
New Strategic Equation in East Asia

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The New Order in Asia can be summarized into the following several trends. The first is the rise of China, and with it the growth of its overall national power and increasing interdependence with neighboring nations. The second is the change in the leadership role of the United States and its adjustment of relations with the Asian countries. The third is the warming of relations between China and Russia, as exemplified by the recent (August, 2005) joint military exercise. The fourth is the shifting of Japan's place in regional order, the fortifying of its relations with the United States, and its movement towards becoming a "normal state." The fifth is the possession of nuclear weapons by North Korea, thus increasing tensions and stimulating the possibility of proliferation in the region. Last is the increasing possibility of establishing an East Asian cooperation institution that includes both ASEAN and Northeast Asian countries.

1. The Rise of China

The most prominent phenomenon in Asia during the past three decades is the rise of China. Nobody will dispute this fact. The only question is whether the process and consequence of China's rapid rise will contribute to peace and stability of the region and the world.

With its "peaceful rise" policy, China professes to enter the ranks of the major powers in a peaceful way. President Hu Jintao's visit to the United States, which would have started today (September 7th) if it weren't for the Hurricane Katrina disaster, was intended to assure President George W. Bush that China wants to become a leading member of the international community without disturbing the existing order and stability; that global peace and prosperity are good for continued Chinese economic growth and development; that the United States has nothing to fear about China's rise; and that there is a lot more room for cooperation and collaboration than conflict and competition.

China is also pursuing what amounts to a good neighbor policy vis-à-vis Southeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula. China now has an FTA in force with the ASEAN. China is taking leadership in the Six Party Talks (involving North and South Korea, Russia, Japan, and the United States in addition to China itself) aimed at resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. In contrast with "peaceful rise" and "good neighbor" policies, China has even tightened its tough stance vis-à-vis Taiwan, adopting in March 2005 the Anti-Secession Law, aimed at preventing any separation move on the part of Taiwan from the Mainland.

Despite the assurances by Chinese leaders of peaceful and cooperative intentions, there is a tendency in the United States and Japan to regard the rising China as an object of competition and concern, not only from economic and political point of view but also from military and security standpoint as well. Even the increasing dependence of the United States on Chinese purchase of U.S. treasury bonds and of Japan on trade with and investment in China is regarded as ultimately portending a source of concern by the United States and Japan. Such a concern was even further fanned when for the first time in history China and Russia collaborated to conduct a joint military exercise in August, 2005.

South Korea has witnessed a dramatic expansion of relations with China since establishment of diplomatic relation in 1992. China and Korea have been working closely on the thorny issue of North Korean nuclear program. For the most part, the two countries find themselves on the same page in some of the key controversial issues such as the North Korean claim that they have the right to have peaceful use of nuclear program. China has three major objectives regarding North Korea:

That the Korean Peninsula is denuclearized; that the North Korean regime and system are kept intact and afloat; and that the Korean Peninsula is free of war and military conflict. With the priority of each of these objectives changing, the relative importance of their respective priorities also seem to fluctuate.

South Korea has worked closely with China in diplomatic as well as economic fields. In particular, on the North Korean nuclear issue, they share the view that the issue has to be handled with a view to making a maximum use of incentives rather than pressure.

2. Japan's Posture

While the Chinese economy has been expanding, Japan, the second largest economy in the world has had to remain in economic doldrum. Although Japanese economy seems to be picking up somewhat since 2003, even that revival is explained by the effect of the rapid Chinese growth and the resultant ripple effect of increased Japanese trade with and investment in China.

While striving to become a "normal state" and cope with the challenge of rising China, Japan is concentrating on strengthening its ties and closely cooperating with the United States in a range of issues. In particular, Prime Minister Koizumi has succeeded in forging a close personal relationship with U.S. President George W. Bush. Koizumi was one of the first head of government to visit the United States after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001. Since then Koizumi has become a frequent visitor to President Bush's Crawford ranch. In February 2005, the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee meeting of 2 plus 2 (Secretaries of State and Defense from the U.S. and Japanese Foreign Minister and Director-General of Defense Agency) issued a joint statement which congratulated the excellent state of security cooperation between the two countries in the whole range of areas including fight against terrorism, PSI, nonproliferation, and ballistic missile defense. The same statement, however, drew ire from China as a provocation by including Taiwan Strait issue as one of their "common strategic objectives." Furthermore an agreement (amended in July 2004) between the two allies concerning reciprocal provision of logistic support, supplies and services between the Self Defense Forces of Japan

and the Armed Forces of the United States includes “situations in areas surrounding Japan,” provides for base support, and airport and seaport services for operations outside of Japan as well.

3. North Korean Nuclear Issue

The second North Korean nuclear crisis is yet to even begin to be resolved. The fourth round of the Six-Party talks which was held in early August after a 13-month hiatus went into recess and is expected to resume Thursday next week, September 13.

North Korea has played the waiting game with skill and alacrity. After withdrawing from the NPT in early 2003, North Korea reprocessed the 8017 fuel rods it had canned and placed in a pool, and turned them into plutonium. It has withdrawn another 8,000 fuel rods from the 5-megawatt reactor, which had been reactivated in the spring of 2003. North Korea has announced that it not only possesses nuclear weapons but is expanding its “nuclear arsenal.” North Korea’s boasting has been received without much of protest or opposition from other countries.

The basic question still remains: Will North Korea give up its nuclear weapons and program? Or are all these moves intended to buy time and transfer the blame for failure to achieve an agreement to the other side, i.e., the United States. Some believe that the North, as it did 12 years ago, aims to bargain its nuclear program away. Others, however, suspect that Pyongyang is using negotiation simply to buy time to further its weapons development program.

During the August meeting North Korea raised the bar by adding on additional major three conditions for giving up the nuclear program. 1) That North Korea’s right to “peaceful” nuclear program should be recognized, whereby North Korea would eventually give up on the “nuclear weapons program,” not “nuclear program” as such even when an agreement is reached. 2) That a “peace agreement” should be concluded between North Korea and the United States to replace the Armistice Agreement of 1953. 3) That talks should be an “arms control” negotiation, whereby the reduction and eventually dismantlement and removal would be reciprocal on the basis of the recognition that North Korea is a nuclear weapons state. An additional element is the North Korean denial of having any covert uranium enrichment, which was the precipitator of the second North Korean nuclear crisis since 2002.

North Korea insists on its right to “peaceful use” of nuclear program because of several possible reasons: 1) It wants to have access to nuclear generated power; 2) It can drive a wedge between the United States and its allies, South Korea in particular; 3) It can pass the blame on the U.S. in case of a breakdown of the talks; 4) It provides North Korea with the nuclear weapons option. A creative way should be found to deal with this issue to satisfy the security and energy needs and allay fears and concern that North Korea will end up with the nuclear option.

The “peace agreement” is a code-word for undermining U.S.-ROK alliance and the continued presence of U.S. troops in Korea. North probably wins whether it succeeds in getting the peace agreement with the

U.S. or not. If it does, it means greater vulnerability for the alliance and U.S. troops in Korea. If it does not, it will continue to constitute a source of dispute within South Korea and between the United States and ROK.

The insistence on making the talks a reciprocal “arms control” talks is probably intended to legitimize North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons and material and to boost its negotiating position relative not only to the United States but also to South Korea as North Korea asserts that South Korea (as well as Japan), as a non-nuclear power should have a different status in the negotiations.

All in all, what the above discussion indicates is that the future negotiation is not going to be an easy or short one, despite optimistic expectations to the contrary expressed by South Korean officials and somewhat less frequently by U.S. officials.

4. East Asian Regionalism

Today, even as APEC continues to hold its annual summit meetings, the East Asian countries of ASEAN plus Three have been having their own summit gatherings, first in that name (ASEAN Plus Three) and from December this year (2005) as the East Asian Summit. Although the East Asian summit is expected to invite countries as participants from outside of the ASEAN plus Three boundary, such as India and Australia, it still represents a big leap from ASEAN plus Three exercise. Does it then mean that East Asia is moving toward a community?

The question is, “Is East Asia ready for a community?”

I remember we were asking a similar question in our earlier meetings of the 1980s and 1990s, usually in the context of the Asia Pacific region rather than East Asia. We would ask: What are the factors or conditions that promote an East Asian Community, and what factors work against one, especially in comparison with Europe's experience? Those who regarded the European experience in regional integration with a degree of admiration and even envy, could not help but recognize several factors that contributed to regional integration in Europe. First, Europe was fairly well defined, although it was constantly being enlarged, without the debate as to whether it will be an Atlantic community or European community. Second, in the post World War II period, countries which had fought against each other successfully reconciled with each other, making it possible to work toward a common market and ultimately a more comprehensive community. Third, the United States initially supported and encouraged European regional cooperation and integration and later at least accepted the community-building effort in Europe without misgivings much less opposition. Fourth, the presence of the Soviet threat for several decades since the end of the Second World War served as a strong incentive for both the European countries themselves and the United States to seek and support regional integration.

The persistence of nineteenth and twentieth century geopolitics in Asia is especially inimical to the creation and development of a regional community such as Europe has witnessed. In an environment of

geopolitical rivalries, nations tend to opt for unilateralism or bilateralism rather than multilateralism. By the same token, they tend toward nationalism at the expense of regionalism or internationalism. Rifts among Northeast Asian countries portend the danger of not only torpedoing the East Asian community building process, but also at a minimum leaving the leadership and initiation almost entirely to their Southeast Asian neighbors.

Conclusion

Regional community is at once both the *end-result* of peace and reconciliation among its members and the *facilitator of future* harmony among them. But a threshold has to be crossed before a happy, mutually reinforcing process can begin. Overcoming past grievances and present and future disputes will take leadership and political will, which unfortunately are lacking in most of Northeast Asia, as well as encouragement by the United States.

Despite the obstacles, however, I would say that things are moving toward an East Asian Community, at a speed that is not fast, but certainly faster than one would expect under the circumstances. The intensifying economic interdependence, and simply the growing need to cooperate and integrate among the East Asian countries and beyond, dictate that they get together and move toward a community, however it is defined.

The continuing relevance of geopolitics in East Asia makes the role of the United States all the more critical, Hurricane Katrina or not. The indispensable role it has played in East Asian security and development has been underscored by the critical and helpful role it played in the financial crisis of the last decade and more recently in connection with the devastating tsunami.

Regional cooperative mechanisms, such as the ASEAN plus Three (China, Japan and South Korea) will serve the interest of both Asia and the United States. Imbedding China, Japan and Korea into a multilateral structure may be an effective way of ameliorating their rivalries and preventing potential conflicts. In addition, East Asian regional cooperation can ultimately contribute to achieving closer economic ties in such areas as trade, investment, finance, and development, and advancing human security in particular by facilitating regional efforts for environmental protection and good governance. All this will be in the interest of the United States as well.

The North Korean nuclear issue is another powerful example of the need for continued U.S. involvement in the region. Just as Europe needed the United States in Bosnia and Kosovo, East Asia will continue to require U.S. involvement in its region.