Rethinking the International Order in East Asia: Neither War Nor Peace

By ***Inoguchi Takashi***

Abstract

It has never been easy to conceptualize the East Asian international order, now or in the past. It is a complex order. It is also a historically rich order. I will refer to four debates of the East Asian international order to illustrate this point. The four are: (a) China-centered hierarchy versus China among equals; (b) formal institutions versus informal networks; (c) balancing versus jumping on the bandwagon of the rise of China; and (d) alignment with versus distance from American unilateralism. I argue in the end that it is all worthy of praise to analyze from a certain set of theoretical doctrines, but it would be desirable for any sharply focused theoretically driven analysis to bring in a couple of other historical and contextual factors to show clearly how far such theoretically driven analysis can go.

East Asian International Order

The definition of East Asia changes from time to time. Most common during much of the 20th century is the one that regarded East Asia as a region where two landmarks, Chinese ideographs and Mahayana Buddhism prevailed, i.e., China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Korea and Japan. In Victorian England, the definition of East Asia covered the region which is all the space the East India Company covered, i.e., British India, Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia. In the discussion of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Plus Three, the definition of East Asia covers both Southeast and Northeast Asia. Coming up steadily is the definition of East Asia which is not very different from the Victorian definition, i.e., East Asia comprising all of Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and perhaps Central Asia as well. In this paper, I use East Asia in the conventional sense of covering the Northeast and Southeast, but when the need arises, also including South Asia as well.

First Debate: Chinese Hierarchy versus China among Equals

The debate was triggered by John King Fairbank, a student of China confronting the West in the mid-19th century and Maurice Bassabi, a student of the Song China which was surrounded by its competitors in the 10-12th centuries. The hierarchy school advocated by Fairbank argues as follows. China was not a territorially tightly governed empire, but rather it was an entity which accepted tributary relations from its neighbors. China gained stability along its borders and neighbors and was given the upper-hand vis-à-vis its domestic contenders, because it monopolized legitimacy and benefits from trade/tribute relations. This led to the hierarchy and stability in the East Asian international order. Fairbank portrayed the China-centered international order as pertaining throughout Chinese history until the coming of the West in the mid-19th century.

Opposed to this notion is Bassabi, who argued that China acted like a France always mindful of power games vis-à-vis an emerging and threatening power within China and its adjacent space. It was one of the equals. The hierarchy and stability were very fragile and temporary. Looking at the entire history of China, the most striking fact was that those narrowly Han-originating dynasties were very few (Qin, Song and Ming), that the supremacy of military power and strategy was decisive in determining the course of its history, and that non-Han dynasties were key agents in bringing order and stability to the East Asian order (Yuan, Qing and arguably Tang as well). The alleged importance of tributary relations and its associated hierarchy may be attributed to three factors: the sheer tyranny of distance given the low level of technology (cf. Robert Gilpin); the civilizing influence of China triggering nation-building efforts in its adjacent areas; China's potentially massive military forces were prone to intervene especially when the new political leader found it necessary to demonstrate his/her aptitude and greatness in exercising leadership.

From a distance, one might observe that the former resembles what is called hegemonic stability theory (Gilpin), while the latter looks like a balance of power theory. But its hegemonic stability theory has not been able to explain much of the East Asian international order as long as China is taken as a hegemony once the West arrives, be it Britain in the mid-19th century or the United States in the 20th century. In a similar vein its balance of power theory has not been able to explain much as China has kept more or less unified territorially since the time of the Yuan dynasty.

Second Debate: Formal Institutions versus Informal Networks

Turning to the regional order in the last quarter of the 20th century, there was a strong school of integrationists which argued that East and Southeast Asia lacks formal institutional mechanisms to integrate the region. Rather, what is called a loose open regionalism has effectively prevented the region from integrating itself. They often suggest that East and Southeast Asia should learn from the western Europe of the latter half of the 20th century in order to establish formal institutional mechanisms (cf. John Ravenhill).

Another school of thought argues that a focus on formal institutions misses the point. Rather, informal networks function powerfully as adjusting mechanisms when formal institutions cannot be

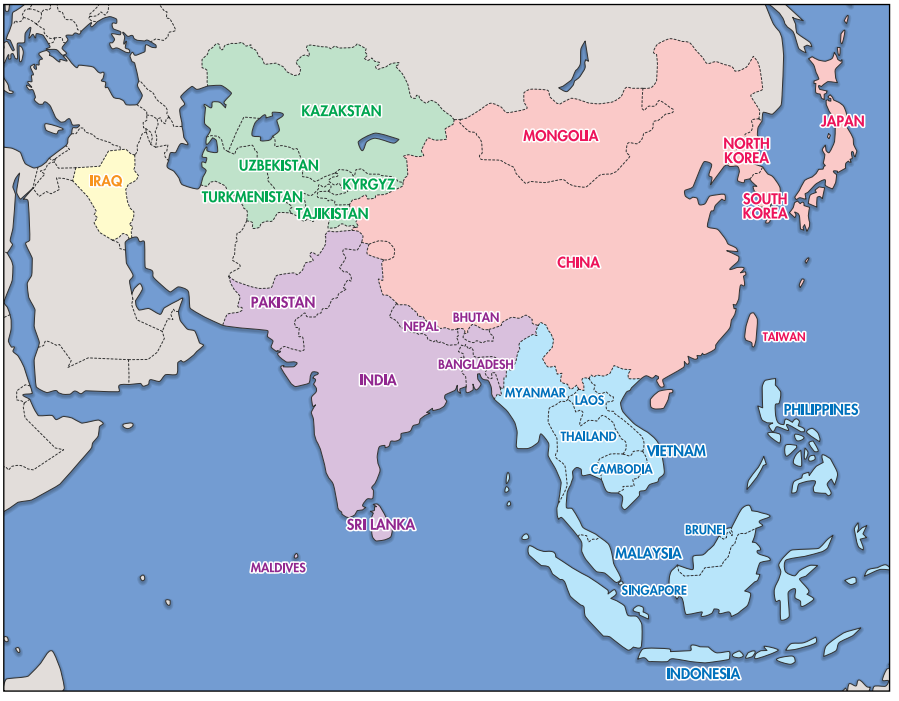
established (cf. Peter J. Katzenstein/ Shiraishi Takashi). Examples include cultural Chinese networks, Japanese *keiretsu* networks and American Ph.D.s. Given the strongly self-guarding state institutions, and given the dynamic economies of the region, informal arrangements on the basis of networks among actors equipped with cohesion and flexibility do make a difference in adjusting to fast changing market environments.

The former tends to be liberal and/or statist institutionalist in that binding commitments with norms and rules are portrayed as a sine qua non of community building. Shaping and sharing norms and rules are portrayed as a driving force toward community building. It also emphasizes the envisioning capacity of potential members. In other words, both grand architecture and passion about regional identity are regarded as essential to community building.

The latter tends to attach more importance to ad hoc pragmatic adaptation to changes. As long as market dynamism (given demographic size, developmental momentum and high educational level) and the American military presence (given the U.S. commitment with hegemony and non-isolationism) are associated with the region, pragmatic management rather than architecture construction should be given higher priority.

Third Debate: Balancing versus Bandwagoning

The rise of China has been an exciting source of intermittent debate on how China's neighbors choose their action. Within what is called the realist school, two instructions exist. One is to counterbalance the rise of China (cf. Avery Goldstein). The other is to join forces and lend support (if not armed) to the rise of China (cf. Robert Ross). The balance of power school argues that given the overwhelming potential and actual threat China has been creating and given the set of adjacent countries that are much smaller, it is natural that they join forces to counter the prospect of the emergence of an overwhelming regional hegemon. The bandwagoning school predicts that given the desperate set of adjacent countries and the defensive realist nature of the Chinese strategy for the foreseeable years to come, their lending support to China is a safe bet.



One of those factors that are sometimes nearly missing in this debate is the American factor. Its globally hegemonic character makes the bandwagoning school sound slightly strange as China's adjacent countries are often part of the American hegemonic umbrella. Similarly its globally hegemonic character makes the balancing school sound slightly strange as their act of balancing vis-à-vis China is bound to be conducted along with the United States. Their action is jumping on the U.S. bandwagon, an action triggered by the emergence of the Chinese threat. On the other hand, its maritime orientation often leads the United States to adopt the policy of offshore balancing, not deeply involved or engaged with Continental power politics too much. Thus when the United States is to lean toward an isolationist stance, it temporarily ceases to be a power that counts.

This prompts China's neighbors to have two choices, balancing or bandwagoning. But in order to posit the question, one needs to treat the American factor much more frontally in the debate.

Also not to be dismissed is the bandwagoning-like interpretation of economic interdependence. As if lured by the ever expanding Chinese market, a huge number of business firms pour their direct investment into China especially from its neighbors. An important point here is to distinguish the language of business and power.

Business uniformly bespeaks itself whereas power has its uniquely characteristic meaning each time it is exercised. Sometimes business speak is convergent with power speak. But not always. Rather, the flow of foreign trade and direct investment into China might not be interpreted directly and singularly as leaning to the growing regional hegemon.

Photo: REUTERS • SUN

Former French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin (left) and German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (right) at the Security Council meeting at the United Nations before the Iraq War began

Debate on American Unilateralism: Alignment versus Distance

The Iraq War was started by the United States. The opposition to start a war against Iraq was raised fiercely and vigorously by the three permanent members of the United Nations Security Council: France, Russia and China. The United States went ahead of the rest together with the United Kingdom in attacking Iraq. This was one of the clearest examples of American unilateralism along with its non-implementation of the Kyoto accord, the non-participation in legislating multilateral efforts to regulate biological weapons and its lack of interest in joining the Conference on Disarmament resolution on the eradication of nuclear weapons (cf. John Bolton, G. John Ikenberry). The inclination of the United States to go ahead alone if necessary on the basis of its resolve and its military power to advance what it considers as its vital national interest was especially salient in the first one and a half years of the Bush Administration. At its height, the Iraq War erupted. The Iraq War has occasioned the schism of the West in the form of the cleavage which made the United Nations temporarily ineffective and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization temporarily dormant. Some countries, most notably France, Germany, Russia and China, have taken a sharp distance from the United States. Others have aligned with the United States as the "coalition of the willing." The resistance of Iraqis to the American occupation has been leading some countries which sent troops to Iraq to withdraw from the country.

In East Asia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Thailand also sent troops to Iraq. Having seen Spain and some others depart from Iraq, the Philippines and Thailand have indicated that they might withdraw troops from Iraq at some point, if the situation worsens. Much earlier in 2004, South Korea indicated that it would send a fairly large number of troops that would rank South Korea as second to none among the American allies in terms of the number of troops sent there. Japan has been steadfast in its commitment to counter terrorism and to help reconstruct Iraq. Late last year, two Japanese diplomats were killed; earlier this year five Japanese nationals were kidnapped and were later released. These two events seem to have hardened the attitude of the Japanese government toward helping Iraqis to reconstruct their war-damaged economy. Needless to say, other East Asian countries, China and Vietnam are keeping some distance from the United States on Iraq but not on economic issues. Malaysia and Indonesia, Muslim countries, take manifestly critical stances on Iraq. North Korea does not hide its hostile attitude toward the United States on Iraq and other issues.

Enduring unilateralism and waiting for the United States to come around to multilateralism seem to be the modal attitude of East Asia irrespective of the distance from the United States. Voicing from within to the United States about the wisdom of working together with others has been the preference of Japan with respect to unilateralism. The type of United Nations resolution East Asian countries may try to adopt in anticipation of a power transfer to an Iraqi government in the very near future would be a good litmus test for unilateralism. JS

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