Prospects for a Northeast Asian Multilateral Security Order and the United States

Jangho Kim

Abstract

Ever since the end of the Cold War, both policymakers and academics alike have proposed and advocated varied versions of a multilateral security order in Northeast Asia. Given the global trend toward such security management, the lack of progress toward a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia has puzzled many observers. This paper seeks to highlight two of the overarching, yet often overlooked, factors inhibiting the development of security structures in Northeast Asia. The first is that the transitional nature of the current order is preventing the major powers from committing to a new security arrangement, and cooperative measures, in fear of another power obtaining the larger share of the gains from such an endeavor. Second, the fundamental geopolitical interests of the major powers in the region in general, and with the Sino-American relations in particular, simply do not provide a fertile foundation for multilateral efforts to flourish. The U.S. geopolitical interest in Northeast Asia is to prevent the rise of a hegemon, and the complexity of the situation arises both from China’s aspirations as well as its actual and latent power. This is partially why the current post-Cold War era is being prolonged, as well as having such a fluid character. Much will depend on how this relationship is managed. In fact, the manner in which the characteristics of the transitional post–Cold War period evolve will largely be sculpted by the future of Sino-American relations.
Introduction

Ever since the end of the Cold War, both policymakers and academics alike have proposed and advocated varied versions of a multilateral security order in Northeast Asia. Given the global trend toward such security management, the lack of progress toward a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia has puzzled many observers. Realists argue that the possibility of a genuine multilateral security order appearing in Northeast Asia in the near future is next to none, given the mere presence of four great powers in the region, along with their divergent threat perceptions. Even the liberals, specifically the proponents of the liberal transition perspectives, are very pessimistic about intra-regional peacebuilding. In a pluralistic security community, a group of states must share interests and values with sufficient commonality that the use of force to settle conflicts among them becomes essentially unthinkable. They claim that China and North Korea have to join the liberal camp of democracy and market economy in order for the process toward true security cooperation to begin. According to the constructivists, the circle of negative perception—anchored by historical animosity, and nationalistic ethos—dampens the prospects for peacebuilding in the region. This certainly seems true, given the current state of affairs between, and among, China, Japan and South Korea. Issue-oriented studies have pointed to the various frictions that are occurring between and among the states of the region such as the territorial problems, proliferation issues and differing interpretation of history as factors that must be overcome in order to begin a true movement toward a multilateral security management.

Although the author wholeheartedly agrees with these assessments, this paper seeks to highlight two of the more fundamental and overarching, yet often overlooked, factors contributing to the retardation of multilateral security institution-building in Northeast Asia, in order to fully comprehend the reasons for the lack of true cooperation. These two reasons represent the root cause of the many potentially destabilizing issues that have arisen recently and are being dealt with by academia. First, the transitional nature of the current order is preventing the major players from committing to a new security arrangement and preventing cooperative measures due to the fear of another power obtaining the larger share of the gains from such an endeavor. This is a classic realist case of a state refraining from a commitment in fear of a potential adversary outgaining it in a cooperative effort. This tendency is further accentuated because of the ascendancy of China’s profile in regional affairs as well as speculation of change in the regional balance of power.

Second, the fundamental geopolitical interests of the major powers in the region in general, and with the Sino-American relations in particular, simply do not overlap to provide a fertile foundation for multilateral efforts to prosper. America’s geopolitical objective in Northeast Asia is as simple as it is difficult to achieve and maintain: to prevent the rise of a potentially hegemonic power. The same goal applies for the European theater. The United States has fought in both World Wars, as well as the Korean War, among others, to achieve this goal. Disengagement of the United States from the Northeast Asian region has been advocated and also predicted by many. But from a geopolitical point of view, it is simply not in the American interest to do so. Its geopolitical objective of preventing a hegemonic power arising in Pacific Asia has remained constant since the acquisition of the Philippine Islands. The complexity of the situation arises from both the speculation concerning China’s aspirations as well as its actual and latent power. A lot will depend on how the United States manages to exercise its geopolitical interest in this setting.

Much of the academic work done recently concerning the international relations of Northeast Asia has had the tendency to spotlight

---


various issues independently, thus isolating the issues from the bigger picture. This paper analyzes the underlying source of these various issues. To illustrate, the paper is divided into three main parts. The following section seeks to elaborate the proposition that the transitional nature, or the perception of such characteristic by the actors of the region, is hindering the appearance of a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia.

Northeast Asia in Transition

Even a decade after the end of the global East-West confrontation, the largely bilateral security arrangements of Northeast Asia still remain the lynchpin of security relations in the region, and the global trends of reconciliation and cooperation have yet to bear fruit. The region is too diverse in its politics, economics and culture, too strongly nationalistic in its outlook; and the existence of China, Russia, the United States and Japan, each great powers with their own differing interests and strategies, gives the region a very different character to that of Europe. Northeast Asian security depends on the network of bilateral arrangements centered on the United States and the subsequent power balancing against it. As the East-West confrontation came to an end, the strategic and political environment in Northeast Asia has altered, but to a much lesser extent than in the Europe–Atlantic region. The relations among the major actors in the region are very different from those among the European states; relations among the Northeast Asian states range from cool to hostile. In Europe, shared political values, economic interests and cultural roots helped to underpin a peace mechanism. Similar circumstances have never existed in Northeast Asia, and a sense of common security interest cannot be created artificially under the currently prevailing policies of confrontation and polarization. Moreover, while the European states successfully utilized détente between the United States and the Soviet Union for the improvement of European peace and security, as well as consolidating and enlarging the European Union and NATO, Asian countries came up with a much more conservative response to the rapidly changing global order. This, coupled with the United States’ continuing military presence, has left the regional security structure with one foot still firmly rooted in the Cold War period.

Thus, although the post-Cold War era and its all-consuming effects of globalization and regional integration are having a global impact, the net effect on Northeast Asia has not been very far reaching. Indeed, it can be argued that national strategies, particularly in the area of defense, are more relevant in the region precisely because of the end of the superpower contest there. In the post-Cold War era, conflicts are diversified in their nature and magnitude. These significant obstacles all add to the transitional character of the regional balance of power, which in turn inhibit the development of a multilateral regional security mechanism in Northeast Asia. Moreover, given the lack of a common

---


5 The “major actors” refers to China, Japan, Russia, the two Koreas, the United States and Taiwan.


8 For multilateral security mechanism or cooperation, see Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition (Boston: Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1977); James N. Rosenau and Hylke Tromp, eds., Interdependence and Conflict in World Politics (Hants: Gower Publishing Company Limited, 1989); R.J. Barry Jones and Peter Willetts, eds. Interdependence on Trial: Studies in the Theory and Reality of Contemporary Interdependence (London: Frances Pinter Limited, 1984); and Helen Milner,
security denominator, divergent perceptions of threat, and deeply ingrained historical legacies, Northeast Asia is struggling to maintain a fragile peace.9

It is important to recognize that America’s post–Second World War dominance in Northeast Asia, though justified as a deterrent to Soviet ambitions, had the equally important function of keeping apart the traditional regional rivals—Russia, Japan and China. Tokyo and Beijing are aware that America’s retrenchment would weaken the buffer that stood between them and that there is no apparent successor to play this role. The Americans realize that a substantial weakening of their military position in South Korea would be interpreted in Tokyo as a sign of U.S. withdrawal from Asia and would encourage an independent rearment of Japan. Even without any reason for the speculation of American military withdrawal from the region, Japanese constitutional amendments are under way which would strengthen its military considerably, possibly including offensive capabilities.10

Thus, in a transitional order, concerns arise from the changing distribution of power among the major powers, along with the perceived negative implications of American hegemony, the perception of a China threat, and the fear of a remilitarized Japan.11 With serious mis-

well as the spread of its “soft power”\textsuperscript{15} in the region. Many have argued that China’s emphasis on economic development and the consequent interdependence with the other states of the region will broaden the foundation for peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, it is argued that because China’s military hardware is outmoded and because of the ever-widening gap between the military technology of the United States and China, the latter is in no way a competitor of the former.\textsuperscript{17} It is true that both economic and military data show that China is nowhere close to threatening the global position of the United States, yet it has nevertheless been encroaching upon American influence in Northeast Asia.\textsuperscript{18} Whether this encroachment signals a more profound change in the overall global balance of power is a question that merits further study. However, it seems certain that it adds uncertainty to the already very fluid situation in the region, thereby contributing to the tendency toward short-term power balancing. Chinese perceptions of U.S. interests, and vice versa, in the region are certainly the most important and relevant issue to any discussion concerning the future of building a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia.

Although the Chinese cut their troops by one million in 1985–1987 and made further cuts to about two million over the following decade, the reduction in number has been offset by qualitative improvements. As the trend in China’s defense spending shows, a massive modernization program was undertaken,\textsuperscript{19} including purchases of SU-27 and MiG-29 fighter aircraft from Russia, as well as new destroyers and frigates.\textsuperscript{20} China also draws considerable strength from the size of its

---

\textsuperscript{17} Eland, “Is Chinese Military Modernization a Threat to the United States?,” pp. 1–14.  
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Dong-a Ilbo}, Nov. 28, 2003.  
\textsuperscript{21} See Yee, \textit{The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality}.  
\textsuperscript{24} Particularly concerning the security arrangements that the United States deems necessary to maintain a balance of power that is favorable to American interests.  
\textsuperscript{25} William J. Murphy, “Power Transition in Northeast Asia: U.S.–China Security Perceptions and the Challenges of Systemic Adjustment and Stability,” \textit{Journal...
At least for the short-term, it is hoped that, as long as the Communist Party remains in power, China will most likely be preoccupied with the task of maintaining political stability, while generating economic development. Having said that, it is not what China is doing now that is confounding policymakers in Washington, but what it might do 10, 20 or 50 years later. It is precisely this potential that has the United States, as well as the other countries in Northeast Asia, feeling uneasy about the possible establishment of a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia.

U.S. Geopolitical Interests and Northeast Asia

Three overarching goals are evident when one looks to analyze America’s interests in Northeast Asia. First, the United States has remained concerned with maintaining a balance of power in the region that is favorable to American interests. This implies that U.S. policy opposes efforts at domination of the region by a power or a group of powers. Second, the United States has endeavored to advance its economic interests in the region through involvement in economic development and expand U.S. trade and investment. A third major goal, centered on American culture and values, has involved efforts to foster democracy, human rights, and other trends deemed progressive by Americans. Of the three goals, the first is the most important, in that it sets the foundation for the other two goals. And it is this goal that has been labeled a “vital interest” by many American officials.

In order to achieve and maintain these goals, the order that the United States most prefers in Northeast Asia is the completion of a hegemonic order centered on it. The most important unfinished task would be to convince China that, despite its size, economic power and/or political ambition, it is best served as a partner in a U.S.-cen-

29 Ibid., p. 436.
31 Ikenberry and Mastanduno, eds., International Relations Theory and the Asia Pacific, p. 431.
trary to the views of some observers, a regional order based on balance of power politics does not have to be war-prone and can provide a degree of stability.

On the other hand, many Chinese have perceived the United States as an aggressive and powerful force in international affairs. Some Chinese claim that the United States has, all along, wanted to establish a security regime that it would dominate, and to make the issue of security an excuse for interfering in other countries’ internal affairs. The end of the Cold War system has brought to the fore the Chinese fear of a unipolar situation dominated by the United States. The relationship between the United States and China has often been very unstable and therefore unpredictable, and much will depend on how they decide to manage their ambivalent relationship. As mentioned above, the American strategy for Northeast Asia is to prevent any single power from dominating the region. Thus, coping with a rising China is an important diplomatic challenge for Washington.

It is safe to say that the post–Cold War era brought to the fore a competition for regional influence among the great powers in a region formerly dominated by the Cold War’s ideological conflict. If history is any indicator, great powers have never tended to entrust their interests in an international institution, nor saw eye to eye with multilateral approaches in conducting their security policies. The mere presence of the four largest powers in the world makes Northeast Asia a prime target of balance of power politics. It is by no mistake that a recent Pentagon report has labeled China as an “emerging rival,” stating that the peaceful rhetoric of China cannot be taken at face value. The United States and China are realizing that they have no overarching motive for strategic cooperation, despite their growing economic ties. China seems poised to expand its strategic reach and regain its traditional prominence in Northeast Asia. As for the United States, its continued ability to intervene in the Northeast Asian region rests heavily on its forward-based military presence in Japan and South Korea and its guarantees of protection to South Korea, Japan, and to some extent, Taiwan. Adding to the complexity, relations between China and Taiwan remain strained because of China’s long-held aim to restore Taiwan to Chinese rule. All this is not to imply that the specter of war looms over the horizon, nor that potentially significant tensions cannot be diffused; only that the search for a common multilateral security framework in Northeast Asia, however well-intentioned or designed, faces a number of significant challenges.

There is no question that open security competition among the great powers in Northeast Asia has been subdued since the end of the Cold War. And with the possible exception of the 1996 dispute between China and the United States over Taiwan, there has been no hint of war between any of the great powers. Periods of relative peacefulness like this one, however, are not unprecedented in history. For example, there was little open conflict among the great powers in Europe from 1816 to 1852, or from 1871 to 1913. But this did not mean then, and it does not mean now, that the great powers stopped thinking and behaving according to geopolitical logic. Indeed, there is substantial evidence that the states in Northeast Asia still fear each other and continue to worry about how much relative power they control. Moreover, as mentioned above, sitting below the surface the region has significant potential for intense security competition.

The relationships among the four great powers represent a continuation, be it a less confrontational form, of the Cold War alignment. China and Russia have defied all contrary expectations to forge a strategic partnership of considerable mutual utility and apparent

---

strength. Although the traditional geopolitical logic dictates that the two land powers, China and Russia, be at odds with each other, given their long common border, the two countries have set aside this concern in an effort to accommodate an even bigger geopolitical imperative—the expansion and the solidification of American geopolitical interests. This sort of cooperation between the two continental powers is not unprecedented in history. It has happened against the Japanese during most of the first half of the 20th century as well as against the United States during the earlier periods of the Cold War. The territorial dispute between China and Russia has been successfully overcome and the 2001 Friendship Treaty symbolizes the strength of their assiduously-crafted and well-maintained bilateral ties.

What is striking about the close ties is that it includes, for the first time, joint military exercises. This was agreed upon by the two parties during Vladimir Putin’s visit to China in November 2004, and signed by the two respective Defense Ministers on December 13, 2004. These ties were reaffirmed during the recent summit meeting between Hu Jintao and Vladimir Putin in Moscow through July 1–4, 2005 and the military exercises commenced on August 18, 2005, lasting until August 25. This partnership represents the strategic needs of both countries, as well as the need for energy and resources on the part of China.

On the other hand, Japan and the United States remain partners in the strongest bilateral alliance in the region. In fact, this alliance seems to have matured to incorporate the aspect of an alliance that stands for something as well as standing against something. While the Cold War confrontation was dominated by the overarching rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, the present situation is further complicated due to the emergence of the Sino-Japanese rivalry over their geopolitical, economic and energy needs. The clash of these vital interests is further fueled by the continuing war of words between the two capitals concerning issues stemming from differing perceptions of

37 Chosun Ilbo, July 4, 2005.
38 JoongAng Ilbo, Aug. 18, 2005.

history, ranging from territorial problems to radically different assumptions of international norms.

Thus, policymakers of the major powers see the situation in Northeast Asia as “fluid.” The nature of a fluid order can be exemplified by “transitional” and “anarchical.” These characteristics of the current Northeast Asian order cannot be overlooked, precisely because this is what is hindering the appearance of a multilateral security order. In a transitional period, no single power can afford to let go of a security arrangement that they have come to trust for a long time. In much the same way, no single power will jump to a different ship while there is every evidence that the old ship is still secure. This tendency is manifested by the resurgence of the strength of the U.S.–Japan alliance, as well as the counterbalancing effects of China and Russia, with the possible inclusion of India in the latter bloc. As for launching new and comprehensive multilateral initiatives, no power will accept it unless it at least guarantees that power an equal share of the pie. It seems that the major powers are anticipating a new security arrangement, yet remaining faithful to their old commitments in the meantime.

Conclusion

The major powers’ temporary commitment to the status quo has made the security environment in Northeast Asia more benign and less threatening than it was during the height of the Cold War. However, the end of the Cold War has had two major destabilizing consequences in terms of the maintenance of stability in Northeast Asia’s security order—the rise of China and the persistence of a prolonged transitional era call the post–Cold War. These two intertwined consequences coexist with the unchanged American geopolitical interest of maintaining a balance of power in Northeast Asia that is in its favor. Perhaps what is more important, is how the United States opts to respond or deal with this potential change in the region’s balance of power.

Thus, the future of Northeast Asia greatly depends on the future of

40 Chosun Ilbo, April 18, 2005.
China, the most populous country in the world, and the United States, the preeminent global powerhouse. Therefore, the direction of U.S.–China relations has had, and will continue to have, a crucial impact on the future of the region. It seems, fortunately, however transitional it may be, that a fairly stable form of balance is taking shape in Northeast Asia between the continental force that is China, and the traditional maritime force that is the United States. However, the substance, and the rules of maintenance, of this balance of influence between the two powers remain vague, and it is altogether possible that it will work as a negative force in maintaining peace and stability in Northeast Asia because the vital interests of the two powers can become conflictual.

One thing is for certain: the ramifications of this relationship will continue to be felt all over the world, especially by the countries of Northeast Asia.

A cooperative multilateral structure that might adequately cope with the interacting interests of the great powers and the greater complexity of the region, has yet to emerge. This is largely because of the two intertwined reasons of the transitional character of the current order and the clash of geopolitical interests of the United States and China, causing speculation, and thus insecurity, among the states of Northeast Asia. Under the surface of the issues of the day, including the North Korean nuclear crisis, the territorial problems, and the different assessments of history, there lie these two fundamental, and ultimately more important, reasons for the lack of security cooperation in the region.

Northeast Asia faces challenges, both old and new, including national divisions, resumption of traditional rivalries and an ongoing competition for influence in the region. More than any other region, Northeast Asia will be most likely to emerge as a theater of great power politics involving traditional methods of power balancing. Under the encompassing tent of antiterrorism, the old national rivalries endure, while the American commitment to multilateralism has not, and there has been persisting unease that national rather than regional interests animate Washington’s policies.

All of the states involved must be aware of the subtleties of the fluid Northeast Asian state of affairs. In order to mitigate the conditions of the current transitional order and the fundamental clash of geopolitical interests between the United States and China, the United States must be transparent and consistent with its policies toward the major players in Northeast Asia. The complexity arises from the possible gap between America’s global and regional interests, as well as possible U.S. involvement in the indigenous tensions of Northeast Asia emanating from the legacies of the Cold War and the historical animosities still lingering. The United States has to be careful not to encourage polarization in any of the issues, particularly concerning Sino-Japanese relations. As America’s foremost ally in the region, Japan must fully comprehend the fluid and delicate balance on which the current order is based, and demonstrate a demeanor commensurate with its status as a great power. Tokyo must be mindful of how its policies can be not only perceived by its neighbors as offensive, but also of what its policies can do to solidify or worsen the current precarious balance of power in Northeast Asia—both of which can only be detrimental to the development of a multilateral security mechanism. As for China and Russia, it is far too early to tell how durable their relationship can be, but they too need to understand the abovementioned complexities and the dangers that the current order presents. Without Chinese adherence to the established international norms of interstate affairs, as well as China’s continuation of its emphasis on economic development and active participation in international organizations, there can be no true security cooperation in Northeast Asia.

All major powers within the region must take into account that the United States is still the lone global superpower, and that as such it will pursue whatever policy it deems beneficial to its own interests. The forward presence of military forces is nothing new, considering that all past hegemonic powers pursued such means to ensure the maintenance

---


of their hegemony. In any case—whether it is through forward presence, offshore balancing, economic and technological preeminence, or a combination of these means—the United States will remain the key to whether or not Northeast Asia moves in the direction of global trends toward a multilateral security mechanism.