Over the past 5 decades, East Asia has experienced various security structures. From 1950s to 1960s, it was the US-USSR bipolar structure. From 1970s to 1980s, the China-US-Soviet Union tripolar structure featured regional security landscape. With the disintegration of Soviet Union and the contraction of Russian power in East Asia and the Western Pacific, the tripolar structure disappeared. In the post-Cold War era, regional security structure has been in fluid, failing to take a definite form. The new security structure, no matter what shape it takes, should reflect the new security reality in East Asia. What are the prevailing trends in regional security today? What legacy has the Cold War security structure left? How to forge a new security structure that is both effective and sustainable in dealing with the challenges confronting the region in the 21st Century?

New trends in regional security

The past decade has witnessed the emergence of some new defining features of regional security. Such features will not only affect the way that regional security issues are managed and resolved, but also produce important impact on regional security structure.

The first is the shift from geo-political security concern to functional security concern. The geo-political concern relates to the change in power balance, while the functional concern has to do with challenges emanating from issue-areas. During the Cold War era, geopolitical impetus drove the global rivalry between the two superpowers and informed the security dynamics in East Asia. With the end of the Cold War, however, functional issues like the proliferation of WMD, terrorism, illegal immigrants, drug trafficking, etc., have risen to the forefront of regional security agenda. The shift in the nature of security concern transformed both the landscape of and the approaches to regional security. For one thing, East Asia is no longer divided along the geopolitical and ideological line, and the common interests among nations in dealing with those challenges lead to more cooperation rather than competition between them.

The second is the growing interest in multilateral security cooperation. In East Asia, the first serious effort to enhance multilateral security cooperation started with the founding of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994. In late 1990s, China and Russia jointly launched the process of “Shanghai-5” (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) which led to the establishment of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001, with the mission to fight separatism, extremism and terrorism. In the post-“911” era, the preeminence of functional security challenges and its trans-national nature makes multilateral cooperation
indispensable. APEC, a multilateral economic forum, has broadened its agenda to cover security issues. The six-party talks on the Korean nuclear issue represent another endeavor in multilateral security cooperation. As East Asian countries accumulate more experiences in practice and deepen the understanding of multilateral security in thinking, multilateral cooperation will become a norm in regional security practice.

The third is the prominence of economic means in dealing with security challenges. On the Korean peninsula, “South Korea is using its economic strength to move the South-North relationship from a Cold War standoff to a cautious but peaceful coexistence.” (1) Moreover, Seoul is also trying to encourage Pyongyang to adopt a policy of economic reform and open-up, hoping such a development strategy will inevitably lead to more conciliatory and peaceful external behavior on the part of North Korea. On the Taiwan issue, Beijing has adjusted its strategy, shifting from pressuring Taiwan to a political negotiation for reunification to promoting economic integration. As a result, the robust economic ties across the Taiwan Strait has added a new dynamic to the equation and may in the long term create a constructive framework in which the Taiwan issue can be managed. In other words, it raises the prospect of “muddling through” the current political gridlock of the Taiwan entanglement toward an economically-driven, evolutionary, and peaceful solution. (2)

The fourth is the relative decline of US influence in regional security. Washington, relying heavily on its Cold War security arrangements (forward military deployment and security alliance), is less effective in responding to new security dynamics in the region. On the North Korean nuclear issue, for example, the use of force is simply not an option and the United States has to seek a solution by peaceful means. The divergence between Seoul and Washington over the approach to Pyongyang also indicates that traditional allies are more intent on seeking their own security interests than just following Washington’s will. In fact, countries such as ROK, Thailand, and the Philippines endeavor to augment their security coefficients through developing political, economic and security ties with their neighbors. For them, US is only one of the several pillars that their security is based upon.

The last but not the least is the evolving Chinese role in regional security. As David C. Kang observed, “Historically, it has been Chinese weakness that has led to chaos in Asia. When China has been strong and stable, order has been preserved.” (3) In fact, as China becomes more prosperous and stronger, it also becomes more responsible and more deeply committed to maintaining regional stability. Before the mid-1990s, PRC’s involvement in regional security was predominantly reactive and bilateral. In the past several years, however, Beijing has become more proactive. It initiated the founding of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and is playing an active and crucial role on the North Korean nuclear issue. Moreover, as is reflected in its participation in ASEAN Regional Forum, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear issue, Beijing appears to feel more and more comfortable with promoting multilateral security dialogue and cooperation. Given China’s growing political and economic weight, China’s constructive participation in regional affairs is of great significance to regional peace and stability.

**Structural problems**
With the sea change occurred in regional political, economic and security circumstances, the Cold War security structure has become a major source of tension in 21st century. This is particularly true with the two long-standing security concerns: Korea and Taiwan.

During the Cold War era, there formed two alliances antagonizing each other on the Korean peninsula: one is Beijing-Pyongyang-Moscow axis, and the other Seoul-Washington. For several decades, their existences strained the security environment in Northeast Asia. The end of the Cold War led to a partial transformation of the political and security structure in the sub-region: Beijing-Pyongyang-Moscow axis has evaporated, and both Moscow and Beijing normalized their respective relations with Seoul in the early 1990s. Such developments have greatly improved the strategic environment in Northeast Asia. The United States, nonetheless, failed to grasp this opportunity to improve its relations with Pyongyang and to turn its deterrence-oriented security posture into one of peaceful coexistence. As a result, there arose both structural as well as power imbalance on the peninsula. To redress this imbalance, North Korea re-opened its nuclear program. If Pyongyang succeeds in turning itself into a nuclear power, it amounts to a shift in the power balance on the Peninsula. If the DPRK is to abandon its nuclear card, then a security guarantee provided by the United States and endorsed by China, ROK, Russia and Japan will serve to redress the structural imbalance which is regarded by Pyongyang as not in its favor. In any case, as long as the structural imbalance remains, it is impossible for Pyongyang to completely give up its nuclear ambition.

The Taiwan issue is so complicated not only because of the historical animosity, mutual distrust, and social and political differences across the Taiwan Strait, but also because of the existence of a structural obstacle posed by the United States: Taiwan is regarded as a part of US sphere of influence in the Western Pacific. During the Cold War era, Taiwan was wrought by Washington as a bridgehead to contain China. In the post-Cold War period, US strategic planners rediscovered Taiwan’s strategic utility: the de facto independence of Taiwan is part of the status quo that favored by the United States, and the Chinese attempt to bring Taiwan back to its embrace is a challenge to the status quo and should therefore be resisted; moreover, as long as Taiwan remains separate from China, much of Beijing’s growing power will be absorbed and digested by its efforts to deal with the Taiwan issue. Out of this thinking, the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) released by US Department of Defense in September 2000 defined “The East Asian littoral (from the Bay of Bengal to the Sea of Japan)” as an area crucial to US interests, and Taiwan naturally falls into this geographical category. This assumption, however, ignores the evolving circumstances across the Taiwan straits. As Taiwan’s prosperity increasingly depends on the economic ties with the mainland, Taipei has to rethink about its political relations with Beijing. Also, Taiwan’s security can not be guaranteed by either an arms race with the mainland or US protection. Taiwan simply can not win in an arms race with the PRC, and the gap in military capability will further widen in favor of China. If the independence-minded influences try to move the island toward de jure independence and Beijing feels it has to resort to the use of force, it would be a big question whether the United States will run all the risks of fighting China for Taiwan’s independence.
A new structure for regional security

The evolving political, security and economic trends in East Asia call for a new security arrangement, and a pluralistic security community will meet the demand. Here “pluralistic” means that the community is not placed on a single basis, but on a couple of pillars such as the consensus of major powers, coalition of the willing, the existing security alliance, and regional or sub-regional mechanisms, etc. The creation of such a security community in Asia-Pacific is possible because states in the region have shared interests in a peaceful and stable security environment, and they increasingly benefit from growing economic interactions among themselves. Such a community is feasible also because relations among major powers will become more stable over a period of adjustments, and the budding mechanism for regional security will evolve over time into more effective means for promoting regional cooperation on security issues.

The US position on the issue is crucial. Washington, having invested so heavily on its forward military presence and security alliance in the region, is understandably more inclined to its traditional “hub and spokes” arrangement. Yet, the changing nature of security challenges requires new approaches. To thwart threats of terrorism and proliferation of WMD, traditional alliance is inadequate, a broadest possible coalition of the willing is desired. More important than this is a consensus among major powers. As Washington has realized, “The events of September 11, 2001, fundamentally changed the context for relations between the United States and other main centers of global power, and opened vast, new opportunities.”(5) U.S. should grasp this historic opportunities and help forge a new security structure in the region. Such a structure, reflecting the changing political, economic and security dynamics in East Asia, will be more effective and sustainable. In this context, US is no longer the hegemon, but one of the several key players.

Notes

(1) Morton Abramowitz and Stephen Bosworth, “Adjusting to the New Asia,” Foreign Affairs, Volume 82, No. 4, p. 121.
http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf