

*Paradigms and Fallacies:  
Rethinking Northeast Asian Security and  
Its Implications for the Korean Peninsula*

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**Abstract**

This article examines the changing characteristics of international politics in Northeast Asia; a politics which is fundamentally distrustful, conflict-ridden, and power and interest-centric and the implications of such changes for the region and the Korean peninsula especially in the post-Cold War era. There is no doubt that such a power and interest-centric realist paradigm has maintained a certain dominance as a means of explaining the lack of reconciliation or institutionalization of regional cooperation both in postwar and post-Cold War Northeast Asia. When it comes to accounting for the lack of institutionalized multilateralism or security cooperation, however, the otherwise robust analytic power of the realist perspective becomes somewhat “sterile.” This is so because realists assume that the values, preferences, and goals of the units or nation states as largely fixed or determined by the anarchical international system. Such a realist paradigm has frequently led to a self-fulfilling prophecy: as if inevitably pressured by the system—or by confusing the realist assumptions with the reality—states often end up pursuing their narrow and myopic national interests, further exacerbating the security dilemmas and problems for all concerned. What is

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most strikingly pronounced is the continued primacy of such contending national interests in Northeast Asian affairs, as manifested in the North Korean nuclear deadlock and the close integration of Japanese foreign policy with America's global anti-terror war. The present article scrutinizes, in particular, the uniquely increasing trend in military spending in post-Cold War Northeast Asia as a way of further documenting these ominous changes as well as the problematic consequences of what have been arguably erroneous policy paradigms underlying the state behaviors under examination here. To help prevent the current security dilemmas from spiraling into a slippery and perilous path towards an arms race requires that the states under consideration and their policymakers change their realist assumptions, redefine their self-interests, and learn to embrace international societal norms and perspectives which are rooted firmly within this reality.

**Keywords:** paradigms, Northeast Asian security, foreign policy, military spending, post-Cold War era

## Introduction

How to construct a more cooperative world in the midst of anarchy has been a perennial, if tantalizing, question in international politics. Noting the sheer difficulty of expecting cooperative behavior to emerge from the anarchic conditions of the present international system, realists as Hobbes portray this situation as akin to a state of war, in which the lives of men remain “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”<sup>1</sup> (Hobbes 1987[1651], 65). Other realists such as Morgenthau (1967) and Waltz (1959; 1979) may not be as pessimistic as Hobbes about the outcome of anarchy, but they share in common the underlying assumptions of a Hobbesian worldview based on power, self-interest, and rational egoism. In particular, Waltz defines the structure as consisting of three components: the ordering principle (anarchy), the functional differentiation of units, and the distribution

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<sup>1</sup> The ruler-less conditions impel self-protective behavior of the fearful and hostile man, which in turn generates the problem of vulnerability for everyone.

of capabilities (Waltz 1979, 82). Moreover, because of the realist assumptions that state that the units or states are survival-seeking egoists in an anarchic, self-seeking system, the functional differentiation becomes insignificant in his structural explanation of international politics. Hence, Waltz infers the expected behavior of states from their relative place in the power-centric system. However, the realists' disinterest in the unit attributes or internal characteristics of states can lead to a seriously flawed and even harmful mode of thought and practice when it comes to the issue of security.

In rethinking the problems and prospects of Northeast Asian security, a field which has been the subject of increasing scholarly attention since the end of the Cold War, this article stresses the danger that comes from such blanket disinterest in the ideas, identities, and values of the units or states. In fact, failing to understand the problems inherent within unit-level identity and choice or assuming them away has frequently led to a self-fulfilling prophecy: as if inevitably pressured by the system, states end up pursuing their narrow and myopic national interests. In post-Cold War Northeast Asia, in particular, the hard-line positions and sterile posturing over the North Korean nuclear deadlock adopted by the states under consideration is one case in point; as is the increasingly emboldened Japanese military and Japan's often extremely nationalistic, right-wing elite being sucked into America's global strategic, if increasingly unilateral, posturing. If state behaviors are indeed structurally pre-determined, the security dilemma problem among the Northeast Asian states can be considered as being particularly acute and serious, as each state's defensive as well as offensive capabilities feed and intensify security-heightening competition and possibly spiral into an action-reaction arms race.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For a recent, nice definition and discussion of the security dilemma as applied to the region, see Christensen, 2003.

## Two Images of Post-Cold War Northeast Asian Security

Two images of the post-Cold War security in Northeast Asia have competed for scholarly attention. The dominant image was provided by Friedberg's (1993/1994) prediction that Asia was "ripe for rivalry." This prediction remained influential especially in Northeast Asia in part because the region continued to suffer from multiple sources of national mistrust, resentments, and conflicts including historical animosities and a lack of multilateral security cooperation. In contrast to Europe, where with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of its troops from Eastern Europe, a new wave of larger European cooperation and integration began, the Northeast Asian region remains fraught with virulent nationalist sentiments, political and military rivalries, and emotionally-charged territorial disputes.

Noting that none of the pessimistic predictions about Asia's future has come to pass in the post-Cold War era, such optimists as Kang (2003) and Acharya (2003/2004) argue that Europe's or Asia's own unstable past does not mean that such a past will inevitably become Asia's future. As the optimists note, Japan has as yet to go down the path of full-scale military rearmament; the level of Chinese irredentism or its military adventurism is not much higher than prior to the end of the Cold War; nor is the degree of danger from North Korean terrorism or its proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

In particular, Kang predicts far more stability in the region as a result of more cooperation with an emerging China. Kang argues without a great deal of force (or mistakenly assumes) that Asia's past China-centered hierarchical order was peaceful or consensual, and that the countries in the region would gladly and naturally subscribe to such a form of Chinese hegemony in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Acharya (2003/2004, 157) points out, however, historical records do not lend any undisputable support for the hypothesis of the supposedly

consensual and peaceful nature of past Chinese hegemony. In effect, Kang's faith in the legitimacy and peacefulness of such an order for the future is misleading and dangerous. A politically unstable China or its disintegration may well be a nightmare, but if one assumes that China successfully attains this rather Herculean feat of continued economic development that would befit its regional hegemonic claims, a cohesive and hegemonic China would be of no less threat. While China meticulously publicizes its "peaceful rise," the neighboring countries remain more wary and fearful of China's rise. Clearly, an economically-engaged and prosperous China would contribute to building a more cooperative regional order in Northeast Asia, but whether a powerful and hegemonic China would be peace and stability-driven is an open question. Simply put, there is no evidence that can convincingly suggest that Chinese economic and military powers are any less fungible than those of any other countries, as realists would quickly point out.

Such realist insight would also question Acharya's justification or the theoretical foundations for his own optimism with respect to the future stability of the Asian regional order. Acharya argues that Asia's increasing economic interdependence and Westphalian norms of state sovereignty, equality, and non-interference have become institutionalized within regional diplomatic and security practice and thus would continue to contribute to the region's peace and prosperity in the future. However, this argument finds that the realist paradigm still provides a clearer understanding of the past and present regional order. Contrary to the expectations of the neo-liberal, institutionalist economic interdependence paradigm (Deutsch et al. 1957; Haas 1964; Keohane et al. 1977), the region's increasing economic interaction and interdependence may have spilled over into security cooperation in a very limited fashion.

What has kept the postwar Northeast Asian peace together to this day has been American hegemony, based as it is upon a

hub-and-spokes system of bilateral arrangements, a system which has been fundamentally driven by respective national interests defined in terms of power (Dittmer 2002). Such an American hegemony-based, realist approach towards Northeast Asia coincided with Japan's Yoshida Doctrine of mercantilism, restrained remilitarization, and subordinate foreign policy during the Cold War (Dower 1993). As its second-class power status under the United States nuclear guarantee facilitated the rise of its economy, Japan strictly adhered to the American hegemony-based rules of the game. Moreover, by keeping American forces on its soil, Japan reassured its neighbors of its intentions not to revert to its militarist past.

Since the end of the Cold War, however, the situation has begun to change. Among other changes, the United States fundamentally shifted from a hegemonic strategy to a more unilateralist one (Skidmore 2005). Moreover, with growing realism in regards to regional power relations and the sense of crisis and diminishing confidence in the prospects of its own economic model in the increasingly globalizing international economy, Japan has been gradually drifting away from its low-cost and highly profitable Cold War strategy of locking itself into America's hegemonic strategy. Other things being equal, therefore, the more pessimistic outcome seems to reflect what the future will likely bring to Northeast Asia. Nonetheless, the outcome will not necessarily be a natural or automatic outgrowth of the anarchical international structure and the presumably resultant behavior of narrowly-defined national interest-driven unitary states. Instead, it will also depend on the socially-constructed behavior of nation-states and the ideas- as well as the interest-driven process in which various states form evolving patterns of interstate relationships.

The next section looks at the evolving international politics in Northeast Asia during the post-Cold War period from the international systemic and regional perspective, and the fourth section follows up

with an analysis from the unit state-level perspective. The two sections examine the changing characteristics of international politics in Northeast Asia; a politics which is fundamentally distrustful, conflict-ridden, and power and interest-centric and the implications of such changes for the region and the Korean peninsula especially in the post-Cold War era. Then, as a way of further documenting the ominous changes as well as the problematic consequences of erroneous policy paradigms underlying the behavior of the states under consideration, the fifth section details the post-Cold War trends in military spending in the region. By way of conclusion, the sixth and final section emphasizes the pressing need for the states concerned to change their assumptions and take a fresh look at alternative ways to build trust, cooperative multilateralism, and an “international society” (Bull et al. 1984).

### **Northeast Asia in the Context of Post-Cold War International Politics<sup>3</sup>**

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union have not quite proved to be the end of history, nor have they heralded the obsolescence of wars or the retreat of the nation state. Instead, the postwar, albeit limited, achievements and principles in institutionalized cooperation and multilateralism may be in danger of being unlearned in the post-Cold War era (Higgot 2005).<sup>4</sup> The mismatch between the increasing level of global economic interaction and the still underdeveloped sense of global political community does appear more striking than ever before. Such starkly contrasting tendencies are

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<sup>3</sup>This section draws on Park, 2004.

<sup>4</sup>Incidentally, Ruggie defines multilateralism as “an institutionalized form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct,” November 1993.

all the more intense in Northeast Asia, where quite virulent strains of nationalism and frequently incompatible mercantilist strategies remain potentially disruptive of the regional status quo.

Perhaps the most dominant systemic factor that overshadows the politics in Northeast Asia is America's global strategy as practiced in the post-Cold War era. United States foreign policy has increasingly tilted towards unilateralism, and the September 11 terrorist attacks further exacerbated the trend. The tendency towards American unilateralism entailed its rejection of a series of major international treaties and agreements, including the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, its slighting of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, and its war with Iraq without securing UN support as part of its war against terror.

To be sure, the postwar international order which the United States led had arguably been more hegemonic than multilateralist: America only loosely subjected itself to multilateral constraints in return for providing its allies with military protection, political, and financial support, and access to American market (Skidmore 2005).

No doubt the United States postwar policy was more multilateralist in Western Europe than in Northeast Asia. Especially in Western Europe in the wake of its intensifying rivalry with the Soviet Union, the United States chose to deter the Soviet threat by rebuilding and rearming West Germany as the West's front line. Being mindful of the deep-seated fears and suspicions in Germany's war victims—especially France, the United States fully supported the Western European idea of reinstating German sovereignty and rebuilding its economy only within the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the EU's precursor (Grieco 1996). In short, in order to guarantee that the German nation no longer posed a threat to their neighbors, Germany ceded its sovereignty to multilateral organizations, taming its military power.



In contrast, in East or Northeast Asia, the United States viewed its military capabilities as sufficient to neutralize the surrounding threats, and thus preferred to maintain its interests in the region through bilateral arrangements. The United States exercised exclusive control over the postwar occupation of Japan, and in reshaping the Japanese political and economic order, China or Korea did not have any say, nor did the US consult any other key concerned countries over the matter. In contrast to Germany, Japan ceded its military sovereignty to the US—outside of any multilateral framework. In part because of the way in which the Japanese emperor did not abdicate his throne as a symbol of Japan's full admission of war guilt, and in part because Japan never truly tried to reconcile with or compensate the Asian victims of its continental war and brutal colonial rule, fear, and mistrust fundamentally and perpetually mar international relations between Japan and its neighbors in Northeast Asia.

Thus, despite the absolute level of intra-regional trade, which has been on the rise thanks to the dynamic growth of the Northeast Asian economies, the lack of institutionalized multilateralism still aptly characterizes international relations in Northeast Asia (Kurth 1989; Betts 1993/1994; Friedberg 1993/1994; Blackwell et al. 2000). In the wake of the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for instance, Japan and China became the largest trading partners to each other, both respectively overtaking the United States; China also became the biggest market for South Korean exports and investment capital (Korea Customs Administration). The three Northeast Asian countries also began to take part in regional cooperation between central banks and finance ministries under the 2001 Chiang Mai agreement. Although this regional financial cooperation may be seen as an incipient form of multilateralism, one can hardly fail to note that it came rather inadvertently in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. It took on the form of a rather narrow, sector-specific type of multilateralism and thus remained in scope confined to the financial sector only.

In short, there is a striking variation in the level of institutionalization of regional cooperation between Western Europe and Northeast Asia, and in contrast to Western Europe, the Northeast Asian region's growing economic cooperation has hardly translated into security collaboration. As a result, no multilateral treaties but a series of bilateral arrangements govern Northeast Asian security. To this day, for instance, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a 1994 extension of the ASEAN's Post-Ministerial Conference, remains the only official and regular, if still infantile, multilateral security institution for regional dialogues. Thus, the lack of cooperative multilateralism in Northeast Asia as combined with America's global anti-terror war and what it entails for the politics of the region seems quite ominous in anticipating what the future is likely to hold for the peace and stability of the region.

### **The Primacy of Contending National Interests in Northeast Asian Affairs and Its Implications for the Region and the Korean Peninsula**

As discussed above, Japan had been rather content with its less than fully sovereign status under America's nuclear umbrella prior to the end of the Cold War. Since the end of the Cold War, however, Japan has become increasingly unwilling to remain a second-class power in international affairs. As the world's second largest economy and a major contributor to international organizations, Japan no longer shies away from acting on the international scene as one of the world's great powers, and in fact, it has been seeking a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. The change of Japan's posture has reflected the rightward drift of its polity: While the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has been unable to free itself from the Cold War framework of thought, nor effectively deal with the collapse of Japan's economic bubble, or offer an alternative vision and leadership

for the post-Cold War era, its right wing elements have ushered in dramatic changes in Japan's foreign policy stance.

At the heart of these controversial changes is the revision of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which renounces "war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes." While the provision does not recognize Japan's right of belligerency, through gradual loosening of the official interpretation of it, Japan's right-wing politicians have been bringing about an incremental rollback. The Peace-Keeping Organization Law in 1992, for instance, allowed Japan's Self Defense Forces (SDF) to undertake peace-keeping missions, and the 1998 revision of the 1978 US-Japan Defense Guidelines deepened bilateral cooperation and extended it to "areas surrounding Japan," areas to be defined in situational terms. The cooperation further intensified after September 11, 2001. In October 2001, Japan under then Prime Minister Koizumi adopted a Terror Special Measures law and provided substantial logistical support to America's anti-terror war in Afghanistan. Moreover, despite the United States' failure to attain United Nations backing for the 2003 war in Iraq, Japan sent its armed SDF forces—for the first time since the end of World War II—to Iraq, albeit in a subordinate and non-combat role. Further, Japan's revised National Defense Program Outline of December 2004 described China and North Korea as potential sources of threat to Japan. Moreover, in a February 2005 joint statement on security cooperation, the United States and Japan named Taiwan as a matter of joint concern in a formal statement for the first time. Departing from its traditional strategic ambiguity, in other words, Japan deliberately made its position on Taiwan clearer by declaring that Taiwan is a mutual security concern. In making such policy changes and attaining a closer integration with America's global anti-terror alliance, Japan's right-wing politicians resorted to the principle of *fait accompli*, exploiting and feeding the nationalist paranoia about the rise of China

and the North Korean nuclear and missile threats.

To be sure, China has also become more assertive in foreign policy, feeding a negative feedback loop and engendering a heightened Sino-Japanese rivalry and sense of conflict.<sup>5</sup> China's 1995 nuclear weapons tests, its 1996 bracketing of Taiwan with ballistic missiles, and its emotional dispute over the Diaoyu (or what the Japanese call Senkaku) Islands represent cases in point. Particularly with respect to Taiwan, China asserts that reunification with the mainland is the only solution. China insists that it will seek to explore peaceful means first, but as demonstrated in the adoption of the anti-secession law in early 2005, which provides a quasi-legal basis for use of force, China's state power holders refuse to rule out the military option on the Taiwan question. From the standpoint of China's national security, therefore, the renewed US-Japan alliance and its missile defense programs pose grave threats to its core interests especially with respect to Taiwan. Clearly, how China behaves and uses its growing influence in its relations with other states will be as influential as how Japan handles its external conduct in determining regional stability and cooperation.

Arguably, however, the greatest source of Sino-Japanese dilemmas over security currently stems from Japan's identification of its foreign policy with America's global anti-terror strategy even at the expense of regional cooperation. Japan's proactive joining of the United States' war on terror has aroused the deep-rooted suspicion that the specter of Japan's old militarism may be on the rise once again. China's, and South Korea's for that matter, fear and mistrust of Japan remain compounded by Japan's persistent mishandling of its history, including: Japan's apologies without genuine introspection about its past military aggression, exploitation and genocidal wars of

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<sup>5</sup> The rise of China may well engender an uncharted territory in Northeast Asia where strong and rising China and prosperous but possibly developmentally-peaked Japan find themselves in a collision course with each other, as they jockey for leadership, power, and influence.

conquest; the Japanese government's prohibition of history textbooks which address its wartime atrocities as well as its approval of right-wing textbooks that actively justify Japan's invasion of Asian countries as a liberation.

While postwar Japan has tried to buy friendship and support for its leadership role in the region with increased economic interaction and interdependency, in the post-Cold War period it seems to have begun to lose confidence in the effectiveness of economic diplomacy. As Green (2003) perceptively points out, the key source of Japan's external behavior has been shifting from a faith in economic interdependence and its spillover effects to a "reluctant realism" with a growing emphasis on power and national security-driven interests and a tendency toward more populist foreign policies.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, Japan has not yet taken a strict realist policy based on its national interests as defined in terms of power. Japan has neither pursued only relative gain at the expense of neighboring countries nor translated its economic might fully into military power as yet. Instead, it has combined its strategy of engagement and continued economic interaction and cooperation with that of hedging against the prospect of potential threats such as China's rise (Green 2003, 78-79).

Indeed, what has held the Sino-Japanese rivalry and conflict in check has been the overwhelming presence of the United States in the region and Japan's continuing reliance on its alliance with the United States. The predominant military and political presence that the United States enjoys in the region has restrained Japan from, say, fully reciprocating American military ties, let alone Japan's desire to keep or not to damage its economic interests. China also prefers to keep the troubled history of Japan's wartime atrocities in the background where it cannot disrupt economic ties or complicate its relations with Japan. China is surely the world's seventh largest economy, but with

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<sup>6</sup>See also Pempel, 1998.

its 1.3 billion people, it still remains one of the world's poor in terms of its GDP per capita. China's rapid growth, in fact, hides a multitude of domestic problems, including rampant corruption, uncertainty over a future political transition, rigid and troubled financial institutions and inefficient state-owned enterprises, and a large number of migrant workers in urban slums without family support networks, health care, or resident permits. Any serious faltering of the economy could threaten China's political stability. Thus, China's focus on maintaining economic growth and dealing with a multitude of internal problems has compelled China to emphasize its "peaceful rise."

Being natural rivals for primacy in terms of regional politics, nonetheless, China and Japan frequently take confrontational stances to each other. Ostensibly for Japan's failure to show contrition about Japan's past militarism in the manner acceptable to China, for instance, there was no official visit to China by the Japanese prime minister from October 2001 to October 2006 until after Koizumi stepped down from the office, and none by the Chinese president to Japan since the disastrous visit to Tokyo by Jiang Zemin in December 1998, the longest hiatus since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1972.

The South Korean-Japanese relations also remained fraught with misgivings, resentments, and animosities. In fact, despite the strategic imperative of maintaining strong bilateral ties as a cornerstone in the America-led postwar security structure in Northeast Asia, South Korea and Japan have often come close to precipitating diplomatic disasters even on such relatively marginal issues as a renewed conflict over Dokdo, a rocky set of South Korean-controlled islets. In February 2005, for instance, the Japanese ambassador to South Korea publicly claimed Dokdo as part of Japan's territory in the heart of Seoul, calling it Takeshima. Additionally, in March 2005, Shimane prefecture on Japan's west coast adopted an ordinance designating February 22<sup>nd</sup> as "Takeshima Day" to mark the date in 1905 when Japan first claimed

the islets in the midst of Japan's usurpation of Korean sovereignty. The claim and the ordinance infuriated South Koreans, and the South Korean government fulminated that it was tantamount to invasion. South Korean furries have been further stoked by the latest round of the Japanese governments' approval of history textbooks which whitewash Japan's war crimes.

The problem is that, in tandem with the strengthening of Japan's alliance with the United States in the face of what the Japanese right wing sees as the threat of a rising China and the North Korean nuclear program, Japan no longer tends to back down or yield to the concerns or pressures of its Northeast Asian neighbors—even at the expense of the spirit of trust and regional community building. Without regards to Chinese and Korean protests, for instance, Koizumi, while serving as Prime Minister, continued to visit the Yasukuni Shrine, which honors Class-A war criminals and has a museum that denies Japan's wartime atrocities and justifies its invasion of Asian countries as acts of liberation. In short, Japan's foreign policy posture has been unmistakably changing especially during the last few years, and what used to be only minority views of Japan's right-wing politicians such as the notorious Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara seem to have become the polity's dominant trend during the same time span.

Against such a backdrop, it is not surprising that Korean and Chinese elites as well as their publics remain fearful and suspicious of a renewal of Japanese militarism and aggression. As Ikenberry and Mastanduno (2003, 11-12) contend, the 1995 *Yomiuri Shimbun* survey results clearly indicate that the difference between Japanese self-perception and the views of its neighbors remained striking:

“Asked if they thought Japan might become a great military power again or that if already is one, Japanese public opinion was overwhelming: 74 percent said they did not think Japan would ever again become a great military power, while 18 percent said that it may become one. In contrast, among Koreans, 56 percent strongly believed that Japan may become and 26 percent thought it already was a military

power. PRC respondents were roughly divided on whether Japan would again become a military power.”

Hence, the Northeast Asian governments need to recognize the necessity of sincerely seeking ways to make territorial disputes or history textbook issues less of a flashpoint. The frictions may in fact constitute some manifestations of the unresolved and entangling problems of the militarist past, and they may also be signs of rising right-wing nationalism and a confident determination to pursue more narrowly-defined national interests.

Clearly, no country can be perfect or without blemish, and neither Korea nor China can necessarily claim moral superiority in condemning Japan for its failure to show a true contrition. Nevertheless, Japan’s rapid upgrading of its security alliance with the United States and its steady and increasing rollback of its pacifist constitution without open debate or a consensus-building process are of grave concern, to Korea and China. Japan does need an open, public discussion on the changes to its constitution and military policies. Failing this, the brittle shell of Cold War pacifism may incrementally crumble away, and even some small but emotionally-charged territorial issues may prove to become the straw that breaks the camels back.

Historically-embedded tensions, rivalries, and nationalist passions would rise further in Northeast Asia especially if the United States is viewed as encouraging Japanese militarization, albeit as part of its global strategy. The close integration of Japanese foreign policy with America’s global anti-terror war efforts and the consequent revitalization of the US-Japan alliance have indeed accompanied Japan’s increasing “normalization” of its military sovereignty. In effect, America’s global war on terror since 2001 has had particularly negative on Northeast Asian affairs.<sup>7</sup> It not only deflected America’s

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<sup>7</sup>I do not deny that there were some positive developments in the Northeast Asian security affairs in the aftermath of the September 11 terror: in particular, the increas-



attention from focusing on a peaceful resolution to the disputed question of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction. It also entailed a more confrontational approach by America to North Korea, which halted and reversed its previous, rather respectable engagement policy under the Clinton administration, whose tit-for-tat strategy had engendered a series of reciprocated cooperative moves, culminating in the 2000 summit meeting between South and North Korea (Suh et al. eds. 2004, ch. 4).

As the North Korean nuclear crisis clearly represents a major flashpoint to the deep-seated conflict-ridden politics of Northeast Asia, what goals the United States pursues and how it conducts its foreign policy in relation to the countries concerned will indeed critically influence the future of the region and the Korean peninsula. The heightened American security concerns are understandable in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, but the current application of its global anti-terror war approach to North Korea will not successfully resolve the North Korean nuclear dilemma and deadlock. Instead, America's anti-terror approach may well aggravate the situation by refusing to recognize North Korea's sovereignty rights and its legitimate survival and security concerns.<sup>8</sup> Despite the on-and-off Six-Party Talks, in fact, the failure of Bush's rigid hard-line policy became undeniably manifest in North Korea's underground nuclear test of October 2006.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to its policy objective, America's fundamentally power-

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ing cooperation between China and the United States and the resultant Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear issue. As discussed below, however, none of the otherwise constructive and potentially promising developments including the Six-Party Talks would get very far without some radical rethinking of the concerned states' power- and interest-centric foreign policy assumptions and approaches.

<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence that can suggest that North Korea has ever sold its weapons of mass destruction such as chemical or biological weapons to anybody, and with respect to nuclear weapons, it just does not have enough, if at all, to think about selling any of them to any terrorist. See Preston, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> For a nice review of American foreign policy towards North Korea under President Bush, see Lim, 2006.

national interest- and military-superiority-based hard-line approach to the North Korean regime, in effect, ended up compelling and further prodding the development of North Korea's nuclear program.

There is no question about the immorality and bankruptcy of the North Korean regime: It has literally killed millions of its own people through years of man-made famine as well as through its notorious concentration camps. Moreover, given its past history of external aggression and other hideous international crimes, therefore, any country trying to deal with it would have to do so with a significant dose of caution and skepticism. However, to prevent the nuclear dilemma from further escalating into a major crisis on the Korean peninsula or in the region, if not a cataclysmic clash that no country concerned could possibly desire, requires understanding and recognizing North Korea's security concerns and its sense of vulnerability to an American preemptive attack. From Pyongyang's present standpoint, nuclear weapons may seem the only thing that can provide it with some semblance of deterrence against the military might of the world's only superpower.

Thus, the United States' neo-conservative, anti-terror approach to North Korea as a rogue state has only led to an entrenchment of the hard-line posturing of the North Korean hardliners. In fact, President Bush's labeling of the North Korean regime as an "axis of evil" compelled the North Korean regime to believe that the United States was determined to overthrow it. While such an approach posed a clear, credible and present threat to the North Korean regime, it would not by itself provide any incentive for the regime to cooperate on the nuclear issue nor indeed other issues. The United States at times complained that the reason why its hard-line, power-centric approach did not work effectively with North Korea was due to the lack of cooperation from other concerned parties such as China and Korea. Had all other parties confronted the North Korean regime with a unified voice and posture à la America's, according to this argument, the rogue regime

would not have had any choice but to comply. Even under such circumstances, however, North Korean compliance may not have been highly likely; once the North Korean regime believes that its own destruction is what its enemies really seek, and that it has nothing to gain from further engagement or negotiation, the chances of its non-compliance and an even accidental spiral to conflict and clashes may actually run higher. Moreover, the consequences of such a scenario would seem too grave and dreadful for China or Korea to conceive of; it would be the case especially for South Korea, whose capital Seoul lies well within the range of North Korea's numerous artillery pieces not to mention missiles. Hence, to move forward with the challenge of resolving the nuclear problem and the cause of constructing a more cooperative multilateralism in Northeast Asia would call for the United States in particular to set a model by going beyond power-based realist calculations and showing improved sensitivity to the region's and concerned countries' priorities, concerns, and needs. It goes without saying that North Korea itself also needs a radical rethinking of its own sense of security threat vis-à-vis the United States before it runs out of alternatives and cuts off the possibility of more desirable ways out of the nuclear deadlock,<sup>10</sup> especially since any preemptive attack on North Korea by the lame-duck and politically-troubled Bush administration seems increasingly unlikely and unfeasible.<sup>11</sup> Only with a genuine, dedicated, and reciprocal meeting of minds, designing a peaceful, feasible, and future-oriented solution to the deadlock would become

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<sup>10</sup> At least to some North Korean hardliners, the real or perceived security threat from America may seem useful in justifying and maintaining their totalitarian regime, but such myopia may lead to nothing but sitting on a domestic time bomb until it implodes in one way or another.

<sup>11</sup> As a result of America's failure to bring security and stability to Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, President Bush's Republican Party lost the both houses of the Congress, and the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, a key leader of the so-called neo-conservative policy camp in the Bush administration, immediately resigned from his office.

possible.<sup>12</sup> Without such a meeting of minds, however, the primacy of conflicting national interests continues to be pronounced in Northeast Asian politics, a starkly clear reflection of which is found in the region's post-Cold War military build-up.

### **The Trend in Military Spending in Northeast Asia**

The biggest problem in analyzing the state of regional security in terms of military expenditures is the lack of exact and consistent data. A number of sources offer yearly estimates of military spending, and the three most commonly cited include *The Military Balance*, the *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers* (WMEAT), and *The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook*. However, the numbers from even these sources are not in full agreement with one another. China may be one of the most egregious cases of information inconsistency: *The SIPRI Yearbook* holds that Chinese military spending amounted to \$20 billion in 1999, while the WMEAT report claimed that \$89 billion was the correct figure.<sup>13</sup> Other sources place Chinese expenditures somewhere in between these two figures. Such inconsistency in data partly explains the dearth of scholarly analysis on military spending and its trends. Nonetheless, my sense is that by looking at the broad trend in regional military spending, one can identify patterns of security practice and interaction. In fact, during the post-Cold War period, one is struck by

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<sup>12</sup> Japan, on its part, also needs to go beyond its current myopic fixation on the issue of Japanese abductees to North Korea and put it in perspective in the spirit of the September 17, 2002 Pyongyang Declaration between Kim Jong Il and the then Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi.

<sup>13</sup> The WMEAT reports warn that the figures for Chinese military spending should be taken with a pinch of salt. It is so in part because no appropriate exchange rate is available in China, the WMEAT uses purchasing power parity (PPP) estimates. Also, there is an inconsistency or discrepancy problem of what is counted as military expenditures not only in various estimates but also in varying countries.

the fact that Northeast Asia represented the world's only region that failed to reap any peace dividend from the Cold War's end. Whereas the military expenditures as a share of GNP decreased in all other regions of the world from 1993-2003, for instance, those in East Asia increased from 1.8 to 2.1 percent during the same period, further exacerbating the patterns of the Cold War era (*The Military Balance: 2003-2004*).

As of 1999, North America, Western Europe, and East Asia accounted for 78 percent of world military expenditures.<sup>14</sup> North America took up 34 percent of worldwide military expenditures in the same year. While the region's share was up from 1989, this was so because the decline in the region's military spending proved slower than the general trend in the world. North America's real expenditures actually declined by three percent per year from 1989-1999. The United States remained the largest military spender, accounting for 96 percent of North American and 33 percent of world spending in 1999.<sup>15</sup>

Western Europe, with 22 percent represented the world's second largest regional defense spender in 1999. However, as was the case with North America, the general trend is towards decline: the region's military expenditures declined by almost two percent per annum from 1989-1999, with such major countries as Germany and Great Britain showing higher rates of spending decrease than the regional average figure. The rising expenditures of Turkey (eight percent growth per year during the decade) were the major factor which dampened the regional average to a mere two percent.

Most noteworthy is the East Asian region, whose share of world military spending more than doubled from 1989-1999, up from ten to 21 percent at an annual growth rate of well over three percent. It

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<sup>14</sup>This section heavily draws on WMEAT at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/18723.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup>The United States quickly restored its Cold War-level military expenditures in the wake of the September 11 terror in 2001.

constituted one of the two major changes in the global trend in military spending during the immediate post-Cold War decade (with the other being the sharp decline in Eastern Europe's share of world military expenditures from 34 to seven percent in the wake of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the region). Almost the half of the growth in regional spending came from China, but even if one discounts the China factor because of the uncertainty of its statistics, other Northeast Asian countries have also significantly contributed to the increase in expenditures. During the decade after 1989, Japan's real military spending jumped by 20 percent, South Korea's by 25 percent, and Taiwan's by 80 percent, while North Korea's declined by 11 percent. The rise in the Northeast Asian countries' military spending is, to be sure, in line with their economic development; yet, the rise remains quite significant in light of the general decline in world military expenditures since the end of the Cold War.

Even if one looks at the relative economic burden of the military build-up in the post-Cold War period, what is striking is the increased level of the Northeast Asian region's military spending as a share of their GNP in comparison to the decline in all other regions of the world. The global military expenditures as a share of world GNP fell from 4.7 percent in 1989 to 2.4 percent in 1999. However, the level in East Asia increased to 2.1 percent by 2003, up from 1.8 percent in 1993, while that in NATO countries, except for the US, dropped from 2.5 to 1.9 percent, and that in non-NATO countries slipped from 1.9 to 1.7 percent from 1993-2003 (*The Military Balance: 2003-2004*).

The sheer size of the military spending in Northeast Asia itself is worth noting. If we trust WMEAT estimates, China is the world's second biggest military spender with \$89 billion in 1999, although the American military budget of over \$450 billion for 2004 dwarfs this high-estimated figure. Even if we use China's officially declared military spending, the absolute amount is by no means small. With double-digit increases per annum, it has more than doubled since

the mid 1990s to almost \$30 billion by 2005.<sup>16</sup> With respect to Japan, despite thus far sticking to its Self Defense Forces' share of GDP at one percent, it spent \$45 billion for its military in 2004. Japan constitutes the world's third or second biggest military spender depending on which Chinese figures are used. Japan's SDF dramatically increased expenditures on missile defense to \$1.2 billion for 2004, nine times more than the total spent from 1999-2003, and it already has 38,000 kilograms of plutonium, which can make over 7,000 nuclear warheads at any time if it so chooses (Matthews 2003, 76-78). South Korea's spending totaled \$16.4 billion, and Taiwan's \$7.5 billion in 2004 (*The Military Balance: 2003-2004*).

Perhaps most ominously, the Northeast Asian countries' increased military spending in the post-Cold War period has not been directed at mere modernization of their respective armed forces, but at expanding their war-fighting capabilities. Going beyond simply replacing older fighter aircraft with at least some "fourth-generation" ones, the militaries have been "acquiring greater lethality and accuracy at greater ranges," which would include expanding blue-water navies, tanker aircraft for air-to-air refueling, early warning aircraft, and missile defenses (Bitzinger 2004). In acquiring such advanced, foreign-built conventional weaponry, Taiwan spent almost \$26 billion, Japan \$22 billion, South Korea \$16 billion, and China \$7 billion during the 1990s. This rising trend of regional military expenditures and power projection capacities seems set to continue for the foreseeable future. South Korea, for instance, plans to invest over \$17 billion in upgrading its military forces from 2003-2007, and Taiwan over \$20 billion in the next decade (Ibid.).

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<sup>16</sup>*International Herald Tribune*, March 5-6, 2005.

## **Paradigms, Fallacies, and the Future of Northeast Asian Politics**

This article has analyzed the patterns of Northeast Asian security relations in the post-Cold War era, steeped in distrust and increasingly acrimonious, where the “ripe for rivalry” image remains still highly influential. Undoubtedly, the power and interest-centric realist paradigm maintains its explanatory dominance in capturing the lack of reconciliation or institutionalization of regional cooperation both in postwar and post-Cold War Northeast Asia. As documented above, in fact, the post-Cold War era has ominously witnessed an intensification of conflict, rivalry, and security competition in the Northeast Asian region, broadly in accord with what the realist paradigm would have us expect.

When it comes to prescribing for the lack of institutionalized multilateralism or security cooperation, however, the otherwise robust analytic power of realist perspective becomes “sterile.” This is so because realists assume the values, preferences, and goals of the units or nation states concerned as largely fixed or determined by the anarchical international system. In this respect, neo-liberal institutionalists do not differ from realists: They fundamentally share the realist disinterest in the unit-level phenomena, paradigmatically assuming unit states’ identically egoistic behavior under anarchy. The international systemic pressures supposedly dictate the patterns of state behavior, and by assumption, the resultant, largely invariable state behaviors and their interactions do not make any discernable difference in shaping or changing the anarchical system. Such a realist paradigm or wholesale disregard for the unit state-level values, principles, and policy choices has frequently contributed to a further exacerbation of security dilemmas in the post-Cold War period.

However, paradigmatic or theoretical assumptions are not facts, and thus assumptions, realist or any other kind, must not be confused



with realities. Even if self-interest represents the dominant behavioral trait in human beings or nation states, in fact, realist definitions or conceptions of it have often been overly narrow, verging nearly on the level of animal instincts. Self-interest can be open, broader, and considerate, if not exactly altruistic, empathetic, or inclusive of self-interest of others. The fact of the matter is that states or their policymakers do not always act egoistically. Even at the expense of their own immediate interests, nation states do at times advance principles or enlightened ideas, especially if they regard their principled behavior as more advantageous to them in the longer run. Some classic examples of such would arguably include the United States' Marshall Plan in the wake of the Cold War and Gorbachev's "new thinking" in Soviet foreign policy at the close of the Cold War. Such an alternative, if more balanced, approach is called for especially in attempting to approach post-Cold War Northeast Asia, where the specter of power politics and rivalry over contending national interests has increasingly loomed large on the horizon. To help prevent security dilemmas from spiraling into a slippery and perilous path of arms competition requires that the states concerned and their policymakers change their realist assumptions, redefine their self-interests, and learn to embrace international societal norms and perspectives which are built firmly within reality. Such a radical rethinking would entail shifting away from the idea of independent security through unilateral actions to that of mutual or cooperative security through close consultation, help, and support to alleviate rival or enemy states' security dilemmas and problems as a way of benefiting and attaining one's own security.

As discussed earlier, regarding the North Korean nuclear dilemma, in particular, the more strictly power-centric and narrowly self-centered approach the United States or other concerned states adopt without taking the perspective of their, albeit evil, adversary into consideration, the more "nasty, brutish, and short" the life of man

could become in the consequently insecure environment of Northeast Asia. In effect, the continued primacy of fiercely nationalistic and exclusionary definitions of national interest in Northeast Asia may be translated into nuclear deadlock and the close and problematic integration of Japanese and American foreign policies. The United States as a hegemonic power may well still be best able to overcome the “rogue” regime in North Korea and may indeed be able to turn it into a legitimate member of international society, and in the process, help mold a more stable and institutionalized multilateral security system out the Six-Party Talks. America, in rethinking its current and failing approach to embrace and prevail over North Korea, could make possible a grand political resolution of the problem of the nuclear deadlock and thereby help play midwife to a more benign and peaceful transition for the future of the region. For America, such a reconstructed foreign policy would earn a great deal of goodwill and respect from the international community.

Clearly, no state can act entirely free from systemic pressures or without regards to power and interest-driven considerations. To the extent that power matters, for instance, any realistic effort to develop cooperative multilateralism in the region may have to rest on some constructive support, if not the full-fledged exercise of leadership, of indeed hegemonic power. Nonetheless, there is room for policy choices for each and every state even under the existing anarchical international structure, albeit in varying degrees, and how states and their policymakers choose to act and what values and principles they hold in their choice of actions can and do help shape the kind of international society which develops as a result. Mistaking realist assumptions for reality and thereby subscribing entirely, uncritically to its paradigmatic worldviews as policy guidelines may lead to outcomes that no one desires.