

OUT OF ORDER: NORTHEAST ASIA IN A LIMINAL AGE*

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Is there a security order in Northeast Asia? In the last few years, the regional status quo has appeared to self-destruct. North Korea has announced that it possesses nuclear weapons and, with its most recent test, appears to have kicked down the door of the nuclear club. Japan has already stepped out from under its “peace constitution,” and it is no longer quite such a taboo for Japanese politicians to discuss a preemptive strike option and even a formal nuclear capability. The U.S.-South Korean security alliance is beginning to fray at the edges as Seoul prepares to strike off in a more independent direction. China has embraced multilateralism, significantly encroached on U.S. economic and diplomatic influence in the region, and has even participated as an observer (for the first time in June) in a large-scale joint military exercise in the Asia Pacific conducted by the United States, Japan, and South Korea.

And yet, certain salient features of the old security order still remain. China and Taiwan, despite considerable cross-investment, still face off across the Taiwan Straits. North and South Korea, despite movement toward rapprochement, remain divided at mid-peninsula. Still asserting its role as an honest broker with no territorial ambitions, the United States

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maintains the most powerful military force in the region even as it calls upon reserves from the Pacific theater to bolster its presence in the Middle East. Japan and the United States have never been closer. China and North Korea remain nominal allies.

Northeast Asia seems, in other words, to be caught half in and half out of order. To borrow from the terminology of another discipline, the region has entered a liminal state. Cold War verities no longer apply except in the most vulgar sense (for instance, militarized borders). But a new regional order has yet to take its place because the actors all remain uncertain of their new identities and their new regional roles. It has become quite difficult to predict -- and predictability is the essence of order -- the future trajectories of each of the countries. With all relationships in flux, the exponential increase in permutations and combinations makes it nearly impossible to formulate the likelihood of any one conception of order prevailing over any other.

Such a liminal state -- a term originally used by anthropologists to speak of an in-between status in transformative rituals -- poses enormous risks at a geopolitical level. All states are trying to extract greatest advantage in the new, evolving, and still unclear dispensation. While uncertainty does not lead automatically to conflict, a collection of states all seeking to maximize their advantages before a new order crystallizes can be very dangerous indeed.

In this paper, I will try to assess the possible orders that might emerge from the twilight zone of East Asia and the role the United States will carve out for itself. A new order will eventually coalesce in the region. Geopolitics, after all, abhors unpredictability.

The Uses of Uncertainty

While randomness determines so much of the natural world, predictability is the lifeblood of human systems. Financiers make investments based on probable returns, tourists make their travel plans based on probable risks, and government leaders construct foreign policies on the basis of expected outcomes. While smart decision makers prepare for

unexpected contingencies, they must base policies on what is most likely to happen. The greater the predictability, the higher the comfort level.

In the same way that liminal sexuality makes many people uncomfortable -- consider the movie *TransAmerica* -- liminal geopolitical states make most policymakers squirm. Does North Korea have a bomb or not? Has China fully embraced peaceful multilateralism or does Beijing still harbor territorial aims (beyond Taiwan)? Is South Korea's new foreign policy one of independence, neutrality, balancer, or some other new type? Will Japan abandon its peace constitution or not?

Uncertainty about these basic postures bedevils policymakers -- with one major exception. Uncertainty about another's plans is frustrating, but uncertainty can be a welcome and even necessary element in one's own plans.

The United States has specialized in incorporating uncertainty into military planning. The "neither confirm nor deny" policy concerning the presence of nuclear weapons on ships, stations, and aircraft, updated in February 2006 in a memo from the office of Chief of Naval Operation, keeps U.S. deterrent capability in a state of fluid liminality.¹ Or take Condoleezza Rice's recent response to North Korea's announced nuclear test when she simultaneously stressed that "there is no intention to invade or attack them" and that the president "never takes any of his options off the table."² North Korea, similarly, has been unclear about its nuclear capability, offering concealed tests, possible decoys, and bait-and-switch (such as the notorious Kumchang-ri caverns). Such a liminal nuclear capacity -- simultaneously present and absent like the quantum paradox of Schrodinger's Cat -- serves as a necessary interim construct until an actual, robust program is in place. It is also a potentially cheaper deterrent than an arsenal that can be measured and determined to be wanting.

¹ See the Nuclear Information Project, February 8, 2006, at <http://www.nukestrat.com/us/navy/ncnd.htm>.

² Colum Lynch and Maureen Fan, "China Says It Will Back Sanctions on N. Korea," *Washington Post*, October 11, 2006, p. A14.

It is the privilege of military superpowers to embed uncertainty in their foreign policies. Middle powers such as Japan and South Korea traditionally must submit to order and transparency: allies must provide predictable responses in times of war and peace or else face penalties. It's left to outlier nations like North Korea to adopt the "weapons of the weak" such as bluff, feint, and bluster.³ Non-state actors such as guerrilla forces and terrorist entities depend even more on unpredictability. When all countries in a region find security in uncertainty -- particularly the middle powers that hitherto relied on or were forced to adhere to a transparent security system -- then all possibility of order disappears and liminality reigns supreme.

In East Asia's liminal state today, there are competing notions of order. Some are completely abstract (if country A were to do X and B to do Y and C to do Z, a new order would be born). Others are less ideas than power dynamics coalescing, as it were, beneath the radar. Before turning to what I think will be the most likely order to emerge in Northeast Asia, I will evaluate the future of various bilateral and multilateral scenarios.

Bilateralism

The U.S. strategic position in Northeast Asia has traditionally been anchored by two key alliances with Japan and South Korea. This bilateralism suffered several post-Cold War shocks, beginning with the unexpected and unceremonial expulsion of U.S. troops from bases in the Philippines in 1992. The Cold War and a certain amount of authoritarianism provided the glue for bilateral agreements in Asia. The advent of people power and a relative threat reduction undercut the strongest arguments for maintaining exclusive alliances with the United States.

The Pentagon's upgrade in military posture and strategy is also intimately tied to the strengths and weaknesses of bilateralism. The Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and the development of the concept of "strategic flexibility" were, according to conventional

³ James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Scott was referring to how peasants resist communal domination, but his insights can be applied as well to how weak countries resist geopolitical domination.

wisdom, responses first to advances in technology (primarily computers and communications) and the application of market principles to military management, and then to new threats and an altered security environment as a result of the end of the Cold War and the attacks of September 11. Fixed military bases with lumbering tanks and static defenses are, according to the latest war-fighting wisdom, comparatively low-tech and incapable of addressing rapidly emerging conflicts and threats.

But a case can also be made that RMA and strategic flexibility are responses to NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) and democratic movements. Fixed bases were becoming an irritant in bilateral relations: first in the Philippines, then spreading to Okinawa and Tokyo, and finally to Seoul. The U.S. security umbrella was generally popular but the U.S. security footprint was another matter.

As became clear with South Korea's more independent thrust in foreign policy, people power affected not only the usability of bases but the dependability of the bilateral relationship overall. People power in South Korea, expressed through the election of Roh Moo Hyun, made South Korea an unpredictable ally, one that begrudgingly sent troops to Iraq, refused to join either the missile defense alliance or the Proliferation Security Initiative, and looked askance at the whole notion of "strategic flexibility" because it might draw Seoul into a conflict with Beijing. A fixed bilateral relationship began to assume the same static problems -- a lack of flexibility -- as fixed bases.

The U.S. concept of "strategic flexibility," in other words, was not only useful for fighting an unpredictable enemy but also for dealing with an unpredictable ally. With Manila, the United States negotiated a Visiting Forces Agreement that not only sidestepped many NIMBY issues but also accorded U.S. forces much greater potential access throughout the country to carry out a rather vaguely defined range of activities. With Seoul, the United States is negotiating a base relocation, troop drawdown, and transformation of wartime control that will reduce U.S. costs and overall U.S. footprint. It will also reduce U.S. dependency on South Korean support for strategic flexibility. Other features of the bilateral relationship have come under stress because South Korea's

toward North Korea has diverged from that of the United States. Reportedly apprehensive that Seoul would transfer advanced technology to Pyongyang, the United States cancelled the sale of four Global Hawk unmanned surveillance aircraft to South Korea in July.⁴

The same flexibility that has allowed the U.S.-ROK security alliance to weaken has led to the strengthening of the U.S.-Japan bilateral relationship. Under Koizumi, Japan provided logistical support for the U.S. war against the Taliban, peacekeepers for the war in Iraq, and Marine Self Defense Forces for humanitarian operations after the tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia. In December 2004, the Diet passed new defense guidelines that modified a longstanding ban on arms exports so that the government could fully cooperate with the United States on missile defense. In February 2005, the United States and Japan updated their security agreement to include the area around Taiwan as a “common strategic objective,” though without mentioning what specific military assistance Japan might provide the United States in case of war.

As the Japanese case suggests, bilateralism is by no means dead in East Asia. But a measure of liminality has crept into what had previously been a more certain set of obligations and expectations. South Korea’s commitment to “strategic flexibility” is uncertain; the nature of Japan’s military support for U.S. objectives in the region is ambiguous. To the extent that bilateralism has become problematic for U.S. strategy in the region—because of NIMBY, the influence of democratic movements on foreign policy, and the growing influence of China—Washington has begun to look at other ways of organizing its interests in the region.

Multilateralism

The Soviet threat provide indispensable in the construction of NATO out of what were once implacable European foes. Such a structure never emerged in Northeast Asia.

⁴ Sang-Ho Yun, “U.S. Nixes Global Hawk Sale to Korea,” *Dong-A Ilbo*, July 13, 2006, at <http://english.donga.com/srv/service.php3?bicode=050000&biid=2006071318338>.

Scholars have exhaustively picked over the reasons why East Asia has not followed the European example, a divergence that began with the unenthusiastic U.S. response to the “Pacific Pact” proposed by Philippine, Taiwanese, and South Korean leaders in 1950.⁵ Disagreements over history (Koguryo, Japan’s World War II conduct) and geography (Dokdo/Takeshima, Senkaku/Diaoyu, Kurile Islands) remain persistent in the region -- in sharp contrast with Europe, for instance, where disagreements over history textbooks and borders have become, as Americans like to say, “history.” Multilateral norms have also been notably weak in the region, despite common adherence to Confucian values and a shared experience of Chinese high culture. Perhaps more critically, the United States does not share a cultural history with East Asia as it did with Europe.

And yet, at least in the first term of the Bush administration, multilateralism became a popular watchword, as exemplified by an influential essay by Colin Powell in *Foreign Affairs*.⁶ In East Asia, for instance, the administration pushed for Six-Party Talks against the advice of those calling for direct bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang. And the administration also championed the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) as a multilateral non-proliferation strategy (with the Regional Maritime Security Initiative designed for East Asia in particular). Powell’s views found echo in Francis Fukuyama’s vision of a “neoconservative moment” in which the United States ceased to ignore regional arrangements proposed by China, Japan, Malaysia, and others. “I believe that East Asia is under-institutionalized,” Fukuyama wrote in 2004, “and ripe for some creative thinking by the United States.”⁷

⁵ On the Pacific Pact history, see Myong-sob Kim, “Declined Invitation by Empire: The Aborted Pacific Pact and the unsolved Issue of Regional Governance,” in Dong-Sung Kim, Ki-Jung Kim, Hahnkyu Park, (ed.), *Fifty Years After the Korean War: From Cold-War Confrontation to Peaceful Co-existence*, Seoul: KAIS, 2000. For a recent overview of scholarly arguments, which includes South and Southeast Asia, see Amitav Acharya, “Why Is There No NATO in Asia?” May 2005, at <http://www.iir.ubc.ca/Papers/Acharya-May05.pdf>.

⁶ Colin Powell, “A Strategy of Partnerships,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2004. Powell’s essay was a change from his confirmation hearings, when he conspicuously left out any mention of Asian multilateralism. See, e.g., Ralph Cossa, “Bush’s Emerging Asia Policy: What’s Still Missing,” *PacNet 6*, Pacific Forum, CSIS, February 9, 2001.

⁷ Francis Fukuyama, “The Neoconservative Moment,” *The National Interest*, Summer 2004.

While the Bush administration seemed to back away in its second term from the more multilateral vision of Colin Powell, there is still support for organizing U.S. interests in the region in a multilateral form. After the North Korean missile test, David Frum argued in the *New York Times* that the United States needs “a tighter and stronger security arrangement in the Pacific region, one from which rogue states and those who support them are pointedly excluded. The NATO allies have agreed to expand the organization well beyond Western Europe; now we need to persuade them to make it global.”⁸ Joining the conservative Frum are Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier in *Foreign Affairs*, who state the case positively (shared values) rather than negatively (shared threat).⁹

This revival of a NATO option is substantially different from earlier attempts. Rather than constructing their own regional order, U.S. allies Japan and South Korea would simply be absorbed into a global initiative. Disagreements that might make a regional NATO impossible become more diffuse when set in a global context (in the same way that South Korea and Japan can cooperate on security matters in the UN in ways that would be difficult on a regional level because of outstanding disputes). Daalder and Goldgeier also stress the nonmilitary components of such a global NATO -- delivery of disaster relief, post-conflict reconstruction -- and speak of global threats only in the most general terms.

Frum, on the other hand, sees the expansion of NATO as a way to “punish China” for its failure to rein in North Korea. And herein lies the greatest challenge to this new form of U.S.-led multilateralism.

The U.S. position toward China is a prototype of liminality. China represents the greatest threat to U.S. interests for it is the only power on the horizon that can eventually challenge U.S. hegemony. But China is also a key ally that has bought up U.S. debt, cooperated on anti-terrorism activities, and served to twist North Korea’s arm at Washington’s behest (though it would certainly deny such a causal relationship). The

⁸ David Frum, “Mutually Assured Disruption,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 2006.

⁹ Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier, “Global NATO,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2006.

Bush administration's inheritance of the Clinton administration's "conengagement" approach to China undercuts the utility of a China "threat" to cement a multilateral security alliance in Northeast Asia. Daalder and Goldgeier never mention China in their essay, which is quite a remarkable omission.

The U.S. approach to China is by no means unique. China's opposition to PSI and missile defense has influenced the South Korean position; Chinese economic relations with South Korea and Japan make any threat-based security alliance, any NATO-like structure that substitutes China for the Soviet Union, a distinct improbability. Even a positively stated global NATO along Daalder and Goldgeier's lines would find little favor in Northeast Asia if it excluded China, for the Chinese would no doubt put pressure on South Korea not to join.

What about a different kind of multilateral security structure in Northeast Asia, one not based on a regional NATO-like structure or subsumed within a global NATO, but instead a more equitable regional system? Elsewhere I have assessed the minimum requirements for an East Asian "grand bargain" that could serve as the foundation of a new regional order.¹⁰ To summarize, I argued that the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) model began as a relatively informal structure, was built on East-West rapprochement, didn't posit multilateralism against bilateralism but instead as a complement, made room for the United States in the structure but not as *primus inter pares*, and satisfied key demands from participants that could only be met multilaterally. I concluded that the prospects for such a structure to take root in Northeast Asia were remote but not impossible. They required a stronger Japan-ROK bilateral relationship, a commitment by the United States to support Korean reunification, and an expansion of the multilateral efforts begun by China with the Six Party Talks.

The breakdown of the Six Party Talks, followed by the North Korean missile launches in July and the presumed nuclear test in October, has made the above scenario ever more

¹⁰ John Feffer, "Grave Threats and Grand Bargains," in John Feffer, ed., *The Future of U.S.-Korean Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

remote. While Japan and South Korea might find themselves moving closer together out of necessity (rather than true affection), China has suffered a setback in its attempts to resolve the crisis multilaterally and the two Koreas may well see a significant step backward in their mutual engagement.

An Asian CSCE remains a desirable option. And if the United States and North Korea were to find their way out of the current nuclear crisis, the region might again head in that direction. But this scenario remains rather abstract. A more likely order is already emerging subliminally: beneath the liminal uncertainty of regional relations. That emerging order is in some ways a reassertion of an older construct, namely the Sinocentric order that endured for centuries in East Asia.

Dragon Vs. Eagle

Speculation that China will construct a new regional order in Northeast Asia has derived from two major sources: economics and polling data. On the economic side, China surpassed Britain in 2005 to become the world's fourth largest economy. Also in 2005, China became Japan's largest trading partner (two years earlier, China had become South Korea's largest trading partner). China consumes more grain, meat, coal, and steel than the United States and is now the second leading consumer of oil.¹¹ According to rather crude extrapolations, China is expected to surpass the United States economically sometime between 2020 and 2030.¹²

China's rapid economic growth, and its eager adoption of "soft power" foreign policy, has clearly influenced global public opinion. When the Uri Party took over the South Korean parliament in April 2004, much was made of a poll that showed that a majority of the new lawmakers identified China as the "most important country" in determining

¹¹ Lester Brown, "China Replacing the United States as the World's Leading Consumer," Earth Policy Institute, February 16, 2005, at <http://www.earth-policy.org/Updates/Update45.htm>.

¹² C. Fred Bergsten, "The New Agenda with China," Institute for International Economics, May 1998, at <http://www.iie.com/publications/pb/pb.cfm?researchid=81>.

South Korea's foreign policy.¹³ In an article for YaleGlobal online, David Shambaugh cited an Australian poll -- this time of popular sentiment -- that showed the same eclipse of U.S. influence in the country in favor of China.¹⁴ Through 2005, polls were showing the high favorability ratings for China throughout Asia, even among countries such as Indonesia where anti-Chinese sentiment was notorious.¹⁵

Since that time, China's reputation has fallen a notch, at least in East Asia. South Korea and China have had several trade disputes, a minor tussle over ancient territorial claims (Koguryo), and a perhaps more substantial competition for gaining economic advantage in North Korea (as China has moved into North Korea's northeast with a 20-year lease of the port of Rajin and South Korea has established the Kaesong Industrial Complex in the south of North Korea). Japan and China have butted heads over oil deposits in disputed waters, and there has been a rise of anti-Japanese sentiment within China itself. These trends have moderated the earlier polling results. The economic numbers should also be taken with a grain of salt. If we look at per capita GDP, China ranks 110th in the world.¹⁶ More importantly, there is considerable doubt whether China can sustain its remarkable growth given resource constraints, growing inequality, popular protests, external pressure for current revaluation, and so on.

We should not be seduced into making predictions based on headline issues. The Koguryo and oil disputes are temporal issues. The challenges facing the Chinese economy, while significant, may simply postpone the day that China overtakes the United States (a trend that also depends on the trajectory of the U.S. economy, which faces its own endemic problems). Looking into the medium term, then, China's economic size, its more sophisticated foreign policy, its growing but by no means hegemonic military, and the popularity of its culture (movies, language), suggest that the only coherent security

¹³ Cho Se-hyon, "Lip Service," *Korea Herald*, April 27, 2004. According to the poll, 55 percent of the 138 representatives elected for the first time to the National Assembly named China as "the most important country" in formulating South Korean diplomacy while only 44.8 percent picked the United States.

¹⁴ David Shambaugh, "Rising Dragon and American Eagle," YaleGlobal Online, April 20, 2005, at <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=5601>.

¹⁵ "Who Will Lead the World," PIPA/Globescan poll, April 6, 2005.

¹⁶ *People's Daily Online*, October 9, 2006, at http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200610/09/eng20061009_310200.html.

order that will emerge in East Asia will be Sinocentric. The question is not so much what this order will look like, but how the United States decides to deal with it.

First, the emerging Sinocentric order will owe little to the “clash of civilizations” thesis and the purported Confucian commonality of East Asian countries. It will be based foremost on China’s economic power and the overseas Chinese community (both the older trading community and the new cadre of engineers and scientists). This economic base will depend as well on Beijing’s ability to serve as a broker for Russia’s energy resources not only to power China’s own industrial base but that of South Korea and Japan as well.

China’s diplomatic efforts, while stymied so far on the Korean peninsula, have been more successful in Southeast Asia (South China Sea), Central Asia (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), and South Asia (bilateral agreements with India and Pakistan). China’s military, while growing, has not yet been perceived as threatening (outside of Taiwan and a cadre of U.S. hawks). Beijing’s multilateral turn is motivated in part by a perceived need for a predictable set of foreign relations that can provide an environment within which the Chinese economy can maintain growth.

China long ago came to grips with the liminal quality of East Asian security. Sometimes China’s tolerance for the liminal is tactical. Hong Kong has been for a long time a liminal city, first as a British colony and now as a more-or-less democratic, capitalist enclave. Taiwan is a liminal country, with an uncertain foreign policy status. Beijing’s long-term ambition would be to move the territories it considers Chinese out of their liminal status and into its own sovereign space. In its relations with the near abroad, however, a liminal status can be maintained. The alliance with North Korea, for instance, has widened considerably since the era of “lips and teeth.” Military cooperation with the United States substantially blurs the line between mere adversarial relations.

What a Sinocentric order might look like in East Asia depends a great deal on how the United States responds. A form of *realpolitik* currently prevails in Washington, despite

the misgivings of the “Blue Team.” The Kissinger legacy of viewing a U.S.-China relationship in a balance-of-power calculus lives on, with global terrorism substituting for the Soviet Union in the equation. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review maintains the rhetoric of conengagement with its talk of China’s “potential to compete militarily with the United States” juxtaposed with rhetoric about China as a “partner in addressing common security challenges.”¹⁷ It is conceivable that this conengagement could morph into a spheres-of-influence arrangement if China’s economic leverage over the United States becomes greater (in much the same way that U.S. economic leverage over Britain led to the passing of the imperial torch).¹⁸

Under such a power-sharing arrangement, China and the United States would each exert primary control in its own sphere of influence. China would thus gradually gain power at the expense of the United States in Central Asia, on the Korean peninsula, and among certain Southeast Asian countries. Eventually, by expanding strategic flexibility, devolving military authority to Japan and South Korea, and shifting resources to the Middle East, the United States would retreat from Northeast Asia under cover of “strategic disengagement” or “retrograde maneuver” or some such euphemism. Washington is already attempting to establish a fallback containment ring by securing military agreements with India, the Philippines, and Australia. Looking further into the future, Taiwan would eventually follow Hong Kong’s path; a reunified Korean peninsula would be Finlandized; China, Japan, and Russia would settle their outstanding territorial disputes on the basis of cash settlements and trade concessions; and the region would construct some form of CSCE model but on China’s understanding of cooperative security not the United States (emphasizing peaceful coexistence rather than intrusive human rights standards).

On the other hand, the United States could refuse to negotiate its loss of influence in East Asia. In such a scenario, Beijing and Washington would move from conengagement

¹⁷ Quadrennial Defense Review, U.S. Department of Defense, February 6, 2006, at <http://www.defenselink.mil/qdr/>.

¹⁸ Emanuel Pastreich, “Is China the Nemesis in a New Cold War?” Policy Forum Online 06-18A, Nautilus Institute, March 6, 2006, at <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/0618Pastreich.html>.

toward open conflict as the “Blue Team” reestablished itself in some future administration. If global terrorism proves an illusory threat on which to justify U.S. hegemony worldwide, China may well return as a leading candidate.¹⁹

What is reasonably certain, however, is that East Asia will not remain in its current liminal state for long. Whether the region tilts toward the certainty associated with a new Cold War or toward the certainty of a more benign cooperative security system remains a matter for political, and not simply academic, debate.

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¹⁹ On the illusions of global terrorism, see John Mueller, “Is There Still a Terrorist Threat?” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2006.