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Asia in Transition: The Evolving Regional Order

DAVID SHAMBAUGH

The Asian subsystem of the global order is experiencing substantial change. New features are appearing while old characteristics are redefined. Traditional hard power factors now interact with emerging soft power issues. No single aspect is dominant—instead, a number of factors operate simultaneously and, taken together, constitute the regional order. Analysts, scholars, journalists, and government policy makers all need to readjust their perspectives and view the region through multiple prisms in order to take full account of this evolving and complex system. Comfortable paradigms are insufficient to explain new realities or prescribe helpful policy options.

Realism, liberalism, and constructivism—the three predominant international relations paradigms—all offer insights into trends that characterize the region. Realists perceive classic power balancing and hedging between major states (the United States and China, Japan and China, India and China) and emphasize growing military capacities and action-reaction “security dilemmas.” Liberals observe intensifying intraregional economic, social, and technological interdependence and multilateral arrangements among states and nonstate actors that serve as constraints on great power competition and the potential for conflict. Constructivists believe that common norms and a pan-regional identity are taking root among many Asian societies.

While each is valid and insightful to a certain extent, none of these prominent paradigms can

explain the totality of regional interactions in Asia today. Nor can any metatheory explain it better. What can be discerned are five defining features that collectively capture the current complexities and essence of international relations in Asia.

THE HUB AND SPOKES

First, the US-led security system remains the predominant regional security architecture across Asia. This system includes five bilateral alliances in East Asia; non-allied security partnerships in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania; a buildup of US forces in the Pacific; new US-India and US-Pakistan military relationships; and the US military presence and defense arrangements in Southwest and Central Asia. Taken together, these comprise the dominant security architecture spanning Asia.

The alliance system is commonly referred to as the “hub and spokes” model, with the United States serving as the hub of a wheel and with each of the five bilateral alliances (Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand) serving as the spokes. The system has benefited the United States and its Asian allies for more than five decades and has been the primary regional security architecture since the end of the Vietnam War. It has been central to the maintenance of strategic stability and economic development throughout East Asia. Even China has benefited from the security and stability engendered by the system, which has provided an environment conducive to China’s recent explosive economic development.

During the second Clinton administration, but particularly during the tenure of President George W. Bush, the United States has sought to strengthen each of these bilateral alliances. In the case of the US-Australian alliance, this has involved stepped-up

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diplomatic consultations, joint military training, and intelligence sharing, as well as the repositioning of supplies and logistics support. Australia has also contributed to the “coalition of the willing” by deploying troops to Iraq, and President Bush and Prime Minister John Howard have forged a close bond.

In the case of Japan, the strengthening of the alliance has involved collaboration on theater missile defense, a troop realignment that has reduced Okinawa’s burden in hosting US forces, and the issuance in 2005 of a “Joint 2+2 Statement” on mutual security interests (which outlined 12 common strategic objectives, including a controversial clause identifying Taiwan as a matter of “mutual security concern”).

The US Global Defense Posture Review envisions changes in deployments and command structures that increase joint military interoperability and that further facilitate Japan’s involvement in global peacekeeping operations. Washington has also pushed for Japan to assume a larger role in Asian regional maritime security (anathema to a number of Asian states), increase its defense spending, modernize its forces, and contribute more to international peacekeeping. Japan’s unprecedented deployment of forces to Iraq has commanded respect in the White House and Pentagon, even if it has caused consternation elsewhere.

The US-South Korea alliance has undergone redefinition, insofar as the Pentagon has decided to redeploy some forces out of central Seoul and away from the Demilitarized Zone, in line with a broader rethinking of South Korean defenses. But the alliance has also experienced substantial tension because of rising anti-Americanism in South Korea as well as divisions between Seoul and Washington over the handling of the North Korean nuclear crisis.

The US-Philippines and US-Thailand alliances have also been upgraded. Both have been designated as “major non-NATO allies,” thus making them eligible for large security assistance packages. In both cases, cooperation on counterterrorism operations has assumed a central place in joint training and other assistance.

While the military components of each of these alliances have been upgraded, the political dimensions of some have experienced significant strain in recent years. In a few cases they have been strained politically because of the military components. In

South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, the behavior of US forces has created fervent frictions with local communities. The broad global policies of the Bush administration have deepened these tensions in some cases. Relations with China have been a further irritant in a few alliances, with Australia, South Korea, and Thailand all drawing closer to Beijing than some in the Bush administration would like. These governments have indicated that they do not intend to compromise their ties with China just to please Washington. In other words, these allies are now seeking to balance their ties with the United States and China, rather than continuing their singular strategic tilt toward the United States.

China’s growing, and America’s declining, popularity among US allies has been further evidenced in public opinion polling. A recent survey of Australians, conducted by the Lowy Institute in Sydney, found that 69 percent had “positive feelings” toward China, while only 58 percent felt likewise about the United States. Polling in South Korea and Thailand reveals an even greater gap

in favor of China. Only in Japan is there a clear public preference for the United States over China.

Meanwhile, in addition to strengthening the military components of its alliances, the United States has moved to solidify non-allied security partnerships with India, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Singapore. In each case, these security partnerships involve joint exercises, training, intelligence sharing, arms sales, military educational exchanges, and a wide range of military assistance programs. Indonesia has also recently re-qualified for US military assistance programs (after a decade hiatus), Malaysia has quietly begun to buy large amounts of US weaponry, and military-to-military exchanges have commenced between the United States and Vietnam. In Central Asia, the United States has maintained air bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in connection with the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Each of these security partnerships is significant in its own right; but taken together, they strongly supplement the five bilateral alliances in East Asia and help form a dense web of security and military partnerships between the United States and the majority of Asian nations stretching from Northeast to Southwest Asia. Only North Korea, Laos, China, Cambodia, Burma, and Nepal lie outside the purview of US defense arrangements.

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are not stable, East Asia is not stable.*

Notable too is the fact that these alliances and security partnerships geographically ring China. This is no accident, and represents US “hedging” against the potential for strategic rivalry with China—a strategy that is led by the Pentagon. The Pentagon’s new Quadrennial Defense Review makes clear that China is seen by Defense Department planners as the only prospective strategic competitor on the horizon, and the review stipulates a substantial redeployment of US forces to the Pacific theater for this reason.

In addition to strategic partnering with various Asian nations, the United States has undertaken its own unilateral military buildup in the Pacific. In particular, Guam is being developed into a forward base of major significance. The forces deployed there are directly relevant to China and potential contingencies in the Taiwan Strait or the Korean Peninsula, but could also be used for deployments into the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and broader Middle East. Andersen Air Force base on Guam is home to the 13th Air Force command, and includes growing numbers of B-1, B-2, and B-52 strategic bombers, long-range transports, reconnaissance aircraft, jet fighters, in-flight refueling tankers, and other aircraft. Guam is now also home to a growing number of Los Angeles-class nuclear attack submarines and surface combatant ships. Consideration is being given to basing an aircraft carrier battle group at the island. And the Third Marine Expeditionary Force is being relocated to Guam from Okinawa. A similar strengthening of US forces in Hawaii, Alaska, and the West Coast of the United States supplements the buildup in Guam.

Despite its pervasiveness, the US-led security system cannot be said to be truly and fully regional. A number of countries—most notably China—remain unaffiliated, and have no compelling reasons to join. Nonetheless, it is this US-led system of alliances and partnerships that provides for regional stability and security—public goods from which all Asian nations benefit.

PROACTIVE CHINA

A second feature of the emerging regional order—and one of the most significant developments of the past decade—is China’s proactive engagement of its periphery. China’s new regional posture is reflected in virtually all policy spheres—economic, cultural, diplomatic, and strategic—and this parallels China’s increased activism on the global stage. In each of these realms, China’s efforts and progress in reaching out to its neighbors have

been truly impressive (with the notable exceptions of Japan and Taiwan).

As China has reached out, its neighbors have reciprocated and have redefined their relations with Beijing. As China’s influence continues to grow, some of these countries are looking to Beijing for regional leadership or, at a minimum, are taking China’s views and sensitivities more into account. Even those less certain of Beijing’s short-term motives and long-term strategy recognize the benefits of binding China into a web of institutional arrangements that will constrain its potential for disruptive regional behavior.

Overcoming its earlier hesitancy to engage in regional multilateral forums, China since 1998 has taken an active role in many of the groups. Beijing has also worked hard to address and alleviate one of the region’s most contentious issues: the North Korean nuclear crisis. The Chinese government’s general embrace of regional multilateralism is significant, since no regional institution can be considered effective unless China is an active participant. Beijing’s engagement in regional diplomacy places it increasingly at the center of all regional issues, bilateral and multilateral. And China’s growing centrality to the economic and technological networks of production and supply chains that crisscross the region serves as a stabilizing factor.

Bilaterally and multilaterally, Beijing’s diplomacy has been remarkably adept and nuanced, earning praise throughout the region. As a result, most nations in Asia—with the exception of Japan—now see China as a good neighbor, constructive partner, and status quo regional power. This Asian perspective is striking, given that just a few years ago many of China’s neighbors voiced growing concerns about the possibility of China becoming a domineering regional hegemon and powerful military threat. Today these views are more muted.

Even former adversaries such as Vietnam, India, Indonesia, South Korea, and Russia now enjoy sound and steadily improving ties with Beijing. To be sure, Beijing’s strained relations with Japan are a major blight on this otherwise positive trend, and some countries (particularly Singapore, Vietnam, and India) are hedging their bets by strengthening ties with the United States. Overall, however, China’s cooperative diplomacy has become a defining—and positive—feature of the emerging regional order.

“HEDGED ENGAGEMENT”

The third significant feature of the regional order is the evolving relationship between the United

States and China. This complex relationship is currently characterized by substantial cooperation on bilateral, regional, and global issues. Yet, despite this tangible and positive cooperation, there remain evident suspicions and distrust of the other's motives and actions. As a result, the state of Sino-American relations today may be characterized by David M. Lampton's term "hedged engagement": both sides are engaging to a significant extent, yet are hedging against the possibility of a deterioration of ties. Looking to the future, the Sino-American relationship is likely to continue to exhibit these paradoxical features.

Although both nations occasionally display traditional balance-of-power and strategic hedging practices, it should be recognized that Sino-American cooperation is real. And bilateral interdependence has never been thicker—as evidenced by China's vast holdings of US Treasury bonds, a trade relationship worth more than \$200 billion annually, growing societal interactions, and the attention that each country pays to the other.

Further, it must be recognized that the *absence* of Sino-American antagonism is an important feature of the regional order. While some Asian countries may hedge against either US or Chinese regional domination—and acquire whatever resources and benefits they can from both China and the United States—every one of these countries seeks a stable, cooperative Sino-American relationship. Should Beijing and Washington one day confront each other, all regional states would experience their worst nightmare: they would be put in the position of having to choose sides, and this they seek to avoid at all costs.

There are, of course, tensions in the relationship. For Washington, the ballooning trade deficit is primary, while China's human rights record and media censorship have risen on the US agenda. Taiwan is always a potentially volatile issue, but both sides appear to have worked well together to manage it and contain the Chen Shuibian government's independence inclinations. Intellectual property rights are another notable concern. China's military modernization is viewed warily by Washington, the Pentagon in particular. China's relations with the rogue states of Burma, Iran, Sudan, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe have also drawn critical attention in Washington. Meanwhile, the US security partnerships and military buildup in the Pacific are of concern to Beijing. None of these issues, however, are grounds for a significant cleavage in the relationship.

The principal tasks before Washington and Beijing are thus to manage these issues, maximize

cooperation, engage in regular and candid dialogue, and minimize strategic competition. This requires regular, institutionalized exchanges between the two governments and militaries at all levels. Reducing misperceptions and enhancing trust should be a priority.

Dialogue is no guarantor of agreement, but it is an important confidence-building measure that can lead to tangible cooperation. The past few years have witnessed significantly increased bilateral dialogue in all sectors and at all levels, including a special channel between Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick and Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo. The breadth and depth of the dialogue represent the true institutionalization of ties and are a positive indicator that a "floor" exists beneath the often fluctuating relationship.

SOURING CHINA-JAPAN TIES

While Sino-American relations are characterized by a mixture of engagement and hedging, with significant cooperation and extensive exchanges, unfortunately the same cannot be said for Sino-Japanese relations. This relationship between two of Asia's four leading powers (India and the United States being the others) has progressively atrophied in recent years. It is on the verge of being politically and diplomatically dysfunctional, despite the robust economic relationship between the two nations. Some describe it as "hot economics, cold politics," but in fact the relationship is more complex than that.

Suspicious, nationalism, and hostility run deep in each society. Mutual perceptions are increasingly negative, as measured by numerous public opinion polls in each country. The "history issue" hangs as a dark cloud over the entire relationship, and repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine—which honors Japanese war dead—by Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi are a frequent and unnecessary irritant. To make matters worse, the potential for military engagements over disputed maritime claims in the East China Sea/Sea of Japan and around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is growing. Japan also views China's military modernization as unnecessary, even threatening (with China expressing similar concerns about Japan's military).

This is a combustible environment. The maritime-energy dispute could ignite a broader confrontation that could quickly escalate, and would put the United States into a delicate and uncomfortable position. Given its alliance with Japan, Washington would have little choice but to side with Tokyo in any such dispute.

The atrophy in relations needs to be arrested immediately, and a series of confidence-building measures established. The United States can, and should, play a constructive role in this process.

The deteriorating Sino-Japanese relationship is not simply a bilateral matter—it has implications across the region. If relations between China and Japan are not stable, East Asia is not stable. Furthermore, Sino-Japanese instability is becoming an inherent danger in Sino-American relations. The United States risks being drawn into a confrontation with China over Japan's behavior.

American national interests are, of course, best served by functional and cooperative relations along all three sides of the US-China-Japan triangle. This was the case from the 1970s through the 1990s, when Washington enjoyed positive ties with both for the first time in a century, but such symmetry has dissolved over the past few years. Today, the United States must balance its strategic and economic interests with both China and Japan, not simply tilt toward Japan.

Washington should use its considerable leverage to urge Japan to deal in an effective manner with the history issue by emulating a German-style sustained domestic effort in educating the public about the causes and consequences of Japan's aggression during World War II. President Bush should also urge Prime Minister Koizumi to cease immediately his visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, and to remove the remains of the World War II-era Class A war criminals interred there. Truth and historical reconciliation commissions should also be established.

Much work needs to be done in this domain—and as long as the US government remains silent and unresponsive on this issue, it is seen by China and other Asian nations as complicit in Japan's obstinate behavior. Japan may seek to become a "normal nation" and even aspires to a seat on the UN Security Council. Washington has been supportive of both goals, but as long as Tokyo fails to effectively deal with the history issue it will never have a normal relationship with its Asian neighbors. (Koreans and many Southeast Asians feel as passionately as do Chinese about the issue.) It is not in US national interests for Japan to be so isolated from its own region and tethered solely to its alliance with the United States.

THE NEW SECURITY COMMUNITY

The fifth and final defining feature of the evolving Asian order is the gradual emergence of a regional security community and growing multilateral architecture that is based on a series of increasingly shared norms about interstate relations and security. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum, or ARF, is the cornerstone of this emerging regional community, but the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation are also important components. These organizations are forms of cooperative, rather than collective, security. China's growing embrace of them is a positive sign and may move the region gradually in the direction of further institutionalization. Asian nations are also increasingly engaging in combined military exercises—some US-led, some bilateral.

In the area of nontraditional security, effective intraregional cooperation is already occurring in a wide variety of areas, including economic security, nonproliferation, resource management, public health, counterterrorism, illicit narcotics, smuggling, piracy, organized crime, human traf-

ficking, container security, and disaster relief. Energy security is an issue ripe for multilateral cooperation.

Although the growth of multilateralism in Asia has had a late start compared with Europe or the Americas—and it has a long way to go to reach comparable levels of institutional integration—there has nonetheless been significant progress in recent years. One reason for the increase in the number of dialogues, groupings, and multilateral mechanisms in Asia has been the growing acceptance of common norms within the region. Once norms are institutionalized, they have a kind of binding effect on member states. The diversity of Asian societies, cultures, and economic and political systems will be a challenge for Asian states to overcome, but there are increasing signs of normative convergence around the region.

Growing regional multilateral cooperation mirrors the intensifying interdependence that is occurring throughout Asia. This feature of the evolving Asian system is oriented not around security affairs or major power relations, but around an increasingly thick web of economic, scientific, technological, cultural, societal, educational, and other ties being forged among Asians in an era of accelerating glob-

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alization. The core actor in this process is not the nation-state but a plethora of nonstate actors that create links at the societal level: trade, investment, transport, communications, education, research, tourism, and other forms of daily interaction.

Indeed, they point up another significant way in which the Asian region is changing: its traditional geographic subcomponents—Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Southwest Asia, and Central Asia—are no longer useful intellectual constructs for dividing or distinguishing the macro processes occurring throughout the region. In the twenty-first century, these five subregions are all increasingly interconnected and interdependent at numerous levels.

Regional interdependence—a rapidly accelerating trend—serves as a powerful deterrent to conflict, and is conducive to peace and stability (including across the Taiwan Strait). Yet, as profound as this dynamic is, interdependence by itself is insufficient to establish a dominant regional system in Asia. It does not operate at the nation-state level, nor does it necessarily require the creation of security arrangements—features that any truly regional system must exhibit.

SHAPES OF THINGS TO COME

Asia remains a tremendously complex region, composed of no fewer than 30 states. Globalization and the region's new regional dynamics have only made it more multifaceted. In thinking about the universe of systemic possibilities for the Asian order in the future, a number of options are conceivable. Although some of these seem unlikely, it is important to consider the full range of possibilities.

One future is a hegemonic system, dominated by a single major power. Primary candidates include the United States and China, but neither appears to have the requisite composite strength and influence to dominate the region. When China was weak and insular (from the 1950s to the 1980s), the United States was the dominant regional power, if not hegemon. But the "rise" of China and India, the continued economic weight of Japan, and the increased normative influence of ASEAN have contributed to diminishing American dominance. The United States may still be the dominant military power in the region today, but even US power is not omnipotent. As one Southeast Asian diplomat suggested to me, "The United States may still hold the

balance of power in Asia, but no longer the balance of influence."

A second possibility is major power rivalry resulting in a balance-of-power system, characterized by two competing major powers: the United States and China. A number of observers, most notably Aaron Friedberg—the Princeton University realist theorist and former Bush administration adviser—posit this as the most likely (or even current) defining nature of the region. If this were the case, one would see competing blocs of nations aligned or allied with the United States and China, an overtly adversarial tenor in bilateral Sino-American relations, military deployments geared to countering the other, and a range of economic and technological sanctions against each other.

While there is evidence that the US military footprint and deployments in Asia are increasingly geared to China contingencies (a form of unilateral "soft containment"), they are also useful for other conflict scenarios as well (in the Persian Gulf and Korea). Nor does one see the kind of strate-

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gic alignments taking shape to suggest a balance-of-power system. Most important, as noted earlier, the United States and Chinese governments are currently cooperating on a broad range of regional and global issues, and the two nations' economies and societies are inextricably bound together.

A variant of this, but a distinct third possibility, is the theory of structural asymmetry and inevitable clash between the main established power (the United States) and the main rising power (China). Such an alternative is distinct because it rejects the possibility of a balance of power, and argues instead that it is an iron law of the history of international relations that all powers seek hegemony.

This argument is most forcefully made by John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago. Where the classic realist view of international relations is premised on the Hobbesian notion that the international system is inherently anarchical, and thus needs either a balance of two major powers or a single dominant-but-benevolent hegemon to keep the peace, Mearsheimer's "structural asymmetry school" is more Darwinian in its core argument. In his book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, and a recent article in *Foreign Policy*, "Clash of the Titans," Mearsheimer contended that all major powers inevitably seek global hegemony, and that China is

no different. On this basis he predicts an inevitable clash between the United States (the established power and global hegemon) and China (the rising global power and aspirant hegemon), and thus argues for “preemptive containment” of China by the United States and its allies.

But Mearsheimer’s thesis of international relations is historically flawed, his analysis of China disconnected from reality and history, and his policy prescription downright dangerous. Indeed, even if the US government agreed with Mearsheimer and decided that preemptive containment of China was a desirable option, not a single other nation would go along with such a policy. All of China’s neighbors, the European Union, and nations across the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America are fully engaging China and have no intention of changing course. If anything, an American decision to try to contain China would both fail and cause unnecessary frictions between Washington and other nations.

A fourth conceptual possibility would be a concert of powers in which the region is dominated by, and stability preserved through, agreements and cooperative actions undertaken by the three to five most powerful regional powers. The best example of this type of system was the Concert of Europe, which functioned for almost half a century in the wake of the Congress of Vienna in 1815. But Asia has never known such a system—indeed its history over the past two centuries has been characterized by great power competition and conflict. And as long as China’s relations with Japan, India, and the United States are characterized by lesser or greater degrees of suspicion and friction, a Concert of Asia will never come to pass. The dysfunctional and antagonistic China-Japan relationship by itself rules out such a scenario.

POWER COUPLES?

A fifth possibility would be a condominium of powers, whereby the two strongest powers in the region collaborate to dominate the region and cooperate in maintaining regional stability. While Washington and Beijing are cooperating today on a range of regional and global issues, their lingering suspicions and strategic hedging rule out such a possibility. A Sino-American condominium would also require the abandonment of, or Beijing’s harmonization with, the US-Japan alliance. During the 1970s and 1980s, China largely supported the alliance, since it seemed to Beijing an effective way to keep a cap on Japan’s military development and regional roles (the “cork in the bottle”), but this is no longer

the case. Today, Beijing sees Washington pushing Tokyo to build a stronger military and assume greater security roles—all anathema to China’s own national security interests and regional aspirations.

A sixth alternative would be a regional system forming a hierarchy of powers, with one power atop a pyramid of less powerful and subservient nations. A hierarchical order is a kind of patron-client system, whereby the dominant power extends security protection and other tangible economic and political benefits to its client states. It also requires a form of “bandwagoning” of states together with the dominant regional power.

This was the case with the traditional Chinese-led “tribute system” that existed for much of the pre-modern era before European imperial powers encroached on it and destroyed it beginning in the eighteenth century. Today, the United States provides such a system for its allies—but they constitute only five of the thirty nations in Asia (hence it is not all-encompassing and pan-regional). Nor can China provide such assets to its neighbors. Even if China had the desire, it does not possess the capability to provide “extended deterrence” and security guarantees to its neighbors. Nor can India or Japan. Thus there is no single nation capable of heading such a hierarchical system at present or into the foreseeable future.

A seventh and final alternative would be a region-wide collective security network—either along the allied lines of NATO or the non-allied Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Although the ARF could conceivably evolve into an Asian version of the OSCE, it still has a long way to go to reach the level of consensus and institutionalization that has existed for more than two decades in Europe. An Asian version of NATO, a multilateral security alliance, seems inconceivable given the diversity of political systems, cultures, and extant security dilemmas that characterize the Asian landscape.

Even if these seven conceptual possibilities do not obtain or apply at present, several of these models characterized the regional system in the past—and may do so again in the future. This leaves us with an Asian region that, for now, exhibits the five defining features outlined earlier.

The emerging and evolving Asian system today is a mixture of realist, liberal, and constructivist elements—with major powers vying for influence, while interdependence deepens, and behavioral norms and multilateral institutions develop. Such cross-trends may not make for conceptual clarity, but they do constitute the current reality. ■