


The Evolving East Asian System and Korea: A Reality Check



Young Chul Cho
Jindal Global University






Abstract

-  The aim of this presentation is twofold: first, it is to chronologically review past East Asian (international) systems and Korea's place and interaction with the systems in the context of international relations studies; second, it is to provide a critical reality check on today's East Asian international order in process while discussing Korea's possible ways of adapting itself to a possible coming order. Toward the first aim, I will illustrate key features of three East Asian systems in history: the Sino-centric tribute system, the Japanese imperial system and the Cold War system. In so doing, I will explore the ways in which Korea was related to the three systems. It would seem that historically Korea had largely taken a conformist stance in a defensive spirit, in relation to the three systems. To address the second aim, I will delineate the contours of shifting East Asian international order in the post-Cold War era, by briefly looking at security views of China, Japan and the US. And, it will be discussed that there exists a danger of reproduction of the cold war-style security structure in East Asia today. Related to the shifting East Asian order, I also talk about Korea's in-between dilemma in the region.



The aims of this talk is






-  to chronologically review past East Asian (international) systems and Korea's place and interaction with the systems.
-  to provide a critical reality check on today's East Asian international order in process, by looking at the key actors' geopolitical thinking today.
-  East Asia → mainly, Northeast Asia + the US

I: *The Sino-centric tribute System*

- 📌 ‘an investiture of a king in each tributary country in order to assure Chinese suzerainty and supremacy’ (Kim 2008: 38) → **‘hierarchical’ nature** in both theory and practice
- 📌 Suzerain and vassal used each other for their own good.
- 📌 World order: an extension of the Chinese cultural boundaries and idealized self-image
- 📌 No: the international; sovereignty; Westphalian thinking
- 📌 Yes: autonomy; independence; diplomacy
- 📌 Korea: conformist stance (rule-following)



II: The Japanese Imperial System

-  Japan: the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912); escaping from Asia and entering Europe; Japan as a European-style great imperial power
-  Re-entering Asia by military expansion in the name of liberating Asia from Western imperialism
-  To the West: the logic of int'l society → **equality**
-  To the East: the logic of imperialism → **hierarchy**
-  Korea: compelled to conform to the system (rule-following)



III: The Cold War System

- Started from the Korean War (1950-1953)
- Hierarchical** bi-polar system:
 - communist world vs. free world
- The division of Korea (consolidated)
- The end of the Cold War (1989; 1991)
- Both Koreas: active participants in the system (rule-following)



IV: How do we label today's world?

- 📌 The 1990s: short US uni-polar moment
- 📌 East Asia: parallel development of nationalism & globalization
- 📌 All EA states: relatively strong for the first time in history → not so passive
- 📌 EA states: unsure about what kind of a new regional order they want
- 📌 Need to look at key state actors' geopolitical inscription of boundaries in relation to each other.

The US 'Pivot' to Asia

- 📌 'America's Pacific Century', 'Forward-deployed' diplomacy by Hillary Clinton (2011)
- 📌 Obama admin.: 'a shift in strategy aimed at bolstering the US defense ties with countries through the region and expanding the US naval presence there' (Ross 2012: 72)
- 📌 **“Rebalancing” towards Asia** (US Defense Dept. document in 2012)
- 📌 (Debate) is this just about containing rising China?
- 📌 Regardless of the US “true” intention, ‘the US/its allies vs. China’ security discourse framed [us/them]



Japan: Abe's 'Asia's Democratic Security Diamond'

- 📌 Abe's geopolitical initiative: 'Asia's Democratic Security Diamond' → (OZ, India, Japan, and Hawaii) “form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons” against China [us/them]
- 📌 Explicitly targeting China in a military sense, though values are emphasized.
- 📌 Overlap with 'the US pivot to Asia': “nothing is more important for Japan than to reinvest in its alliance with the US” (Abe, 27 Dec. 2012)


Cont.

-  3 basic principles of Japan's postwar diplomacy (*sangensoku*):

1. Americanism

2. Internationalism

3. Asianism

-  Nationalism largely contained through the three; yet, recently it's traction is on the rise

-  Hedging China > Hugging China

-  Can Japan hug China and the US at the same time?

China's Harmonious World & Peaceful Development







- Xi: 'Chinese Dream'; reiterated Peaceful Development
- Hu Jintao's Harmonious World & Peaceful Development (2005, 2007)
- A list of good words; yet, criticism of hegemonism
- Growing voice for Chinese IR school (ex.) *Tianxia* (All-under-heaven) discourse
- Recalling history
- China (Inherently peaceful civilization) vs. the West (full of hegemonism and power politics) [us/them]

Xi's 'New Type of Great Power Relationship'

- 📌 China's beloved word: G2
- 📌 Still struggling to conceptualize what a new type of great power relationship might be
- 📌 Need to flesh it out.
- 📌 Formal geopolitics in China
 - Increasing use of 'equal', 'fair' & 'just'
 - Embracing international society; yet, agenda-setting, rule-making & rule-monitoring
- 📌 Power, wealth & respect



South Korea's Concerns

-  SK's EA policy: not yet shown clearly
-  Many vexing NK problems
-  SK worries about the possibility of being caught between its ally (the US) and rising China in a regional power competition.
-  A difficult balancing act: consolidating SK-US alliance while not antagonizing China
-  Contested SK; peace-keeping > peace-making
-  'Middle power' discourse; 'swing state'?

In lieu of Conclusion

- 📌 All seems to be boxed in realist paradigm
- 📌 A danger of (re)producing cultures of insecurity (e.g.) security dilemma, the cold war structure
- 📌 Talk global, act national; lack of discussion on how to contribute global governance
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- 📌 Need to problematize state-centric perspective
- 📌 Need more multiple, grass-root engagement activities
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- 📌 Regionalism: see SEA & SA rather than Europe (No hegemonic leadership; less formal & legalistic; open & inclusive; delicate treatment of sovereignty)

Thank You!

