles. In Chapter 8. Song Hong, Gao Lin Yun and Su Qing Yi examine the origins of disruptions in East Asian supply chains. They distinguish between disruptions that are a consequence of government policies in pursuit of political objectives (subjective disruptions) and those which are a result of shocks like the pandemic, natural disasters and accidents (objective disruptions). They argue that supply chain risks are best resolved multilaterally and that, where multilateral resolution is difficult, the United States and China should work bilaterally to promote healthy competition and avoid the extension of security restrictions on trade.

The question of what is needed in regional or multilateral rules to once again give policymakers and communities confidence in high trade shares, or concentrated markets, is addressed by Sam Hardwick and Shujiro Urata in Chapter 10. They argue that economic security policies can be better calibrated to retain the benefits of openness through greater cooperation and coordination, by managing both positive and negative spillovers in international commerce. Incorporating flexible plurilateral approaches is the most practical way forward given the stalemate in multilateral rulemaking at the WTO.

Reforming the dispute settlement system is the most important challenge given the multilateral trade rules are currently not universally enforceable. The Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) is an example of a successful plurilateral arrangement that is acting as a workaround for the non-functioning dispute settlement system. Expanding membership of MPIA and reinforcing norms around security exception restraint are insurance while the dispute settlement system is fixed and consensus is forged in the use and constraints around what reasonable exceptions might be.

Those multilateral rules and norms pursued through plurilateral arrangements, coupled with domestic frameworks that better balance economic and security interests, can help to reassert and elevate the economic imperative in the international economic order. Policy choices in response to the global disruptions need to avoid protectionism while recognising the need for *pragmatic pluralism*, according to Shiro Armstrong and Danny Quah, that is derived from an acknowledgement of new priorities—resilience, national security, jobs—and seeks reallocation of resources towards such justifiable purposes.

Getting domestic frameworks right needs to be complemented by actions that help preserve the economic imperative. In Chapter 11, Armstrong and Quah argue that Third Nations can act collectively to strengthen the multilateral system, engaging where they can with the Great Powers. That will help to preserve policy space for Third Nations, politically and economically constrain the Great Powers, even by isolating them.

As this volume argues, Third Nation agency and comprehensive regional security is most likely to succeed in Asia if it is driven by ASEAN principles and cooperation. In Chapter 12, Mari Pangestu and Julia Tijaja review the assets that ASEAN has in place to manage economic, political and security cooperation in East Asia, and explain how they might be better operationalised and promote stability, resilience, prosperity and security. Key to such efforts lie in asserting ASEAN centrality through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the RCEP cooperation agenda.

Finally, Yose Rizal Damuri and Mohd Faiz Abdullah bring the volume together in Chapter 13 where they review the opportunities and difficulties in delivering comprehensive regional security for ASEAN. They argue that a comprehensive security framework should be used by ASEAN to integrate the military, economic, climate change and other elements of regional security and be deployed as a basis for engagement with partners, including the United States and China. They stress the importance of ASEAN's adherence to international law and norms (the UN Charter and principles, UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the WTO, for example) and the importance of the international rules-based order to regional stability. They suggest how established internal ASEAN coordination can be strengthened and ASEAN-East Asian political frameworks (such as the East Asia Summit and RCEP) can be leveraged to achieve comprehensive security goals despite internal regional and external difficulties. They conclude that initiatives to strengthen comprehensive regional security within ASEAN will be crucial to pushing back against geopolitical fragmentation and political stability in Asia and the Pacific.

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