

TENSION MANAGEMENT IN THE  
ASIA - PACIFIC REGION  
A BRIEF NOTE

~~1977~~ 1978



II, a year ago, it was possible to observe the drift which seemed to characterize the uncertain flux of international relations within the Asia-Pacific region with some degree of equanimity, it was mainly because of the general expectation that the new administration in the US, elections in Japan and a firmer hold of the new Chinese leadership on the process of China's reorientation towards its development needs, would soon show with some degree of clarity the major vectors which would give direction to the play of contradictory pressures and processes of change in the region. It has now become obvious that it will take a much longer time before the US will be able to sort itself out and to make the hard decisions in the foreign policy, energy and economic fields that will result in a posture towards the Asia-Pacific region that is both adequate and credible. The shift in Japanese domestic politics and in the composition of its power structure in response to domestic and external problems, the psychological impact of this shift, as well as of the growing sense of national insecurity, aggravated by the uncertainty about the manner in which Japan's longer term energy requirements will have to be met, will at best only slowly manifest itself in new national attitudes. And for all the spurts and pauses which we have witnessed in the emergence and consolidation of a new leadership in China, its external policy projections will remain enigmatic, and for a considerable period to come we will only be able to speculate about their significance. These uncertainties, this absence of leadership anywhere in the Asia-Pacific region, force us to speculate about the possible points at which reactions to this continued drift may affect negatively and irreversibly, the flow of events in the Asia-Pacific region, and which would turn the situation in the region into something that is unrecognizable from what it is today, and from what it has been since the end of World War II.

As far as South East Asia is concerned, that period would be reached when the peoples and nations in the region would in despair give up their hope of ever being able to work out viable forms of regional cooperation which could span the great ideological divide that now separates them, and when they accept as a permanent condition the fact of a divided South East Asia. It has become obvious that the prospects for stability in South East Asia will not only be determined by factors which are internal to the region, but by external factors as well.

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\*) Although the author is an adviser to the National Planning Agency, the views expressed here are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of that institution or of the Indonesian Government.



There is little chance for the realization of the aspirations of the ASEAN countries to see South East Asia develop into a zone of peace and neutrality, unless major power rivalries in the Indian ocean can be kept within reasonable bounds, and unless tensions in the North-Western Pacific can be reduced to a lower and more manageable level. The relatively short period after the end of the Vietnam war has already shown that it will most likely take some time before it will become possible for the South East Asia nations to work out modes and mechanisms for cooperation both within the region and outside, for instance in dealing with the North-South issue. Contrary to some initial expectations that this could be done rather quickly, it has now become clear that for some time we will have to live with two South East Asias. It will however, make a great deal of difference for the future of the region, whether the vision of such regional cooperation could be kept alive, while working out patiently and persistently some of the more immediate problems and suspicions, and while at the same time articulating the common interests among what are really two sets of alternative and competing development strategies. Or whether such a vision is discarded early on as impractical, or undesirable. This would remove an essential check which could help keep local or transitory problems of which many exist, and many more will inevitably arise, within manageable bounds. Continued major power tensions outside South East Asia would automatically shatter such hopes, would set the region on a course of increasing polarisation, and would draw in major power involvement, thus destroying the growth of conditions necessary for the region, finally, after more than three centuries of foreign interference, to come into its own.

Putting aside, for the purposes of this paper, the question of the lowering of big power rivalries in the Indian Ocean, we should now consider the Northern Pacific. This area obviously constitutes a fulcrum in the power relationships of the whole Asia-Pacific region.

The continued uncertainty about US policy towards Taiwan, about the speed and seriousness of her effort towards "normalisation" of her relations with China, and about her own energy policy, the scheduled withdrawal of US troops from South Korea, the increased strength and level of Soviet naval power around Japan, Japan's heightened sense of insecurity with regard to the regional balance of power, the potential for conflict on the Korean peninsula, intensified Soviet pressures on Japan and her increasing friction with the US on matters of trade, as well as the nuclear reprocessing dispute, have each in its own way sharply increased the anxiety with which Japan and the two divided nations in the region, North and South Korea, and China and Taiwan, are following the unfolding of events. Without much strain on the imagination, it is possible to envisage, however tentatively, some of the points at which reactions to perceived threats on the part of any of these countries, would change in a fundamental way the prevailing power configuration.



reached,

For China, such a point would be/ when she decides that improving relations with the Soviet Union would reduce the internal political cost of an "unresolved" Taiwan issue, and the longer term cost of inavailability of US technology, credit and skills. For Japan, when growing anxiety and frustration has weakened the LDP to the point where it would lose its capacity to keep Japan's extreme right-wing under control. This might, among other things, open the door to a major shift in Japan's defense and foreign policy posture; for South Korea and Taiwan, when they decide that nuclear weapons are the only reliable guarantee for their security.

These are of course very "iffy" propositions, and each of these countries is still some distance away from these points. Still their relevance is sufficiently visible on the horizon of possibilities, so as to make us aware of the limits beyond which continued drift would irreversibly change the balance of power in the entire Pacific region, including South East Asia and the Southern Pacific.

At the same time, it is also clear that the non-hegemony clauses included in both the US-China and Japan- China communiqués, reflect a fundamental reality in the Asia-Pacific region. Any attempt to stem the drift, to search for a mutually acceptable basis for multiple co-existence, and for a consensus with regard to the limits to which disputes can be pressed without triggering threats of violence, will have to take place collectively, and not under the aegis of any of the major military powers of the region. This will require continued multilateral consultations and information-exchange at a much higher level of intensity than has been the case so far. The communication to one another of one's own perception of existing or new problems, of possible clashes of national interests, or of those arising out of the, correct or faulty, perception of another country's intentions, the perception of possible threats, the communication of plans, aspirations and fears, as well as the potential cost of adjustment or non-adjustment, take on increasing importance as uncertainty grows.

It may therefore well be, that the time has come for the countries in the Northern Pacific to consider the desirability and feasibility of a regional forum in which, on a regular basis, such multilateral consultations could take place. Such a North Pacific Regional Forum or Conference would have to comprise representatives of the governments of all countries in the northern Pacific region ( Japan, Soviet Union, China, North & South Korea, The US and Canada ). Even though in its initial stage it would not be an organization for collective security, there is nothing to prevent it from constituting itself on the basis of article 52 of the United Nations Charter ( see appendix ). Even though such a forum would be incapable of taking collective action, the opportunity that it provides for effective multilateral open communication might reduce tensions and fears, and might facilitate the search for new, informal



structures of multiple coexistence. It could, in itself, also be a small, additional deterrent to violence, without precluding necessary change, and without foreclosing the opportunity to accomodate more fundamental processes of change in the region.

Japan, China and the Soviet Union would conceivably benefit from the opportunity such a forum would provide China, to state her perceptions of the proper balance within a China-Japan-USSR triangle, including the implications of higher Soviet naval force levels and of problems like the exploitation of the Siberian oil and gas deposits. It could also help clarify for Japan, the regional and Pacific-wide implications of the strengthening of Japan's self defence forces in response to American pressures to do more. It could, in addition, provide a greater latitude to the US in finding ways to shed her formal mutual defense treaty with Taiwan, within an informal multilateral setting which would discourage the application of force in the development by Taiwan and China, of peaceable and mutually beneficial relationships among themselves. Likewise, it could conceivably reduce the fear with which North and South Korea look at each other, and Japan looks at both.

The Pacific region will continue to be an area of major change and tension, not only resulting from efforts to maximize one's advantage and to exploit weakness of others, affecting the international balance of forces, but also resulting from processes of profound political, social, economic and psychological change, taking place within almost all countries in the region, big and small, industrial or developing, affecting national as well as external policies. These processes, while bound to affect international power relations, are in most cases not amenable to the application of external power. All countries within the Asia-Pacific will therefore have to learn to live with the external manifestations of these essentially domestic processes, to learn to live with a degree of vulnerability, and to learn to manage their fears, nationally as well as internationally, in ways which will make peaceful and creative adjustment possible.

It would seem that no country in the Northern Pacific region or anywhere else in the Asia-Pacific area is particularly desirous, or has the strength and the stomach, deliberately to upset the existing balance of forces. Not one of them wants to be caught in a revolutionary chain of events, leading to such an upset. Building up a greater collective capacity in the Northern-Pacific area, capable of managing change without recourse to violence, therefore becomes essential. The establishment of a North-Pacific Forum may at present still be beyond reach. But if it will become possible at all, it can only be brought about as the result of an initiative by Japan. It remains to be seen of course, whether after its first independent foray into the realm of international politics with the pronouncement of the "Fukuda Doctrine" towards South East Asia, Japan would want to take a second major initiative soon. Still no country can afford the consequences of continuing drift, least of all Japan.



Though an essential facilitating mechanism, a North Pacific Forum or Conference would not be the only instrumentality needed for the effective management of relationships in the Asia-Pacific region. Connecting almost all parts of the Pacific are the investment, trade and aid relations between the various countries. There are the frictions in the triangular relationship between the USA, Japan and Australia, as a result of changing competitive positions. There is the growing competition between Japan, South Korea and Taiwan in the sale of manufactured goods. All these relations have been seriously affected by the world recession and the sluggishness of economic recovery. The process of recovery itself has been in many ways unequal, leading to additional shifts and tensions in those relationships, as well as in those with the developing nations of the region. Japan's planned growth targets are bound to affect in important, but various ways, the interests of most countries in the region. The conference on the law of the sea has brought into focus the question of "access" by the maritime powers in the Pacific to the Indian ocean. The general adoption of a 200 mile economic zone may at some point also lead to increased industrial power competition and rivalry in the Southern Pacific.

In addition, China's newly increased interest in foreign trade and the importation of technology, may lead to additional changes in the pattern of economic relationship, leading to new areas of competition and adjustment. It may also reopen the question whether Japan would want to work towards a closer economic relationship with China or with the Soviet Union, and visa-versa, with significant consequences for the whole region.

Finally, there is the North-South question in its Asia-Pacific aspect. The failure to make much progress at the Paris meeting, as well as in the subsequent United Nations Review Session, has raised the question whether it might not be more practicable to look for solutions of, at least, some of the more pressing problems in the North-South dialogue within a regional setting, without severing it from its global context. It is clear that there is very little prospect for stability in the South East Asia region, unless the problem of continued rural stagnation and poverty is more adequately dealt with, and unless economic development can be redirected to provide employment for a rapidly increasing labour force. It is doubtful whether this will be possible without a much more effective and larger transfer of real resources, including technology, and a more rational redeployment of industries throughout the Pacific region at a politically acceptable cost. There seems to be no other way to prevent the political disaffection of an increasingly large cohort of young people from the prevailing political systems, irrespective of their ideology. The destabilizing effects of such internal threats to the stability in the region, might once again, possibly against their own inclinations, pull the major powers into South East Asia, thus compounding the North-South tensions with those between East and West.



These shifting patterns of economic relationships within the Asia-Pacific region in a context of increasing interdependence, suggest the need for an OECD type of research organization, capable of monitoring trends and changes in economic relationships, capable also of helping governments to anticipate and possibly adjust the possible impact of plans and policies of other nations which are bound to affect them, and in that way increase the regional capacity to avoid, or if unavoidable, to manage the tensions arising out of these changes. Cooperating with similar, autonomous research institutions at the sub-regional level, such an institution should also be capable of looking at the Asia-Pacific region as a whole, and of suggesting policies serving the overall interests of the whole region, as it is hardly likely that the full potential of the Asia-Pacific region could be realized simply as a result of bilateral negotiations. There can be little doubt that the establishment of a North Pacific Forum or Conference, and a strong OECD type research capability serving the whole region, would enhance the collective capacity for tension management. These institutions might eventually become, together with other already existing institutions and networks, important building blocks for a structure for peace and equitable development in the Asia-Pacific region.

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## APPENDIX

Article 52 of the United Nations Charter states :

1. Nothing in the present Charter precludes the existence of regional arrangements or agencies for dealing with such matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security as are appropriate for regional action, provided that such arrangements or agencies and their activities are consistent with the Purposes and principles of the United Nations.
2. The members of the United Nations entering into such arrangements or constituting such agencies shall make every effort to achieve pacific settlement of local disputes through such regional arrangements or by such regional agencies before referring them to the Security Council.
3. The Security Council shall encourage the development of pacific settlement of local disputes through such regional arrangements or by such regional agencies either on the initiative of the states concerned or by reference from the Security Council.
4. This Article in no way impairs the application of Article 34 and 35.