THE PROBLEM AND PROMISE OF FOCALITY IN WORLD AFFAIRS

Donald K. Emmerson
Stanford University, APARC Encina Hall E-301
616 Serra Street, Stanford, CA 94305-6008, USA

emmerson@stanford.edu

[Note: This essay is being made accessible with the kind permission of Strategic Review. What follows is identical to the text that appears in the inaugural (August 2011) issue of SR, except for the absence in the published version of the italicized opening paragraph, the footnotes, and the Postscript that appear below. Comments are welcomed.]

Increasingly in world affairs, insecurity bred of complexity and uncertainty is eliciting focality: the concentration of power and prowess in the hands of a limited number of actors—not so few as to lack any claim to legitimacy, yet not so numerous as to lack the ability to respond to urgent challenges in a timely fashion. As a zone of policy opportunity, focality is both promising and problematic: In the face of a crisis, a few authorized deciders can take steps that are necessary but controversial, achieving a productive trade-off between effectiveness and representation. There is also a “natural” focality that can encourage pragmatism among formerly partisan incumbents who face the need to govern. But they may not be able to agree, and even if they can, they risk being targeted—for elitism, unaccountability, incompetence, self-dealing, and intransigence, among other sins—by those who reject their authority to act.

Professional observers of world affairs tend to cluster in one of two methodological camps: empiricists and theorists. The empiricists work inductively; they describe and interpret “the facts.” The theorists work deductively; they employ and enjoy abstractions.

Neither method is intrinsically superior to the other. At their least venturesome, empiricists substitute description for analysis. They forget that the facts never speak for themselves. At their most presumptuous, theorists replace realities with interpretations. They think they can speak for the facts without mentioning them. Only by shuttling correctly back and forth between conditions on the ground and concepts in the mind can an observer hope to acknowledge “the facts” without taking them for granted as self-evident on the one hand, or, on the other, distorting them for the sake of a generalization that they do not fit.

Managing this balance is made more difficult by the dynamism of reality. Things change, and as they do, the assumptions and concepts that are conventionally used to seek patterns in facts and make inferences from them may require updating, revision, or replacement.

Dynamics: Keynes, Taleb, and Cognitive Shock

When the Great Depression of the 1930s destroyed the previous decade’s prosperity, the British economist John Maynard Keynes abandoned his neoclassical faith in the self-regulating ability of free markets to generate employment. The shock of economic collapse led him to reverse his free-market position and recommend using state resources to stimulate a recovery of aggregate demand and thereby to jump-start economic revival. When he was criticized for
inconsistency, he famously replied, “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”

The lessons of cognitive shock are not always self-evident or long-lasting. The fiscally oriented Keynesianism that the Depression called for did not permanently vanquish market-oriented monetarism. Conditions continued to change. Damaging spurts of inflation, for instance, rationalized fiscal restraint. The advice that the IMF offered President Suharto when the Asian Financial Crisis struck Indonesia in 1997 was hardly Keynesian in character. Bailing out bad banks, said the Fund, would only create moral hazard. But when the American Financial Crisis of 2008 spread unemployment in the United States, Washington flooded the US economy with cash to boost demand. In 2011, responding to the debt crises in southern Europe, France, and Germany championed opposing solutions—Paris wanting liquidity underwritten by the state, Berlin urging discipline delivered by the market.

Changing facts do not automatically reorient minds, let alone point them toward the same new conclusion. Schools of thought may cling to their axioms despite mounting evidence to the contrary. A scholar who propounds a given theory has a vested interest in its continuing use. But one can also change one’s mind too soon. At the moment when reality changes, it is not yet possible to know what the change will turn out to be: a transformative shift calling for the radical revision of a ruling paradigm, or a temporary aberration that does not warrant revamping still valid beliefs.

Because the future is unpredictable, these difficulties are unavoidable. But the shock of unexpected empirical change can at least be approached, and possibly mitigated, through heightened curiosity about trends that may already be underway and gaining speed and significance—potentially consequential trends of which contemporary observers may be insufficiently aware.

When a discontinuity does suddenly arrive, it is tempting to excuse one’s surprise by arguing that no one could have seen it coming. But such events are often tectonic. Rather than arriving unheralded and full-blown, they may mark the tipping point of previously accumulated incremental pressures for change. As Nassim Taleb would say, a “black swan” may arrive.

In a recently co-authored piece, Taleb asks us to imagine someone who keeps adding sand to a sand pile without any visible consequence, until suddenly the entire pile crumbles. It would be foolish to blame the collapse on the last grain of sand rather than the structure of the pile, but that is what people do consistently, and that is the policy error.

I agree, although not fully. It would not be foolish to allocate some of the blame for this event to the placing of the last grain of sand on the top of the pile, for had that not been done, the pile would not have crumbled. Taleb is right, however, to spotlight the increasingly precarious

---


structure—the tectonics—of the pile. The critical challenge for policy is to become aware of gradations of factual change before the crisis whose probability they are increasing, grain by grain, has taken place. Only then can the conceptual adjustment needed to understand a crisis precede its occurrence. Or, if I may tweak Keynes’s remark: “When the facts begin to change, I begin to think about changing my mind, before it’s too late. What do you do, sir?”

Identifying present trends can help to anticipate the future events that may follow from them. The current analytic and policy implications of such trends are worth investigating in any effort to anticipate “black swans”—unforeseen events of major consequence.

Awareness of conditions is not enough, however; one must think of how to respond to them. Across a range of policy choices, which one is more likely to relieve the accumulating pressure and forestall malign interaction? Which policy has the better chance of preventing a disaster—postponing it to gain time for prophylactic measures, or at least to lessen the extent of unavoidable damage?

These questions are more easily asked than answered. Pre-crisis conditions vary, as do the crises themselves and the remedies for them. With apology for adding to the mix of metaphors: No two sand piles are the same, and no single policy key fits every lock. Nor are all black swans worrisome; some bring good news. In the United States, for example, it was thought that economically stressful times would motivate more Americans to commit more robberies and other lawless acts. Instead, despite higher unemployment, crime rates have declined. That is a welcome black swan.

In this fluid and contingent context, my intention is necessarily more modest: to use the Keynesian notion of adapting policies to fit changing facts to highlight just a few interacting empirical trends in our current and probable near-future world—trends whose consequences are worrisome, or could become so.

Trends: Complexity, Uncertainty, and Focality

Among the many hypothetical tendencies in world affairs that could be identified for discussion, three seem especially relevant to the global purview of this and future issues of Strategic Review. Although limits of space, time, and knowledge prevent their full exploration here, let alone their empirical proof, these trends are plausible enough to be worth considering as examples of changing facts that challenge us to change our minds as well.

The trends are toward greater complexity, uncertainty, and focality in world affairs. I highlight them here in order to advance the following argument for debate:

(1) World affairs in the 21st-century are becoming simultaneously more complex and less certain;

(2) complexity and uncertainty are interacting in ways that pose challenges to global, regional, and national security; and
(3) such challenges are both rationalizing the case for focality and stimulating pushback against it.

The scope of these contentions is limited to “world affairs.” When it comes to personal and local affairs, the case for increasing uncertainty is distinctly weaker than it is for geoeconomic and geopolitical matters on a global scale. Uncertainties over food, shelter, safety, jobs, and education for themselves and their children remain the daily experience of a great many people. Rising inequality has tended to bifurcate many societies into two broad groups. The less advantaged continue to struggle with contingencies—what could go wrong and what could result from what already has gone wrong. But the welfare of those who are better off, or have become so, is less at risk, and this second group has been growing in size. Since 1990, poverty has decreased in every world region, and this is true especially of Asia. In recent decades, some three quarters of a billion Asians have left poverty behind, and with it their relative exposure to uncertainties of a life-and-welfare-jeopardizing kind.

In contrast, I am arguing, it is in the realm of international relations and global political economy—world affairs—that uncertainty has been rising.5

The term “focality” in proposition (3) is borrowed from the lexicon of geography, where it denotes a nexus that attracts and radiates flows of value—people, goods, information—from and to its environs. But the concept is used here in a narrower and more purposive sense to mean a concentration of power and prowess in the hands of a limited number of actors. Focality as a matter of conscious intent can be problematic or promising. It is problematic insofar as (a) it may fail to reduce the potential for damage to human life and livelihood in systems of complex uncertainty, and (b) its concentration of power may be unaccountable, that is, undemocratic. But it is promising insofar as (c) it succeeds in managing and mitigating the potential of spiraling complexity and uncertainty to degrade or destroy life-serving systems, and (d) it does so democratically, without sacrificing accountability.

Now consider proposition (1): that complexity and uncertainty increasingly characterize world affairs. This is not a self-evident assertion. The apparent simplicity of life in prehistoric times did not prevent surprises of either the nasty or the fortuitous kind. One might not be shot in the middle of the night, but one could be clubbed over the head. What does distinguish our 21st century from, say, the Stone Age that began some 2.5 million years ago is the vastly greater scale and intricacy of interdependence within and among interconnected systems of communication and exchange.

---


5 In this context it is not coincidental that, as I write these lines in mid-July 2011, politicians in Washington are prolonging the suspense over whether the US government will raise its debt ceiling and forestall default; fears are growing that the eurozone might be unable to resolve its own debt crisis; and the global price of gold—the classic refuge from uncertainty—has reached an all-time high.
One ought not exaggerate the extent to which the world today is interknit. Access to cyberspace, for example, varies from place to place, and most people do not have it. Among the twenty countries with the largest absolute numbers of people who used the internet in 2010, the estimated proportions of national populations who did so ran from 83 and 81 percent in the United Kingdom and South Korea, respectively, to 12 and 7 percent in Indonesia and India. The internet penetration rate for the world at large was only 20 percent.\(^6\)

Nor has the trend toward greater, more systemic, and more complex economic interconnection been evenly incremental. The volume of global trade shrank 12 percent in 2009—the largest such contraction since World War II.\(^7\) Even with these caveats in mind, however, and depending on how complexity is defined, the net historical trend toward greater and more complex interdependence is real.

If complexity is a tricky concept, operationalizing uncertainty in world affairs is more difficult still. The rise or fall of subjective uncertainty could be approached through survey research by asking respondent repeatedly over time whether they feel the world has become less predictable, either in general or with regard to a specific prospect. But it is far harder to study objective uncertainty—the extent to which history really is becoming less linear and more discontinuous. Philosophically, if the future cannot be known, how can we know whether its unknowability is increasing?

We can, of course, look back in time. We can study the record of measurable empirical trends and events in search of spikes, collapses, breaks, reversals, explosions, and sudden accelerations and decelerations—the telltale choreography of nonlinear history. Nor do recent world affairs lack instances of surprise. One need only recall the uprisings for Arab reform and Japan’s triple catastrophe (earthquake, tsunami, radiation) in 2011, the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, post-election turmoil in Iran in 2009, the American Financial Crisis of 2008, and so on, back through the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, Al Qaeda’s attack on the US in 2001, the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Not to mention floods, fires, and droughts, contagious infections, maritime piracy, and additional outbreaks of terrorism and conflict among other more or less astonishing events.

Taleb and Blyth have concluded that world history is indeed less linear in nature than it used to be.\(^8\) Provisionally, pending the careful empirical investigation that is not my purpose here, it seems reasonable to entertain the idea that in the broad and public realm of world affairs uncertainty in both its subjective and objective senses has increased, not just since the Stone Age but in recent times as well.

---


\(^7\) World Trade Organization, “Trade to Expand by 9.5% in 2010 after a Dismal 20m09, WTO Reports,” PRESS/598, 26 March 2010, [http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/pres10_e/pr598_e.htm](http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/pres10_e/pr598_e.htm).

Defensible, too, is proposition (2): that complexity and uncertainty are interacting in ways that pose challenges to global, regional, and national security. Again, empirical research is needed, but the logic is plausible: The more complex a phenomenon is, the more numerous and diverse are its components, their interconnections, and the ways in which those pathways process information. Such interrelations render the phenomenon vulnerable to butterfly effects that can magnify the ramifications of a sudden shock, whether it originates from the phenomenon itself or its environment. The sequence from earthquake to tsunami to meltdown in Fukushima in 2011 comes readily to mind.

Black swans need not be complex, but the simpler and more linear they are, other things being equal, the easier they are to anticipate by extrapolation, in which case, being expected, they lose the capacity to surprise and can be prepared for. It is true that complexity can reduce fragility when elaborate redundancies—fail-safes and back-ups—are built into a system to protect it from fatal error or hostile intrusion. But the combination of scale and intricacy can create potentials for destabilization. Damaging imbalances can develop within the system or, more likely, be triggered by an intrusion from outside in the form of a major shock, as in Fukushima in 2011, or an intentional breach, as when the Stuxnet virus degraded Iran’s nuclear capacity in 2010.

Causal two-way relations between complexity and uncertainty are themselves complex and uncertain. Engineering professor, InfoWorld columnist, and Ethernet co-inventor Bob Metcalfe turned out to be spectacularly mistaken when he predicted in 1995 that the internet “will soon go spectacularly supernova and in 1996 catastrophically collapse.” He was wrong to expect the internet to blow up from “overload” and be abandoned in the wake of “major security breaches.”

The Year 2000 Problem, or Y2K, is an interesting case in this context. Before remedial measures were taken toward the very end of the 20th century, computers typically referenced years by their last two digits alone. Fears arose that at midnight on 31 December 1999 computers would break down and cause havoc due to their inability to distinguish the year 2000 from the year 1900. As it turned out, very little damage was done. Was this mainly due to the preventive measures that were taken in advance to solve the problem, or was it mainly because the problem was exaggerated to begin with? Opinions still differ.

Y2K was not a black swan. The structure of this presumed sand-pile was linear and known in advance down to the final tipping-point grain: the arrival of 1/1/2000. The remedies taken to prevent collapse, if collapse really would have occurred, had an unintended benefit when a genuine black swan did arrive in New York City on the 11th of September the following year. Preventive steps that had been taken to solve the Year 2000 Problem, including bolstering computer systems with fall-back redundancies, enabled telecommunication and transportation networks in Manhattan to rebound from the Twin Towers’ destruction much more quickly than if those safeguards had not been in place.

---

9 Bob Metcalfe, “Predicting the Internet’s Catastrophic Collapse and Ghost Sites Galore in 1996,” InfoWorld, 4 December 1995, p. 61. Two years later an internet conference audience watched as he took a printed copy of his prediction, put it in a blender, added some liquid to create a pulpy substance, and literally ate his words.

However sanguine or apocalyptic one cares to be about the risks of nonlinearity in virtual systems, cyberspace is a good place to begin illustrating my trends of concern and their intersection: how complexity and uncertainty are interacting to generate focality in world affairs.

**Illustrations: Cyberlinkage, Extremism, and Apolarity**

**Cyberlinkage** The internet as we know it now will not blow up. Electronic apocalypse is not a prospect. But the number of internet users—governments, corporations, groups, individuals—who have been affected by breaches of privacy, or who legitimately worry that they may have been, is likely to increase. The rising scale and complexity of cyberspace, and the attendant multiplication of the functions performed therein, will facilitate an increase in the number of things that *could* go wrong, including vulnerability to financially and politically motivated attacks. Compared with on-line theft and sabotage, full-scale virtual wars will remain unlikely. But the technological race between efforts to innovate methods of protection against intrusion, and instances of intrusion despite such protection, will go on.

In this dynamic environment, focality can serve as an instrument of protection. Consider the modifications of the Internet Engineering Task Force’s Domain Name System Security Extensions that are presently underway. Reportedly, when completed, these changes will create a tri-focal global internet security system whose electronically and physically shielded ganglia in Silicon Valley (San Jose), Singapore, and Zurich will be “virtually impossible” to breach.  

As a response to the volatile mix of complexity and uncertainty, focality makes sense. One can understand the benefit in safety to be gained by simplifying the current pattern of multiple decentralized servers that are individually open to infection. Cloud computing may entail such a gain by shifting the storage of data from millions of vulnerable hard drives in desktops and laptops to a few central points of protected access. In the meantime, however, points of entry into the internet will proliferate as multiple-use smart phones than can host and spread malware become more ubiquitous.

More controversially, focality can be put to coercive purposes, as in the shift in the American physical-force repertoire in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen toward wielding, from a central electronic location, drone weapons above distant targets. Beyond the pushback against it in public opinion, however, the trend toward establishing a limited number of positions of centrality to use in defense against cyberterrorism and in launching counter-terrorist strikes will carry additional risk. The scarcity, centrality, and significance of these nodes—their very focality—will make them that much more attractive to would-be saboteurs.

As cyberlinkage and other forms of connectivity increase, the experience of isolation will become scarcer, and therefore more valuable. For a government that wishes to be both internally secure and externally influential, the challenge will be to increase isolation from undesirable input without decreasing access to the recipients of desired output—“offline” for

---

protection, but “online” for dissemination. The optimal result will be a version of “smart power” in which the closure associated with traditional security through hard-power (fortification and deterrence) is balanced against the openness associated with non-traditional security through soft power (admiration and assurance).

The balance that China manages or fails to strike between these priorities will be especially consequential. Indonesia’s rise has been less spectacular than China’s, but Indonesia, too, if and as its influence in regional and world affairs continues to increase, will strive to balance old-fashioned “nationalist” closure against outward-oriented “globalist” openness. 12

Strengthening the nation’s resistance to extremism will be a key challenge in this connection.

**Extremism** Radicalism has many motivations, takes many forms, and should not be imputed indiscriminately to any group with a grievance. Islamism is comparably diverse, as I have argued elsewhere. 13 Political conflicts that pit some Muslims against other Muslims, being intra-civilizational, cannot be blamed either on a monolithically Western crusade against Islam or a monolithically Muslim jihad against the West. Neither such campaign exists. It is convenient to speak of “the West” and “the Muslim world,” but convenience and accuracy are not the same. These terms not only homogenize the myriad identities of the countries and citizens they ostensibly name. By privileging geography and religion, respectively, the labels shrink to single dimensions the actual variety of hundreds of millions of human beings who have more to think about and believe in than place and faith alone.

In the aftermath of 9/11, fear and conviction that the rise of political Islam could and would trigger an impending clash between civilizations impaired the ability of observers to acknowledge contrary facts, including the decline of political Islam and the incidence of rifts inside Muslim-majority societies.

The diverse realm of political Islam includes this example: A party enters an election in Islam’s name. The party hopes to win and become the government. If that happens, the party plans to implement Islamic law.

In Muslim-majority countries, this narrative of political Islam has mostly failed. Typically the party does not win a majority at the polls and cannot arrange a coalition that would allow it to implement Islamic law. Realizing that its agenda is a liability in the competition for votes, the party moderates its stance, downplaying in rhetoric or relinquishing in practice its desire to create and manage an Islamic state.

Neuralgic fears of a radically Islamist party winning an election, declaring an Islamic state, and canceling or manipulating any future election in order to remain in power have been greatly overblown. Those who harbored such fears neglected to acknowledge the classic propensity of most distributions of public opinion to assume, on a graph, the shape of a bell or a hill—a

12 The quote marks are necessary because, depending on the issue, a “globalist” commitment to engagement could serve the nation better than a “nationalist” insistence on autonomy.

popular and moderate statistical mean sloping down on both sides into thin and diminishing
tails of possibly intense but decidedly unpopular radicalism.

To the extent that such a normal curve exists in a given democracy, and other things are
equal, it will be rational for a party wishing to gain power legally through an election to temper
its views, move toward the center, and thereby enlarge its share of the vote. The exact
settings and trajectories of the Pan-Islamic Party (PAS) in Malaysia and the Justice and
Prosperity Party (PKS) in Indonesia differ in many ways, including the extents to which they
ever favored an Islamic state. Yet both of these instances of political Islam exemplify the
rationality of moderation.

The logic of political moderation tends to characterize the experience of incumbency as well.
Once a party becomes part of a government, it becomes responsible for policy, and
policymaking in a democracy typically involves compromise. All-or-nothing stands advanced
during a campaign may be moderated in the knowledge that at the next election the party
could be punished for having chosen intransigence and deadlock over achievement.
Incumbents may also be exposed to compromises of a less constructive kind. Elected
politicians may enjoy opportunities for self-enrichment that, if taken, can especially damage the
credibility of an Islamist party whose candidates made a point of their moral superiority,
swearing fealty to an ethical conception of justice, but went on to violate that standard once in
power.

Normal curves are not preordained. More or less U-shaped distributions can and do occur, as
when a particular issue polarizes the electorate in question. A case in point has been the
fiercely bimodal—“red versus yellow”—division of public opinion in Thailand over the person
and policies of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. In deeply divided societies, far from
fostering moderation, the zero-sum character of an election—you win, I lose—can entrench
extreme views and foster violence on their behalf. Among more stably consensual societies
whose democratic practices are more institutionalized, however, versions of normality remain
the rule.14

A system of many parties is complex. So is a system whose one main party is highly
factionalized. Uncertainty is built into democratic elections; their legitimacy depends on their
outcomes not being known in advance. The clustering around the mean of a normal-curve
distribution, when it does occur, amounts to a “natural” focality that helps to organize
complexity and uncertainty into a reasonably stable pattern.

Dictatorship in this context may be considered an unnatural focality, arising as it does not from
the preferences of the populace but from the edicts of a leader—order and predictability
imposed from the top down, not sustained from the bottom up. Black swans of protest against
such top-down arrangements arrived in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. The
unexpected demonstrations in Tunis and Cairo drove Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Muhammad
Hosni Sayyid Mubarak, respectively, from presidential office. Abetted by cyberlinkage, these
and other reform movements proliferated across the region. From Morocco to Syria and
Bahrein, citizens challenged autocrats. In 2011 many of these struggles to replace despotic

---

14 The intransigence of the “Tea Party” wing of the Republican Party in the United States is exceptional in this context. See the
Postscript at the end of this essay.
with democratic focalities—ways of organizing complexity and limiting uncertainty without stifling human rights—were still in progress.

These instances of pushback against authoritarian focality raise basic questions of ownership and accountability. In Egypt, as I write, the question is: Whose focality will prevail? Will the military’s ostensibly transitional regime become permanent, or will it cede power to a genuinely democratic civilian format? In Yemen the question is: Will any focality be able to prevail? Or have the multiplicity of political and tribal splits and grievances in that country, exacerbated by economic duress, generated a condition of anarchy that cannot be overcome?

In complexly uncertain circumstances bordering on breakdown, extremists could seize power. Scenarios of this sort are thinkable in failed or failing states such as Somalia, the misnamed Democratic Republic of Congo, and the brand-new Republic of South Sudan. In Afghanistan, following a withdrawal of NATO forces, the Taliban could re-establish its own brutal version of focality. Mounting stresses and strains in the body politic of Pakistan—its own precarious sand-pile tectonics—could reach a tipping point in years or months to come. Intolerance and violence, including terrorism, could flourish.

Or not. Al Qaeda and many of its cognates, such as Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia, have been decapitated, have fragmented, or both. As I have noted, Islamism is anything but a monolithic or monovalent force. It covers a heterogeneous array of tendencies and factions that range all the way from liberal to maniacal. When it comes to religious beliefs, the bell curve mainly prevails in majority-Muslim countries as well. In those societies, notwithstanding variations, moderation is the populous mean between proportionally thin statistical tails—a few proponents of basically secular liberalism at one end of the distribution, a smattering of willfully deadly jihadists at the other.

A handful of dedicated people can accomplish much, as 9/11 showed, and the campaign against Al Qaeda has not put an end to terrorism. But counter-terrorist efforts, including those undertaken by Indonesia, have disrupted and decentralized the planning and perpetration of violence in religion’s name. The present trend is toward do-it-yourself attacks with diverse motivations, chances, and consequences. As complexity and volatility incubate uncertainty and vice versa, the need for focal responses will remain, especially when political upheavals and state failure combine to widen still further the range of conceivable events.

In the future in such cases, who will fund, sponsor, and reap the benefits of a drive toward focality to achieve at least minimal political order? Will it be the United States? Will American power by then have declined to the point that, absent the willingness of other states to help, zones of chaos will be left to fester? Will European powers take the lead, as France and the United Kingdom did in the first phase of the intervention against Muammar Muhammad al-Gaddafi’s regime in Libya? Or will Asian powers—China? India? Indonesia?—working in tandem with the United Nations organize coalitions of those willing to help rescue failing states?

These questions implicate my next and final illustration: the likely future dispersion or concentration of power in the world—focality or its absence on a global scale.
**Apolarity**  It is both fashionable and premature to say that we live in a multipolar world.  Soft power aside, the hard-power superiority of the US relative to other states may be attenuated in the decade to come, but it will not drastically worsen, fiscal retrenchment in Washington notwithstanding.  The proliferation of nuclear weapons is an established fact, unlikely to be reversed.  But outright multipolarity, in which several states display roughly equal prowess and influence, will not soon arise.

The complexity of global politics is increasing, however, as China and other actors, including Indonesia, gain international stature, and as the number of important policy problems that cannot be solved inside any one country continues to increase.  Efforts to manage the resulting uncertainty will include initiatives conducive to focality in transnational venues that allow for wider participation but are not inclusive to the point of paralysis.  The shift from G7 to G8 to G20 already illustrates this propensity.

Multilateralism is often thought to be a necessary response to the uncertainty implied by apolarity.  According to this scenario, the hub-and-spokes model of global and regional security should and will evolve into an arrangement whereby interaction among the spokes themselves reduces the autonomy of the hub, whose ability to act unilaterally declines as decision-making authority is shared with the rim.

A very different pattern of response is also possible, however, in which individual spokes seek more privileged bilateral relationships with the hub, and are motivated to do so precisely because the power and responsiveness of the hub along the full circumference of the rim can no longer be taken for granted.  To the extent that American economic weakness requires the US to be more selective in allocating priority support across would-be recipient countries, some of the latter may have an additional reason to make sure they are on that shortened list.  On the subject of maritime security in Southeast Asia, Vietnamese and Philippine interest in American backing against Chinese claims already illustrates this response.

The salience of bilateral as opposed to multilateral security also depends on the kind of security that is involved.  China and other key Asian actors remain averse to pacts that are military and multilateral in nature.  This is so in part because of the natural interest that any government has in restricting to a minimum the number of partners with whom the secrets of its hard power are shared, compared with its contrary interest in publicizing the soft-power “secrets” of its success.  Asian governments are also reluctant to commit themselves to come to the physical defense of any and all members of a multilateral pact, NATO-style.  Nor is Asian aversion to such an obligation lessened by the involvement of NATO’s members in a lengthy, costly, and possibly unwinnable war triggered by Al Qaeda’s surprise attack on the US in 2001.15

As a policy realm, compared with traditional (deterrent) security, the non-traditional (non-deterrent) security sector has proven itself more hospitable to multilateral initiatives.  It is not

---

15 It is safe to assume that the sole Asian contingents in the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in mid-2011—31 Malaysian and 21 Singaporean personnel—reflected these governments’ respective bilateral relations with the US rather than a principled commitment to multilateral security.  See [http://www.isaf.nato.int/troop-numbers-and-contributions/index.php](http://www.isaf.nato.int/troop-numbers-and-contributions/index.php).  Even within NATO, willingness to engage in concerted action has varied from member to member.
coincidental that the first and ostensibly hard-power-oriented ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) in 2006 should have occurred a long time—39 years—after the 1967 birth of its military-pact-averse parent, namely, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) itself, or that the inaugural ADMM Plus in 2010 should have lagged by 16 years the 1994 formation of the non-traditional-security-focused ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

The East Asia Summit (EAS), begun in 2005, could someday acquire a hard-security role. But China’s recent “frown diplomacy” on behalf of its claims to East Asian waters, including their energy resources and land features, is driving some local states in the opposite direction, as already mentioned—away from multilateral confidence-building and toward traditional (deterrent) security through bilaterally negotiated American protection against incursions and disruptions by Beijing. To the degree that this inclination continues, it will pose for US policymakers a trade-off between, on the one hand, the likely ineffectiveness (or, at any rate, the inefficiency) of a multilateral response, and on the other, the risk of appearing to endorse the questionable maritime claims of a bilateral partner.

The uncertainty-spawning complexity that is my theme here recurs in this context as well: Arrangements of multiple actors who must be consulted, and whose differing public and hidden agendas must be taken at least somewhat into account, are inherently unsuited to the task of responding quickly and effectively to a crisis involving physical force. For this reason, the nascent EAS and ADMM Plus are unlikely to serve as multilateral antidotes to traditional (military) insecurity pending a diminution of division and mistrust among the relevant powers.

As for the balance of force and influence between states, situations of reasonably clear asymmetry between two major powers are more conducive to third-power strategies of bandwagoning or counterbalancing than are situations of complexity and uncertainty associated with entropy—the narrowing of inequalities between actors. Apolar conditions are typically both complex and uncertain. In East Asia, the trend toward apolarity associated with China’s amassing of weapons and wealth and America’s overstretched military and underperforming economy will reduce the appeal of bandwagoning and counterbalancing in the eyes of third countries. If India’s ascent continues, further complexity and uncertainty will follow, incentivizing smaller powers to hedge their bets instead of making clear long-term commitments to any major contender.\(^{16}\)

In response to uncertainty, enter focality. Efforts to manage increasing contingency may ensue as, for example, experiments in minilateralism. The success of tri-lateral cooperation between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore in patrolling the Malacca Straits shows what an initiative of this kind can accomplish. Future instances could include an increasing use of the “minus X” formula to skirt ASEAN’s unanimity rule and allow for some members to opt out. One could also envision a less consciously instigated trend toward the de facto political distancing of subcontinental from maritime Southeast Asia—an evolutionary clustering of northern versus southern states driven by the diversity of intra-ASEAN responses to the rise of China. In such an evolving pair of northern and southern focalities related to the “China problem,” an eventually stabilized Thailand could specialize in relaying Chinese influence on the mainland while Indonesia becomes the focus of resistance to such influence in the islands.

The future may not be so neatly geometric. Vietnam’s historic suspicion of China, for example, will not be discarded merely to ensure the consistency of a “pro-China” outlook in northern Southeast Asia. Less assuredly, if India is someday able to translate its spatial proximity to ASEAN’s mainland members into political influence over them, a “Look West” inclination in that northern tier could begin to balance the appeal of looking east to China. Conceivably, two clusters of Southeast Asian states with regard to China—one more compliant, the other more contentious—could even underpin a “good cop, bad cop” arrangement whereby ASEAN tries to reap the benefits of both acquiescence and resistance to its giant neighbor. Whatever the pattern of response turns out to be, however, there is no reason to assume that ASEAN’s members will soon want, or be able to persuade each other to adopt, one single foreign policy toward Beijing, except in rhetorical terms.

Another illustration of minilateral focality is the remarkably rapid development of trilateral summitry between China, Japan, and South Korea since 2008. Leaders in Beijing, Tokyo, and Seoul all realize that deferring to Southeast Asians and their “ASEAN way” of strengthening mutual assurance through multilateral means will not guarantee a permanent or institutionalized peace in Northeast Asia. Given recent events on the Thai-Cambodian border, it has not even guaranteed peace between ASEAN’s members. The organization’s limitations, combined with its insistence on retaining centrality as the diplomatic driver of East Asian regionalism, is likely further to stimulate the Northeast Asian states to develop a minilateralism of their own—a separate (and initially investment-and-trade-focused) “way” to greater security in Northeast Asia.

This prospect is worth watching not only because it could shrink the footprint of ASEAN-style regionalism, but for other reasons as well. Among them is the possibility that trilateralist success in Northeast Asia, if it occurs, could lead Tokyo to reconsider the function of its security alliance with the US: from being the axiomatic and all-important basis of Japan’s security toward a more contingent means of hedging against the diminished but remaining chances of hostility from Beijing.

In relation to the United States, the attractiveness of Chinese markets and exports could lead East Asian hedging to assume bi-sectoral form: China’s neighbors could increasingly rely on China economically, while hedging against Chinese aggression by counting on the US militarily. This strategy would consign the US to the status of a specialized half-superpower. To the extent that military prowess ultimately presupposes economic strength, such a lopsided American role will not be sustainable in the long run. In the nearer-term future, nevertheless, Beijing will be unable to sustain militarily a Chinese version of the Monroe doctrine in its neighborhood.

**Conclusion: Focality for Security?**

The challenges that I have tried to illustrate in this essay are real. But complexity is not intrinsically conducive to uncertainty. Cyberspatial networks are extremely complex, but they are not thereby fated to disorganize themselves of their own accord. By controlling human exposure to the natural vagaries of external heat and cold, complex thermostatic systems
reduce our exposure to uncertainty, although their use of energy may in the long run help make the environment more volatile, as meteorological black swans—floods, droughts—multiply.

Nor is simplicity necessarily the solution to uncertainty. Preparations to defend against the specter of Y2K improved the security of cybersystems by adding features that made them more not less complex. The nascent tri-focal pattern of electronic redoubts in Silicon Valley, Singapore, and Zurich is an effort to protect the internet not by simplifying it but by organizing its complexity.

Focality need not be the purpose or result of policy. The clustering of a distribution around a mean may instead be a feature of the environment in which policymakers operate. The complex diversity that characterizes the swath of mostly Muslim societies from Morocco to Maguindanao does includes an extremist fringe. But the greater size of the mean tends to check what a fringe can get away with, depending on how silent or vocal the focal majority is. Most Muslim societies are mostly moderate—a natural focality that can, in principle if not always in practice, limit the appeal of extremist leaders and agendas.

The democratization of the Arab world is often considered in purely linear terms as a trajectory of increasing personal freedom. But the aftermath of Mubarak’s resignation underscores the need for an accountable focality to manage the process of political reform. Compared with Egypt, Morocco may be advantaged in this regard by its monarchic tradition. If the king in Rabat can preserve his popularity as a unifying symbol while fostering real reform, the democratization of his country may prove smoother than the corresponding process in Cairo. In Morocco, the king is indeed part of the problem of authoritarian rule, but his position ostensibly “above politics” makes him part of the solution as well—a useful ambiguity that republican government does not provide. By the same logic, in Thailand the lowering and tainting of the monarchy by association with partisan politics has undermined the constructive focality of the palace as a site for national reconciliation.

The future utility of focality is also suggested by the likely growth and interaction of complexity and uncertainty in the geopolitics of Asia. A pattern of proliferating acronyms that stand for arrangements with overlapping memberships and duplicated functions is not designed to respond promptly or decisively to challenges to regional security, especially of the traditional kind. If such challenges increase, second thoughts about the “ASEAN way” could become more common.

Apart from the larger regional arrangements that ASEAN has sponsored, the organization itself could benefit from greater introspection about its own performance. It is not exactly the “fault” of ASEAN that the South China Sea remains dangerously contested, or that Thailand and Cambodia have come to blows around the temple of Preah Vihear. ASEAN cannot be blamed for not preventing or resolving these situations if it was never strong enough in the first place to have done so. But when will its decades of building mutual confidence and comity among its members through conversation have finally paid off by enabling the Association to prevent or negotiate disputes and conflicts through action?

Regarding contested space and assets in the South China Sea, if ASEAN’s own littoral members cannot simplify complexity and reduce uncertainty by harmonizing their own claims
among themselves, how can they hope, as a group, to convince China to follow suit? One possibly constructive focality could arise if the Southeast Asian claimants did not wait for China but instead, minilaterally, began the process of drafting, signing, and ratifying their own binding Code of Conduct in the South China Sea to replace the current, unenforceable Declaration on Conduct—a process that China would be welcomed to join but could not stop. Other governments could also be encouraged to support such a Code, following the successful example of the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia.

In East Asia and the broader Pacific region, ASEAN has long played a focal role in the creation and expansion of regional arrangements. But facts on the ground have changed. Although geopolitical issues, historical memories, and policy differences continue to divide China, Japan, and South Korea, they do so less deeply than before. The prolongation of their three-way peace, their shared apprehension toward North Korea, China’s large and burgeoning economic profile, and a sense that American primacy is becoming less sustainable have called discreetly into question these three states’ deference to ASEAN’s regional leadership and their acceptance of secondary status in ASEAN-driven arrangements. That the organization should have been so proactive was in any case always partly a matter of default: Northeast Asians were too riven and rivalrous to lead.

If the rulers of China, Japan, and South Korea have begun to change their minds about their own focal potential, will ASEAN update its own outlook in such a “Keynesian” fashion as well? The Association’s own spin-offs need not wither. ASEAN’s leaders can even congratulate their Northeast Asian colleagues for having begun to follow the organization’s own region-forming example. In Northeast Asia a combination of peace and prosperity to which the indigenous local neighbors are directly committed may prove more durable than one that reflects the concerns and agendas of outsiders in Southeast Asia. Or ASEAN could defend its long-standing and productive occupancy of the driver’s seat of regionalism in East Asia by reasserting its own indispensability, as if its own focality were an end in itself—an institutional prerogative.

Comity and identity within Northeast Asia are still not robust enough to jeopardize the default condition that allowed ASEAN to take, play, and keep the lead role in East Asian regionalism. Eventually, however, of the two subregions that make up East Asia, the one with the greater area, population, and economy may finally acquire commensurate responsibility for promoting regional peace and progress. Such a result, one can hope, will avoid or minimize the insecurities that are imaginable in other outcomes, including Chinese-centered focality-as-hegemony, ASEAN-led focality-as-façade, and an apolar lack of focality that attracts black swans.

My focus on insecurity does not mean that I am pessimistic about the future. Efforts to manage cyberconnectivity, extremism, and apolarity, among other challenges, may well succeed, and I hope they will. Whether they do or not, however, the interaction of complexity, uncertainty, and focality will continue to change security environments—national, regional, and global—in years to come.
Postscript

In the third quarter of 2011, after this essay was submitted for publication, the promise and perils of focality were dramatically illustrated when political deadlock in Washington DC over how to deal with the sagging American economy yielded an unconvincing compromise at the last minute, which triggered a rating agency’s downgrading of US debt, which helped to accelerate a decline in equity markets steep enough to spark fears of another recession on the heels of the 2008 financial crisis.

The first of two relevant experiments in focality began in 2010 when President Barack Obama created a bipartisan 18-member National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, better known as the Simpson-Bowles Commission, to recommend how the US could improve its fiscal situation and eventually achieve fiscal sustainability. Almost evenly split between Republicans and Democrats, the Commission was further constrained by a provision that a supermajority of 14 of its 18 members would have to approve the body’s report before it could become official. A defection by three Republican senators precluded this outcome. The experiment failed.

A second attempt at focality was included in a last-minute, short-term extension of the US debt ceiling adopted by Congress and signed by the president on 2 August 2011. A bipartisan “supercommittee” of six Republicans and six Democrats would be formed and try to agree on $1.5 trillion in additional savings beyond those already called for in that law. Were the supercommittee unable to agree, cuts amounting to $1.2 trillion would be triggered automatically, across the board, in early 2013.

In August 2011 it was too early to judge the success of failure of this second experiment. But it was not too early to note the extreme and ostensibly self-binding character of the default to indiscriminate cuts that would occur in the absence of agreement by the supercommittee of 12—a third smaller than the Commission but still “representative” enough to be equally “ineffective.” This self-restriction is merely ostensible because the “automatic” provision could be rescinded or amended before it kicks into effect. Only half facetiously, however, the image of deciders handcuffing themselves in advance points ultimately toward a hyperfocalist fantasy in which policy is decided by the timed operation of a single algorithm, as if elected politicians could not merely alleviate their responsibility for unpopular decisions through focality—a blue-ribbon commission—but could escape it entirely by automaticity—an irreversible program.

Is there a tentative lesson to be drawn from this dispiriting illustration? I think there is: Experiments in focality can succeed in the absence of an already full and solid consensus as to what should be done, and especially so if the need for speed and expertise is generally acknowledged. But an effort to balance representation against effectiveness in limited venues of decision-making will not easily override or sideline an already deeply polarized partisan dissensus in a democratic political system. Arguably, in that latter instance, things have to get worse, and recognizably so, before they can get better.

Donald K. Emmerson heads the Southeast Asia Forum (SEAF) at Stanford University, where he is also affiliated with the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law and the Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies.