The Evolving East Asian System and Korea: A Reality Check

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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 \(\rightarrow\) 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


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)
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
- 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]
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
- Need to problematize state-centric perspective
- Need more multiple, grass-root engagement activities
- Regionalism: see SEA & SA rather than Europe (No hegemonic leadership; less formal & legalistic; open & inclusive; delicate treatment of sovereignty)
Thank You!