In Washington, Beijing, Tokyo, New Delhi, Seoul and Pyongyang, decisions and deeds this year have sharply illustrated how political choice can shape Asia’s security environment.

From a North Korean torpedo strike to an India-China hotline; from a US-Taiwan arms deal to new levels of Chinese maritime assertiveness; from coordinated displays of US naval presence to the reshaping of diplomatic architecture to accommodate America and Russia; from the tightening of ties between Seoul and Washington even as they wavered between the latter and Tokyo: contemporary events underline that Asia’s strategic direction is not preordained simply by shifts in economic weight and military potential. Whether the region’s future will resemble a balance of power, concert of powers, hegemony or some other arrangement will depend also on the choices that governments make in responding to structural forces, as argued in Power and Choice: Asian Security Futures.

Faced with strategic flux and the resulting sense of insecurity, nations have some clear choices, including:

- to expand, consolidate or contract their military reach and profile;
- to opt for unilateral assertiveness or to emphasise dialogue and cooperation;
- to use defence diplomacy as a tool to reduce risk of conflict, or to withhold it as a reward for political concessions;
- to reinforce power-balancing capabilities, whether national defence forces or alliances;
- to seek regional stability through attempts at mutual threat reduction or through bids for military superiority;
- to respond to transnational security threats unilaterally or cooperatively;
- to shape, rather than simply follow, domestic public opinion;
- to focus on regional or global imperatives;
- to invest seriously in inclusive diplomatic institutions;
- to tolerate or respond to provocative actions;
- and to decide whether interests, capabilities, or some definition of values should take priority in determining which countries to engage as security partners.

Some choices are not clear-cut. Actions that may appear unsettlingly assertive in one capital might seem defensive in another. Arms acquisitions can be destabilising or essential to keep the peace, depending on complex and shifting geopolitical circumstances. Dialogue, transparency and cooperation can go hand-in-hand with the advancement of national capabilities and interests. Competitive military modernisation might persist in a relatively low-risk fashion alongside economic and social enmeshment.

Still, there have been worrying signs of late: indications that the threat and use of force, whether as a result of calculated policy or of misperception, are going to remain a part of Asia’s foreseeable future. Constructive steps have been overmatched by a more risky kind.

All At Sea

One notable feature is the maritime context of most of these negative developments. It is no surprise that Asia’s key security interactions should be in this domain, bearing in mind the region’s geography and vast – and still-growing – reliance on seaborne commerce, including energy imports. What is alarming is the degree of risk some powers seem willing to incur in this Indo-Pacific commons.
Despite or because of its acute seaborne dependence, China in particular appears to have taken a decision to pursue assertive deployments and uncompromising diplomacy in several maritime theatres. This April it ventured into the Pacific with its most powerful eastward foray yet, in which its helicopters buzzed Japanese patrol vessels at dangerously short range. Beijing has declared the South China Sea a core interest, suggesting a willingness to confront other countries in these disputed waters. After objecting to US-South Korean exercises in the Yellow Sea it has proceeded with its own live-fire wargames there. And, amid all this, China has cited long-anticipated US arms sales to Taiwan as its reason to suspend precisely the kind of military-military dialogues with the United States that both powers need to minimise accidental confrontations at sea.

Broadly speaking, Beijing’s naval modernisation is the legitimate response of a vast trading power to deep insecurity about its supply vulnerabilities. It was inconceivable that China would forever outsource the entirety of its sea-lane security to the United States. But that alone does not explain some of its key capability choices, such as ballistic and cruise missiles. At this time of unprecedented Chinese naval power, modernisation and audacity, it is troubling that confidence-building and dialogue mechanisms remain weak to non-existent, and that of the DPRK.

Concerns have resurfaced in the past year about the prospect of DPRK state collapse, and the need for coordination among countries with a key stake in Korean stability. In the current climate of mistrust, however, the prospects for a constructive contingency-related dialogue between the most crucial powers – China and the United States – appear slim. Beijing’s current calculation appears to be that such a dialogue would involve unacceptable costs – perhaps because this might mean admitting that Washington has a legitimate role in Korea’s future, or because it might signal a lack of Chinese confidence in and goodwill towards Pyongyang. Yet without such preparation, the risks of China-US military confrontation during a future North Korean regime crisis will be great. They have, of course, waged bitter war over the existence of North Korea before.

Cross-currents

The news has not all been bad for peace and order. North Korea’s action is driving solidarity among US allies and partners not much accustomed to direct defence cooperation with each other. Under its unsteady Democratic Party of Japan-led government, Tokyo’s new official attitude to a rising China has not yet crystallised, though will likely revert to mistrust. It seems that the Cheonan incident is bringing Japanese and South Korea closer together, now that they have a more clear and present maritime danger than zealous citizens claiming the contested Dokdo/Takeshima island. Further away, Australia contributed expertise to the multinational panel that identified the origin of the torpedo attack. Aware of its crucial economic and strategic stake in a prosperous, secure North Asia, Canberra has been trying to add substantial defence ties with Seoul to its deepened links with Tokyo.

Further south, China’s new tone of dominance in the South China Sea is prompting firm reactions. In July the United States has used the region’s most inclusive regional security dialogue, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), to affirm its own interest in peace and freedom of navigation in these international waters. In August, in a demonstration both material and intensely symbolic, a US destroyer visited Vietnam and a high-level Vietnamese delegation visited a US aircraft carrier offshore. Although Vietnam’s official media sought to play down the power-balancing message, and some ASEAN countries say they want to limit US involvement in ‘resolving’ the South China Sea issue, it appears that China’s assertiveness in Southeast Asian waters is reaching the limits of what the rest of the region is prepared to accept. Interestingly, the tone of some Chinese commentators has already begun to moderate, with one even suggesting that China consider referring the disputes to the International Court of Justice.
Meanwhile in the Indian Ocean, the picture is mixed. It is not quite the race to great-power rivalry that some voices have popularised, but it could very well become that. In the Gulf of Aden, there has been some welcome progress in coordination and communication between China’s and some of the other naval taskforces patrolling against piracy, including with China taking its turn as leader of an information-sharing mechanism. New Delhi, initially rattled by the speed of Beijing’s deployment to an ocean India had long considered its own, has regained enough poise to propose limited maritime security cooperation with China. The wider strategic relationship between China and India will face major frictions as the two powers rise, but this year’s announcement of a leaders’ level hotline suggests a new recognition on both sides that ignoring their differences is in the interests of neither. Still, disputes over visas and territorial recognition threaten to cripple the powers’ working-level defence diplomacy, and the potential for confrontation between New Delhi and Beijing will keep growing.

**Gates to Choose From**

At the Shangri-La regional security dialogue in June, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates reminded regional defence ministers and experts of a key lesson from Asia’s post-1945 history:

> … the success this region has enjoyed over the past several decades – its unprecedented economic growth and political development – was not a foregone conclusion. Rather, it was enabled by clear choices about the enduring principles that we all believe are essential to peace, prosperity, and stability.¹⁰

He went on to describe choices about free commerce; the rule of law in international order; open access to the global commons; resolution of conflict without force; and the elevation of common interest over national interest. His message may have been aimed principally at North Korea, but can apply more widely to the region.¹¹

A central argument of *Power and Choice* is that the region’s future is not pre-determined: shifting power balances alone do not explain where the region is headed, including whether we are headed for peace or war, for instability, balance, or the sort of stability that comes through dominance by a single power.

Recent events underscore that some unsettling choices are being made. The region appears headed for a period of heightened risk. In particular, the United States and China are not communicating properly with each other over the day-to-day maintenance of East Asian security, including at sea, at the very time when the risks of prolonged crisis and confrontation on the Korean Peninsula have been heightened.

*Power and Choice* highlights two kinds of choices that will help determine which scenario – hegemony, balance or concert – is most likely to occur about in Asia, and also how particular shocks might accelerate trends towards one scenario or another.

Those two kinds of choices are: first, how to prepare for shocks, how to change the conditions of the international security environment to make it easier to manage shocks when they are occur; and second, crisis decisions, the immediate responses to shocks. Of course the first kind of shaping, preparatory decision helps to set the range of practical options available for the second kind of reactive, crisis decision. In the event of a regime collapse or other crisis in Korea, for example, there may not be a real option for coordinated, de-conflicted action by the US and Chinese militaries if the time of the shock has not been preceded by a long period of improved communication and trust-building between those militaries. At the moment Washington is willing but Beijing appears to be choosing to reject that kind of confidence-building – in other words, raising the risks of confrontation if a full-scale Korea crisis occurs.

One kind of preparatory, shaping choice that is beginning to gain more attention is the formation and deepening of multilateral diplomatic mechanisms – ‘architecture’ – which might convene to prevent or manage crises. It now appears almost certain that the United States and Russia will join the East Asia Summit, ensuring that the region has a leaders’ meeting at which all key security actors are represented – albeit in the presence of many smaller players. The United States has signalled that it sees this summit as having a central role in discussing critical strategic questions, like the South China Sea. A smaller step is the establishment of an inclusive forum for defence ministers in the region, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus Eight, which will assemble for the first time in Hanoi later this year. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that this forum, like the ARF, will be invested any time soon with responsibilities for active confidence-building, discussion of core strategic problems or transparency over offensive weapons procurements. At this stage, it is intended to meet merely once in three years. So for the time being, the region’s security future will continue to hinge on the choices of the strong or the reckless.
About the Project

The Lowy Institute’s MacArthur Asia Security Project explores evolving strategic relations among Asia’s major powers. Based on a realistic understanding of the region’s competitive dynamics in a range of key domains, the Project aims to develop a practical agenda for security cooperation across Asia and a suite of measures to ensure that competition does not lead to miscalculation or conflict.

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