



Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies



SPECIAL ASSESSMENT

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Asia's Bilateral Relations

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Editor's Note

S A T U P . L I M A Y E

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Asia's bilateral relations are as numerous and diverse as the countries of this vast region. Generalizations based on the examples of intra-Asian bilateral relations considered in this *Special Assessment* are therefore susceptible to being simplistic or banal. Still, a number of useful observations about Asia's bilateral relations may be made.

First, Asia's bilateral relationships constitute an important feature of the regional security environment. For all the din of discussion about an Asian concert of powers, possible condominiums, security communities, multilateral institutions, and various conceptual approaches to managing regional peace and prosperity, a basic element of Asia's security topography remains bilateral relationships. Indeed, these bilateral relationships, while they are not quite "building blocks" of a possible regional "security architecture," are certainly a variable in how and what kind of security management approaches evolve in Asia.

Second, Asia's bilateral relations are changing due to factors such as the end of the Cold War, different power trajectories, domestic changes, and economic compulsions. Mitchell Reiss, Director of Policy Planning at the U.S. State Department, alluded to the dynamics of intra-regional bilateral relations in a May 2004 speech at the Asia Foundation in Washington, D.C. While noting the improvement of U.S. relations with major Asian countries, he also noted "these states [Japan, China, India, Russia] are *themselves* [emphasis in original] remaking their relations with one another." The "remaking" of bilateral relationships is far from problem-free or complete. Historical animosities and other disputes continue to shape Asia's bilateral relationships. However, prospects for military conflict among the relationships considered in this assessment are low. The relative weight of politico-military factors in shaping Asia's bilateral relations has dropped as economic considerations have risen to the fore. John Ravenhill, in a 2003 article entitled *The New Bilateralism in the Asia Pacific*, notes "In the past four years...more than 20 preferential schemes involving two or more Western Pacific countries have been put forward."

Though, not all of these arrangements are intra-Asian, many are. Even absent formal bilateral agreements, trade and investment are increasingly shaping, generally positively, intra-regional bilateral relations.

There are also several implications of Asia's bilateral relations for the United States. First, for the foreseeable future, no Asian bilateral relationship poses a serious threat to American interests. This contrasts with the period of the Cold War when Sino-Soviet relations, at least until their falling out in the

mid-1960s, posed a direct and real challenge to American interests. Also problematic during those times were close India-Russia relations. Today, however, there are elements in both of these relationships that are not welcome from the American perspective—such as rhetoric and actions designed to “counterbalance” the U.S. and Russian arms sales to India and China. But neither Russia-China nor Russia-India relations pose grave threats to American security. On the whole, parties to Asian bilateral relationships see the United States as more important to their interests than their bilateral partner. Asian states therefore sometimes seek to use their relationship with Washington to influence its relationship with a “local” state, but this very attempt also gives the United States an opportunity to influence Asia’s bilateral relations in ways consistent with American interests.

A second point of relevance to U.S. interests is that improvements in relations between the United States and most Asian regional countries outpace improvements in relations between Asian states—though this is not an even trend. Indeed, the very unevenness in the improvement of relations between the United States and Asian states creates difficulties for key relationships in the region. An example of this situation is New Zealand-Australia relations. The improvement in U.S.-Australia relations has outpaced improvements in U.S.-New Zealand relations. One result of this discrepancy has been to create some differences between Canberra and Wellington. The Japan-Republic of Korea, China-Russia, and India-China bilateral relationships face a similar situation.

Finally, the evolution of Asia’s bilateral relations are important to the extent that they bear on key U.S. regional priorities including consolidating relations with allies, friends and partners; great power cooperation; dealing with rising powers; and building coalitions of the willing.

These analyses are the contribution of an APCSS teaching and research faculty with keen insights, expertise, and experience on Asia-Pacific security issues. We hope this and other APCSS publications will inform the deliberations of policy makers and the analytical community on both sides of the Pacific.