The recent debate regarding the expansion of the East Asia Community (EAS) by allowing Russia to join the ASEAN-driven grouping highlights the continued search for a better, more integrated regional architecture.

In fact, if one looks at the discourse within the last few years, crafting a new "regional architecture" has been somewhat the watchword of both government officials and scholars alike.

Specifically, many believe that the Asia Pacific should be moving into a more integrated region, especially given the growing intra-regional economic ties and a "shared responsibility" amid increasingly complex challenges.

But what these arguments are sidelining is the fact that from a strategic-military perspective, recent developments do not necessarily go hand in hand with the stated rhetoric.

To start with, regional countries have been spending more and more on defense in the last few years. Northeast Asia's spending rose by more than 19 percent since 2001, while in Southeast Asia, it climbed by 13.5 percent per year between 2005 and 2008 and is forecast to grow up to US$33 billion by 2012.

Even Australia, the supposed "champion" of regional architecture building, has committed itself to increase defense spending by 3 percent in real terms until 2017. Its Defense White Paper, released in 2009, also noted the country's future force projection upgrade.

More disconcerting however is the growing trend that these resources are being directed to acquire state-of-the-art externally oriented weapons systems.

Aside from advanced "fourth-generation" fighters, submarines and main battle tanks, regional countries have been acquiring state-of-the-art air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons, large surface combatants, anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), amphibious assault vessels, and new Command, Control, Communications, Computing, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems.

Indeed, regional navies led by China, Japan and South Korea are forecast to spend some $60 billion over the next five years to strengthen their fleets, including blue-water power-projection capabilities and multi-mission surface combatants.

Submarine warfare is also proliferating - with a regional market set to grow by up to $7.4 billion by 2015.

And perhaps around 80 to 100 new, conventional high-tech submarines will be procured by the navies of India, Pakistan, China, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia by 2018.

Little wonder then that five of the 10 largest conventional weapons importers for 2005 to 2009 are Asian states: China, India, South Korea, Singapore and Pakistan, according to a recently released report by the Stockholm
International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

Further, the same report claims that between 2005 and 2009, Asia and Oceania accounted for 41 percent of imports of major conventional weapons.

And in Southeast Asia, arms deliveries to Malaysia increased by 722 percent in the same period, for Singapore by 146 percent and for Indonesia by 84 percent.

While this development doesn't necessarily imply a classic "arms race" (explicit tit-for-tat acquisitions with the intention of seeking dominance), military analyst Richard Bitzinger argues in an upcoming article for Contemporary Southeast Asia that these acquisitions, at least in Southeast Asia, are still more than "mere modernization" and could greatly change the nature and character of potential regional conflicts.

One could discern, therefore, that perhaps age-old rivalries and enmities have yet to fully disappear from the minds of regional policymakers - most of whom grew up during the Cold War era.

This further highlights another reason why regional architecture building remains problematic: The continued decisive role of senior policymakers and the lack of strategic leadership regeneration in the region.

It shows both the prevalence of "old thinking" in looking at regional security - hence the constant preoccupation for a "supra-structure regional institution" - and the continued relevance of military establishments in the region.

Now, an optimist could make the argument that the regional arms modernization simply represents "contingency preparations", and may even complement existing regional mechanisms. But the fact of the matter is the resulting "arms dynamic" in Asia has at least the potential to dangerously escalate small skirmishes into a full-scale conflict.

Even more so when we consider the yet unclear territorial boundaries of many regional countries - with resource scarcities looming in the background and set to escalate within the next one to two decades. These are "sensitive" issues that most countries wish to sweep under the rug most of the time; perhaps for good reason too.

But any kind of confidence-building measures that regional countries have worked hard to lay brick by brick over the years would be seen as hypocritical when, simultaneously, the very same countries are increasing their force projection capabilities.

True friends do not say how much they love you and buy a gun in the same time just in case your interests radically diverge, right? And normally, frank and open discussions of contentious issues are a sign of a healthy relationship.

After all, given the growing nexus of traditional and nontraditional challenges in the future, including energy security, climate change or humanitarian assistance, much of that state-of-the-art weaponry may prove to be of little use.

As such, without first addressing these potentially destabilizing developments, any kind of search for a new regional architecture will remain as elusive as the search for the legendary "Holy Grail". And consequently, the looming "Asia Pacific Century" may turn out to be nothing more than a pipe dream.

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