

Structural Dilemmas of Multilateral Security Mechanisms in East Asia: A Security Governance Perspective

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the role and limitations of multilateral security mechanisms in East Asia from a security governance perspective. Although economic interdependence and institutionalized cooperation have expanded in the region, security relations remain constrained by great-power rivalry, sovereignty sensitivities, and fragmented threat perceptions. Focusing on regional forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, as well as issue-specific mechanisms including the Six-Party Talks and South China Sea consultations, the paper examines why these institutions persist despite their limited conflict-resolution capacity. Using an institutional analytical framework, the study argues that low levels of legalization, consensus-based decision-making, and weak enforcement mechanisms facilitate inclusive participation but restrict substantive security governance. Rather than functioning as instruments of collective security, East Asian multilateral mechanisms primarily serve as process-oriented platforms for dialogue, confidence-building, and risk management. Their continued relevance lies in managing uncertainty and reducing the risk of escalation under conditions of intensified great-power competition.

Keywords

East Asian security, multilateral security mechanisms, security governance, institutional design, great-power competition

1. Introduction

Economic interdependence increased in East Asia since the end of the cold war, and the systems of regional cooperation are swayed. Nevertheless, the direction of its security order has been completely different. However, in spite of the fact that the institutionalized cooperation is growing fast in the field of trade, investment and functional governance, the relations of security in the region are crippled by the historical legacies, the issues of sovereignty, and inexhaustible strategic distrust [1]. The old North Korean nuclear crisis, repeated violence in the South China Sea and East China Sea and continued uncertainty in the Taiwan Strait have increased low-intensity insecurity in the region which had been prevailing long [2]. Over the past years, the intensifying strategic conflict between the United States and China has made the situation in the region more complex, both in terms of the structure of power and the problem of security matters, and turned security

policies into the framework of great power conflict. It is against this background that a set of multilateral security structures have surfaced and evolved in East Asia that is a multi-layered institutional complex, which is believed to be very essential in facilitating dialogue, developing trust as well as deterring the escalation of conflict. Even as these multilateral security mechanisms have been growing in size and strengthening their political leverage, their performance in substance regulation of security has become the centre of considerable debate. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS) and similar mechanism of a defense dialogue offer a permanent platform of consultation, but their decision making is rather saved through consensus and their institutionalisation and execution rates are not very high. These mechanisms tend to be symbolic and procedural or risk management tool under the multiple pressures of the great power competition, sovereignty based approaches toward security perceptions and limited regional trust, instead of being useful instruments to settle disputes. The systematic discrepancy between institutional form and the results of the governance is the gist of the paradox of East Asian security governance. In this paper, it shall be analyzed regarding the logic and structural constraints in operations of how East Asian multilateral security mechanisms operate under the paradigm of security governance. In this research, institutional analysis will be synthesized to determine the impact of power structures, institutional design, and security perceptions into the performance and constraints of multilateral security mechanisms in the area.

2. Theoretical Perspective and Analytical Framework

2.1 Multilateral Security Mechanisms from a Security Governance Perspective

This paper will be based on a security governance perspective by discussing the role and limitations of multilateral security arrangements in East Asia. In contrast to classic methods of security these days that tend to lean more towards balancing power, deterrence and alliance politics, security governance focuses on managing security agendas via formalized practices, commonality and through continual coordination of various participants without a central governing body [3]. In this light the multilateral security mechanisms are not judged in terms of their ability to settle conflicts but they assessed in terms of their ability to organize interactions, minimizing uncertainty and handling risks in complicated security settings. When applied to East Asia, the security governance approach makes one recognize the peculiar features of the existing cooperation in the regional security, with comparably low rates of both legalization and legalism. The multilateral security mechanisms in the region are more based on dialogue, consultation and confidence building measures as opposed to rules and implementation mechanisms. Consequently, their most dominant elected role in governance is frequently the process-oriented cooperation as opposed to the outcome-based conflict resolution. This line of analysis is just adequate to the explanation of the continuation and expansion of multilateral security mechanisms in East Asia even when they have very little ability to produce conclusive security results.

2.2 Structural Conditions of Security Governance in East Asia

The relevance of the security governance theory to the East Asian region should be placed in the context of the structural circumstances of the region [4]. To begin with, the power structure of the region is characterized by high levels of asymmetry as the dominant powers and primarily China and the United States have a disproportionate power in decision making regarding the security agendas and the institutional dynamics. Although the middle and smaller states are actively engaged in the process of multilateral mechanisms, their ability to influence the substantive outcomes is limited by the more overall strategic rivalries. Second, the East Asian security institutions are weakly institutionalized and have little strength in their enforcement. The decision making processes are very much based on consensus and there are high concerns of sovereignty and non interfering. Although such arrangements reduce the political costs of participation and are more inclusive, they hold back the responsiveness of multilateral mechanisms to security crises or to bind unilateral behavior by states. Third, there is still a high level of fragmentation in security perceptions in East Asia. Contrasting threat determinations, past resentment, and unclear formation of identity, further develop national security preferences, negatively affecting the formation of common strategic perceptions. These aspects limit the internalization of shared security norms and destroy the efficiency of the multilateral security structures as tools of collective security.

2.3 An Analytical Framework for Explaining Institutional Dilemmas

Based on the above-presented view of security governance and the structural conditions, this paper presents a tri-dimensional analytical model to provide an explanation of the dilemmas experienced by multilateral mechanisms of the security governance of East Asian security. The former is a dimension that concerns power structure, and is concerned with how great-power competition crowds out the institutional space within which multilateral cooperation can take place. With the increase in strategic rivalry, multilateral mechanisms are becoming politicized and instrumentalized such that they no longer have the autonomy and effectiveness to function effectively. The second dimension deals with institutional design, which focuses on the low levels of legalization, consensus decision making, and the lack of enforcement mechanisms which create governance deficits. These are the characteristics of design that allow extensive involvement but, at the same time, limit the abilities of institutions to achieve binding results. The third dimension takes into account security perceptions and norms, and examines how the divergence in threat perception, concepts of security focused on sovereignty, and historical memories hinder the process of building trust and internalizing norms. In this situation, it is difficult to lie out of procedural cooperation to more substantive security governance through multilateral means.

3. Multilateral Security Mechanisms in East Asia: Types and Institutional Practices

3.1 Regional Multilateral Security Mechanisms

Regionally, East Asia has come up with various multilateral security systems which are meant to facilitate dialogue, increase transparency and confidence building among the states involved. The core institution of regional multilateral security governance includes institutions like the ASEAN Regional forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). These are typified by long membership, open agendas, and consultation aspect as opposed to binding commitments [5]. The peculiarity of such regional mechanisms is the application of consensus-based decision-making and voluntary co-operation. Although this design reduces barriers to entry and allows the entry of varied actors, the design also restricts the institution responsiveness and narrows ability to overcome acute security crises. Practically, these mechanisms are mainly in the form of platforms of dialogue and agenda-setting that help bring about transparency and communication but seldom translate into enforceable results. Their institutional business is characterised by inclination towards incrementalism and risk aversion, which are in line with the larger norms of the government of the regional security.

3.2 Issue-Specific and Functional Security Mechanisms

Besides the forums that are region-wide in nature, East Asia has also utilized the issue-oriented and functional mechanisms to face certain security related issues. The Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear issue can be seen as a glaring case of a problem-oriented multilateral mechanism used to help manage a high-stakes security crisis [6]. On the same note, the consultative arrangements embracing the South China Sea such as, Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations, are examples of efforts to formalize coordinative practices over disputed security matters [7]. They are usually problem-based mechanisms that are brought about by short-term security demands and are characterized by a high level of attention than wider regional platforms. Nonetheless, their performance highly depends on the strategic decision-making of the large powers and the readiness of the involved states to limit the unilateral behavior. Such mechanisms may promote coordination and communication when there is an alignment of political interests; when there is a mismatch of strategic interests, they are stalled or failed, which demonstrates the weakness of multilateral cooperation in times of increased competition.

3.3 Institutional Characteristics and Governance Modalities

Comparative study of issue specific and regional mechanisms shows that there are various similar institutional features. To begin with, its East Asian multilateral security structures are characterized by low institutionalization and limited enforcement capability. Fetishized regulations are quite minimal, compliance frameworks tend to be primitive, and institutional regulation is always deferential to the notion of state sovereignty. Second, the mechanisms assume process-based governance, which centers its attention on

confidence-building measures (CBMs), sharing information, and spreading norms, instead of the conflict resolution based on outcomes. Although such practices can enhance stability in the periphery, it is finding it difficult to overcome deeply-rooted structural conflicts. Third, these structures complete essential symbolic and communicative functions. Institutionalizing frequent communication among actors of security thus, they lessen the misperceptions, de-escalate tensions even without substantive breakthroughs. Such functions are used to explain why these mechanisms are still intact and in fact they are on the increase contrary to the constant doubt about the efficacy. According to the above identified institutional practices, East Asian multilateralism follows limited parameters that are predetermined by the asymmetries of power, sovereignty sensibility, and fragmented security perceptions. These mechanisms are used to promote a risk management-based, procedural co-operation mode of governance instead of developing into effective tools of collective security. The following institutional reality is an empirical starting point of the structural dilemmas that regional security governance is confronted with.

4. Core Dilemmas of Multilateral Security Mechanisms in East Asian Security Governance

4.1 Power-Structural Dilemmas

One of the main challenges that face the multilateral security mechanisms in East Asia is the fact that the power structure of the region is changing. The growth of great-power rivalry has greatly reduced the space in which multilateral security cooperation can be conducted within the institutional environment, especially the rivalry amongst China and the United States. Although the multilateral mechanisms are officially inclusive and neutral, in reality they take place in an environment that is defined by both strategic rivalry as the determinant of agenda-setting, participation, and institutional results [8]. This process can be observed in such regional meetings like East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum where the security talks are more vulcanized to reflect wider strategies as opposed to common regional agenda. Indicatively, maritime security and freedom of navigation are the topics on which the disagreement has been used to proxy opposing strategic discourses, restricting the possibility of consensus-making. With the primacy of strategic signalling and alliance co-ordination among the major powers, there is a danger of marginalising or instrumentalising multilateral mechanisms and hence their ability to serve as an autonomous collective security institution.

4.2 Institutional Design Dilemmas

The second dilemma is a result of institutional structure of multilateral security in East Asia. A majority of the mechanisms are based on the decision-making on consensus and the minimal degrees of legalization, as there are high concerns with the issues of sovereignty and non-intervention. Although these design attributes promote extensive participation and continuity between institutions, they create a major shortage of governance. This design is especially constrained in issue-specific mechanisms. As an example, the Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear problem have in the first place offered a multilateral model of negotiation and organization of talks [6]. Nevertheless, the lack of enforcement procedures and binding commitments made the process prone to any change in political will thereby facilitating its standstill. In the same way, a negotiation on South China Sea Code of Conduct has been made at a tedious pace and the results have largely stayed in the form of statements and are inadequate to limit the unilateralism of states. This is shown by the examples of low institutionalization that allow dialogue but cripple the ability to govern security successfully.

4.3 Normative and Perceptual Dilemmas

In addition to power and institutional restraints, multilateral security mechanisms have been troubled by normative and perceptual dilemmas that are based on the difference in security conceptualization and historical experiences in East Asia. Sovereignty and strategic autonomy are still key interests of the regional states, they do not feel free to be constrained by outside security actions. Simultaneously, historical antagonism and lacking identity make the process of trust building difficult and the cooperation in accepting shared norms of security hard. The weakness in respect to these challenges has been manifested through the low levels of confidence-building consensus within the regional forums. Although multilateral mechanisms constantly underline such principles like mutual respect and peaceful settlement of dispute, it is not evenly translated into predictable behavioral patterns. In case of maritime disputes, such as the difference in interpretation of international norms and legal frameworks, the mechanism of multilateral dialogues has been limited because of the nature of such

names and their conflicting interpretation. Certainly, multilateral security arrangements in general have the difficulty of getting beyond procedural collaboration to more substantive modes of collective security governance.

5. Discussion

As indicated in the analysis above, treatment of limitations of multilateral security mechanisms in East Asia must not be construed as an institutional failure. Instead, these processes are indicative of a specific form of security governance that is constituted by regional power institutions, institutional preferences, and normative constraints. Security governance wise, that the multilateral mechanisms remain intact despite their low efficacy levels is an indication that they are in control of, but not solution to, security tensions. Such reframing would question outcome-based assessments in which success in governance is standing equal to conflict resolution and instead point to process-based roles in the complicated security context. In this respect, the multilateral security mechanisms in East Asia serve as a risk-controlling tool, and a strategic communication tool. They help in providing transparency, signalling and avoiding miscalculation by maintaining consistent preparation between security players, despite the lack of substantive bargains. This role is specifically acute whenever there is a rise in the great-power competition where the recognized lack of dialogue mechanisms may further compound uncertainty and the risk of escalation. The governance virtue of multilateral mechanisms is, thus, not so much the ability to enforce rules but rather to frame expectations and keep to channel of communication open.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper discussed the East Asian multilateral security mechanism paradox in terms of security governance by submitting that the prevailing and gradual increase of multilateral security mechanisms are accompanied by their low ability to generate substantive security outputs. Through the use of both an institutional and an evaluation of a regional battle with perception of power, the paper has shown that the application of the multilateral security structures within East Asia serve as more of processes of governance than mechanisms of collective security or conflict management. Overall, it is determined in the paper that East Asian multilateral security arrangements play essential government functions, in spite of their limitations. They aid in openness, diminish the perception and offer stable platforms on which dialogue and strategic communication can be done, especially where there is an increased strategic competition. In this regard, they are not so much valuable in conflict resolving but in uncertainty control and avoidance of escalation. This is a process based role which clarifies their resilience as well as the reason why they remain relevant in an un-integrated and competitive regional security order. It has a number of limitations of the study. The manner of analysis is more qualitative and structural than systematic quantitative measurement of the effectiveness of institutions since it makes use of institutional features and a set of empirically chosen cases. Second, the paper considers East Asia as a regional area to large extent that might mask significant sub-regional differences as well as the strategies of countries to multilateralism. This study can be further developed in a number of ways in future studies. A good direction is to focus on the relationship between multilateral and unilateral security systems, including how new small groups institutions overlap or subvert existing regional structures. Furthermore, the comparison of East Asia with other areas would also help to shed more light on how alternative power arrangements and normative environments can influence the success and shape of multilateral security governance.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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