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Panel: National or Multilateral Security? (G2)

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Talking Points for: Paul Evans, University of British Columbia

In 1991 Satoh Yukio, then a senior official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, presented a set of forward-thinking concepts about the nature and structure of a regional security framework appropriate to the complex and shifting conditions in the Asia-Pacific world.

Satoh outlined two important ideas. The first was the “multiplex security system”. The modifier “multi” was popular then in multilateral security discourse, usually in hyphenated form as “multi-dimensional,” “multi-player,” or “multi-tiered.” His “multiplex” idea was that the region was so complex and diverse that the architecture that was needed, and that was likely to evolve, would be diverse, multi-layered, overlapping and messy. It would cover both economic and security issues, traditional matters of national defense as well as new non-traditional security challenges, and would involve a combination of unilateral preparedness, bilateral arrangements including alliances, and new multilateral mechanisms. It would have overlapping region-wide, extra-regional and sub-regional formations.

His second idea was that the major focus of multilateralism in its formative period would not be NATO-style collective defense but efforts to reduce distrust. The dominant concepts of the time were confidence building and confidence building measures. He preferred “reassurance” and “reassurance measures” based on argument that unlike Europe, Asia-Pacific was not a region defined by competition among adversaries. The opportunities for economic cooperation were already evident and could be expected to grow dramatically. And he had in mind that the key Asian country that needed to “reassure” its neighbors about its peaceful intentions and contribution to what we would now call “regional public goods” was Japan.

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Viewed 20 years later, Satoh’s ideas can be judged prescient and seminal. They were the product of an optimistic moment and bold yet elegantly sensitive Japanese leadership. And they helped shape and describe the very complicated nest or noodle bowl of bilateral and multilateral processes that have subsequently developed in varying regional configurations centered in Asia-Pacific.

Yet they need to be revisited in a new strategic context defined by a changing balance of power and an even more complicated and complex security agenda. China’s rise as a multi-dimensional regional and global power and the reactions by its neighbors and especially the United States is redefining the international relations of the region. Whether the framing metaphors are multi-polarity, multi-centrism, two suns in the sky, many stars in the sky, two tigers on the mountain, the region looks very different than it did at the time of the ending of the Cold War in Europe and undisputed American strategic primacy across the Pacific. Countries large and small face a new set of dilemmas and alternatives of the kind outlined in Hugh White’s *The China Choice* and there are calls from all perspectives for recasting the security architecture.

My presentation will address two specific issues:

The concept of American primacy and precisely what this might mean for both multilateral processes and the American centered bilateral security alliances in the region in the coming decade.

The idea of trust and what it means in an era of a shifting balance of power. Is strategic trust possible in these circumstances?

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