

No. 27

**Great Power Politics in
Contemporary East Asia:
Negotiating Multipolarity or Hegemony?**

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Singapore**

JULY 2002

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ABSTRACT

Perceptions among academics and analysts of great power politics in contemporary East Asia vary. In theoretical terms, some have described the East Asian region as multipolar, where balancing relations between China, Japan and the United States potentially threaten to undermine existing multilateral processes as well as the stability in the region. Others have argued that the region is better described as unilateral in view of the preponderant power of the US, the sole global superpower. Further, the Bush Administration's missile defence (MD) policy, among other things, underscores Washington's penchant towards unilateralism. Against this backdrop, this paper makes two arguments. First, an aggressive effort by the US to deploy MD will likely destabilize the East Asian region. Second, all three great powers (China, Japan and the US) must necessarily exercise reason, restraint, and responsibility in their policy making and implementation, or face the sobering prospect of East Asia as a likely future setting of great power conflict.

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GREAT POWER POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY EAST ASIA: NEGOTIATING MULTIPOLARITY OR HEGEMONY?¹

Introduction

As proverbial wisdom has it, when two elephants fight – or, we might add, make love – the grass beneath them suffers. The Chinese and the Americans, to be sure, are neither at war nor in love, although of late Sino-US ties, following the horrendous terrorist attacks of September 11 in New York and on the Pentagon, have significantly improved relative to the difficult relations in the months since George W. Bush assumed the US presidency. This is not to imply that enduring concerns are now on course for any sort of dramatic resolution. As a Chinese analyst, speaking in the context of Sino-US collaboration in the current “war against terrorism,” recently put it, “Cooperation isn’t changing relations fundamentally. It’s changing the atmosphere. We’re not focused on those negative issues.”²

There remains much about the US-China relationship that continues to worry many in East Asia: the Taiwan “question”; the Bush Administration’s definition of China as a strategic “competitor” rather than – as per the Clinton era – “partner,” American concerns over alleged human rights abuses and religious persecution in China, and so on. “The US-China relationship is complex and multifaceted,” as Lee Kuan Yew, the Senior Minister of Singapore, recently observed. “Between an incumbent superpower and an emerging power there will always be both competition and cooperation, both friendly and adversarial situations.”³ Further, the inclusion of Japan into the fray makes for a rather complicated *menage-a-trois*. From the vantage of tiny Singapore, three elephants going at it can only mean that the “grass” – namely, the East Asian region – is in for some “very serious trampling.”

The sort of great power dynamics in contemporary East Asia that I have just described strongly suggests that the region is characterized by what international relations

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the German - Asian Security Conference, Berlin 19-20 October 2001. This conference was organized by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

² Cited in Jay Solomon, Charles Hutzler and Jason Dean, “US’s Drive Against Terrorism Reduces Tensions in North Asia,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Business and Finance - Asia, September 27, 2001.

³ “Interview with SM Lee: The New Power Equation,” *Sunday Times*, May 20, 2001, p. 46.

(hereafter IR) theorists and foreign policy practitioners call *multipolarity*. And although nations are clearly not the only international subjects, much less “global players,” it would seem that the great powers in question here are either de facto world players or, to that end, “wannabes”: the US, as undisputed superpower (or, as the French foreign minister put it, “hyperpower”⁴); Japan, the world’s second largest national economy, although it is strategically reliant on the US; and China, the (in Michael Yahuda’s words) “regional power with global influence.”

Clearly, the smaller nations in the region are concerned about the effects of multi-great power diplomacy on their region. At best, it may compete with existing processes of multilateral activity – such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN “10+3” formula, or the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) – and, at worst, undermine them. Since 1994, the ARF has been the focal point of much of the multilateral security dialogue and cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region, with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the so-called “driver’s seat” in setting and managing the ARF agenda and process – at times to the dissatisfaction of the great powers for different reasons. As Amitav Acharya has noted, “this apparent ‘bottom-up’ approach to multilateralism will be threatened if the great powers are to organize their interactions outside of the ARF framework with a view to manage and influence the security and stability of the Asia Pacific region”⁵ – and, we may add, that of the East Asian region.

Acharya’s concerns are well taken. An ASEAN weakened by financial crisis, overly rapid expansion, bilateral disputes between members (e.g., Thailand-Myanmar, Malaysia-Singapore), and a serious case of navel-gazing is hard pressed to manage the kinds of great power manoeuvres that have impeded efforts to advance the ARF beyond its “talk shop” status – not that ASEAN is guiltless in this regard, especially with the inveterate fidelity of some of its members to the “non-interference” principle. But instances of great power obduracy *have* obstructed the multilateral process. For example, more ambitious confidence-building measures (CBMs) such as advanced notification of military exercises having been stymied by Sino-US differences. China is opposed to any role of the ARF in preventive diplomacy on grounds that it may lead to outside

⁴ Cited in François Heisbourg, “American Hegemony? Perceptions of the U.S. Abroad,” *Survival* 41, 4 (Winter 1999-2000), p. 9.

interference in its internal affairs (read Taiwan). Indeed, China has expressly rejected any role of the ARF in conflict mediation and resolution, preferring to keep the forum as a vehicle for dialogue and consultation – “out-ASEANing” the ASEAN Way, so to speak.

Against this backdrop of great power diplomacy in the East Asian region, I want to revisit some of the theoretical and conceptual propositions of multipolarity. To be sure, few if any analysts and practitioners who view East Asia as multipolar actually think, per multipolarity theory, that great powers therein share parity or near-parity in terms of capabilities and influence. There are those who see a multipolar East Asia as inherently dangerous, and others who see the region not as unequivocally peaceful but plausibly peaceful under certain conditions. The concern here, whether explicit or implicit, centres on whether multipolarity would usher in a period of regional peace and collaboration, or a perilous one of great power conflict and confrontation.

However, it would be remiss of any discussion of multipolarity to eschew discussing the notion of *unipolarity* – an important conceptual (and, equally for many, empirical) distinction that better describes and explains the contemporary global strategic milieu as well as that of East Asia.⁶ Certainly one may say that this is particularly true for many Chinese for whom American unilateralism in foreign policy can be and, indeed, has been the means by which the latter seeks to consolidate its unipolar position.

In particular, I will focus on the Bush Administration’s proposed development and deployment of missile defence (MD) – a policy especially vexing for China, but a boon for Japan. The US Department of Defense’s 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) – released *after* the September 11 tragedy – reiterates the administration’s commitment to missile defence, notwithstanding potential disenchantment within the American public for that policy in the now glaring light of other more obvious threats. Assuming the Bush Administration chooses to continue pursuing its MD policy, it is my contention that (1) an aggressive effort by the US to deploy MD will likely destabilize the East Asian region, and that (2) all three great powers must necessarily exercise reason, restraint, and

⁵ Amitav Acharya, *Reordering Asia: “Cooperative Security” or Concert of Powers?* IDSS Working Paper 3 (Singapore: IDSS, July 1999), p. 2.

⁶ Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, 1 (1990-91), pp. 23-33.

responsibility in their policy making and implementation, or face the sobering prospect of East Asia as a future setting of great power conflict.

Multipolarity

Few, in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War's abrupt conclusion in 1989-1990, could be faulted for imagining that liberals rather than realists would, in all likelihood from thereon, dominate the intellectual milieu of IR. As Charles Kegley noted in his presidential address to the International Studies Association in 1993:

[A]s the Cold War has ended, the emergent conditions in this 'defining moment' transcend the realpolitik that has dominated discussion of international affairs for the past five decades and invite a reconstructed paradigm, perhaps one inspired by idealist ideas associated with the Wilsonian vision.⁷

Further, in the view of some former senior members of the American foreign policy establishment – James Baker and Lawrence Eagleburger included – the diplomatic horizon of the post-Cold War world was multipolar in kind.⁸ Indeed, no less an authority on the notions of global economic hierarchy and hegemony than Immanuel Wallerstein, writing in 1993, has described the transformed strategic milieu in what seemed like multipolarity:

The United States is less strong today, a lot less strong – economically, politically, culturally - than it was in the 1960s. Europe and Japan meanwhile became relatively stronger... The heady days of hegemony are gone, never to return. The United States needs to accept that it is just one major power among many in a world of great disorder, a disorder that promises to increase considerably into the next century.⁹

Yet it bears reminding that the first significant shots fired in post-Cold War IR debate in the main were those by a so-called structural realist, John Mearsheimer, who raised the spectre of a multipolar world as a great deal more unstable and war-prone than

⁷ Charles W. Kegley, Jr., "The Neoidealist Moment in International Studies? Realist Myths and the New International Realities," *International Studies Quarterly* 37, 2 (1993), pp. 131-2.

⁸ Charles W. Kegley, Jr., and Gregory A. Raymond, *A Multipolar Peace? Great Power Politics in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 3, 22.

⁹ Immanuel Wallerstein, "Foes as Friends?" *Foreign Policy* 90 (Spring 1993), pp. 145, 151.

the bipolar world of the Cold War period.¹⁰ The argument, in a sense, was irresistible particularly in the light of the litany of regional conflicts that blooded the 1990s: the Gulf War, Somalia, the Balkans, and so on. Treading a well-worn path eked out by Kenneth Waltz, Mearsheimer and other like-minded neorealist balance-of-power thinkers argued the benefits of bipolarity over those of multipolarity.

Others, however, taking umbrage at Mearsheimer's claims, proved more lenient and willing to grant that multipolarity, under specific conditions, actually contributes to international stability.¹¹ They pointed to the fact that the so-called "long peace," as John Lewis Gaddis famously christened the bipolar Cold War period, was merely a provincial interpretation of the absence of hot war between the superpowers – a peace evidently denied many parts of the developing world insofar as these were treated by Washington and Moscow as playgrounds for their Cold War power-political games. One recalls, for example, Hans Morgenthau's grim indictment of Cold War bipolarity as having reduced the international system

to the primitive spectacle of two giants eyeing each other with watchful suspicion. They [bent] every effort to increase their military potential to the utmost, since this is all they [had] to count on. Both [prepared] to strike the first decisive blow, for if one [did] not strike it the other might. Thus, contain or be contained, conquer or be conquered, destroy or be destroyed, [became] the watchwords of Cold War diplomacy.¹²

Further, unlike earlier proponents of multipolarity who preach the normative merits of multipolarity,¹³ present-day advocates expressly assume post-Cold War multipolarity as a given and proceed from there to focus on conditions under which a multipolar system would be peaceful.¹⁴ In any case, both camps began with the same starting point, i.e., the post-Cold War world is essentially multipolar.

¹⁰ See, among others, John J. Mearsheimer, "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," in Charles W. Kegley, Jr., and Eugene R. Wittkopf (eds.), *The Future of American Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 48-62; "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security* 15 (Summer 1990), pp. 5-56; and, "Back to the Future, Part II," *International Security* 15 (Fall 1990), pp. 194-9.

¹¹ Kegley and Raymond, *A Multipolar Peace?*

¹² Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th edition, revised by Kenneth W. Thompson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 379.

¹³ See, for example, the classic study by Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability," *World Politics* 16 (1964), pp. 390-406.

Both camps are represented among East Asia watchers, although more has been made of contemporary East Asia as a rather unstable region – a view that, according to some, has received partial vindication by the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. Recall, firstly, Aaron Friedberg’s grim scenario of post-Cold War East Asia as the future “cockpit of great power conflict.”¹⁵ Elsewhere, Kent Caulder has theorized on what he sees as the plausibility of accelerating military buildups and deepening geopolitical rivalries in the region as the undesirable consequences of a combination of factors, notably, high-speed economic growth, impending energy shortages, and political insecurity.¹⁶ Although the impact of the recent financial crisis has somewhat blunted the force of Caulder’s argument, not many – including the more optimistic among Asia watchers – would necessarily oppose his contention that energy and politics constitute potentially serious problems for the region’s constituents. Finally, Richard Betts, reasoning that peace in present-day Europe, relative to East Asia, is more plausible due to “the apparent satisfaction of the great powers with the status quo,” notes that in Asia “an ample pool of festering grievances [exists] with more potential for generating conflict than during the Cold War, when bipolarity helped stifle the escalation of parochial disputes.”¹⁷

Clearly, doom-and-gloom scenarios are not without warrant. On the other hand, there are others who, though acknowledging the region’s potential for conflict, are nonetheless confident that major conflagration in East Asia can and has been avoided because – as Kishore Mahbubani, a senior Singaporean diplomat, has put it – of the ability of the great powers to “forge a consensus” over the region. Indeed, as far as Mahbubani is concerned, great power agreements are necessary if East Asia is to defy the historical odds and make a smooth transition from one order to another time. As he once wrote, referring to the 1996 missile crisis in the Taiwan straits:

We faced a danger then, but we also saw a new opportunity because it woke up key minds in Washington, DC, Tokyo and Beijing on the importance of preserving the status quo. A new consensus emerged in the

¹⁴ Kegley and Raymond, *A Multipolar Peace?*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Aaron L. Friedberg, “Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia,” *International Security* 18 (1993/4), p. 7.

¹⁶ Kent E. Caulder, *Asia’s Deadly Triangle: How Arms, Energy and Growth Threaten to Destabilize Asia Pacific* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 1996).

¹⁷ Richard K. Betts, “Wealth, Power, and Instability: East Asia and the United States After the Cold War,” *International Security* 18 (1993/4), p. 64.

region: “Let sleeping dogs lie.” This is why we have not had any major geopolitical crisis in East Asia since March 1996, despite phenomenal historical change in our region.¹⁸

Whether framed in a pessimistic or optimistic light, the foregoing views are agreed on an apparently irrefutable “fact”: the pervasive influence and persistent involvement of the great powers in the affairs of East Asia. To be sure, two of the powers that I have in mind here are themselves Asian nations, namely, China and Japan. The third in question, America, has, for the better part of the last century, been engaged in this part of the world, including active participation in two hot wars of the Cold War period, i.e., in Korea and in Vietnam.¹⁹ Indeed, in the view of some, US engagement in East Asia almost seems inevitable. According to Joseph Nye, “History, geography, demographics and economics make the United States a Pacific power.”²⁰

Unipolarity

The argument for American unipolarity in the post-Cold War world is rather straightforward: notwithstanding the audacity of an Osama bin Laden and *al-Qaeda*, there are few if any state actors ready or willing to challenge the preponderant power of the US. According to Mastanduno and Kapstein, two arguments are central to writings on unipolarity.²¹ In contrast to neorealist balance-of-power politics of the sort propounded by Kenneth Waltz,²² which typically treats unipolarity as an inevitably brief transition to either a bipolar or multipolar situation,²³ the first proposes that the principal post-Cold War foreign policy challenge for other East Asian great powers has been that of the adjusting of their strategies to the emergence and likely endurance of a unipolar distribution of power in the region.

¹⁸ Comments made during remarks addressed to the Europe Asia Forum held in Singapore, February 21, 1998. See Kishore Mahbubani, *Can Asians Think?* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1998), pp. 150-1.

¹⁹ Philip Zelikow, “American Engagement in Asia,” in Robert D. Blackwill and Paul Dibb (eds.), *America’s Asian Alliances*, BCSIA Studies in International Security (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), pp. 19-30.

²⁰ Joseph S. Nye, “The ‘Nye Report’: six years later,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 1 (2001), p. 96.

²¹ Michael Mastanduno and Ethan B. Kapstein, “Realism and State Strategies After the Cold War,” in Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno (eds.), *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies After the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 5.

²² Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

²³ Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Arise,” *International Security* 17, 4 (1993), pp. 5-49.

According to this reasoning, most regional states have chosen to “bandwagon” with the US and depend on American power for their security. The case of Japan is somewhat of a moot point since it is a strategic ally and dependent of the US. At times such bandwagoning is not without risk to one’s own domestic stability (and, paradoxically, one’s national security), as is the case presently for some Islamic nations or countries with significant Muslim constituencies in the Washington-led coalition against terrorism. Although China has demonstrated its willingness to assist the US on that front (and in doing so possibly receive help in its effort to manage Islamic radicalism at home), as a great power it has hitherto been less ready to bandwagon with the preponderant power. Nonetheless, it has sought, since the Cold War’s end, to integrate into the US-dominated global economic order. In short, neither Japan nor China, or any other state, whether individually or as part of a collectivity, has attempted to balance American power – just the sort of behaviour predicted, erroneously in this case, by neorealist theory. Going further than most unipolar theorists would allow, Peter Van Ness, appropriating the Gramscian concept of hegemony to international relations,²⁴ has argued that China and Japan, each in their different ways “strategic dependents” of the US, devise their respective national security policies according to their common perception of “a hierarchical world environment, structured in terms of a combination of US military-strategic hegemony and a globalized economic interdependence.”²⁵ Beginning in the late 1940s, the US in effect “spun a web of institutions that connected other states to an emerging American-dominated economic and security order.”²⁶ By participating in this hegemonic system, China, as has many other nations, has received and continues receiving substantial benefits as, in this alternative sense, a strategic dependent of America.

This is not to imply that China is therefore uninterested at balancing preponderant US power in the future (or, indeed, in more subtle ways at present), especially if the hegemon insists on making certain changes to the rules of the system – say, Washington’s proposed abrogation of the 1972 ABM Treaty as a rationalization for MD – thereby rendering bandwagoning a problematic policy choice. As a senior Chinese “track two”

²⁴ Robert W. Cox with Timothy J. Sinclair, *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Stephen Gill (ed.), *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²⁵ Peter Van Ness, “Hegemony, Not Anarchy: Why China and Japan Are Not Balancing US Unipolar Power,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 2, 1 (February 2002), pp. 131-150.

(or, as some wags are wont to say, “track one-and-a-half”) member once said, China can “tolerate,” but not “accept,” American strategic dominance in East Asia.²⁷ “China is rapidly modernizing its modest military capability,” Van Ness writes, “and its greatest strategic concern is a fear that the United States may in the future decide to stand in the way of China’s rise to power.”²⁸ Visions, correct or wrong, of a China biding its time on the sidelines and chomping at the bits to supplant the US some day – economically and technologically, if not militarily – have no doubt prompted comments such as the following from US National Security Advisor, Condoleeza Rice: “China is not a ‘status quo’ power” because it “resents the role of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region.”²⁹

Further, the purported absence of balancing, however, does not imply the concomitant absence of competition and/or conflict among the great powers. To that end, the second argument emphasizes the significance of “positional competition” among powers outside the realm of military security.³⁰ Such positional competition helps a state achieve relative gains over other states against which it competes: positional competition over resources, markets, prestige, and influence. As Randall Schweller has put it:

Among the present great powers, the rivalry for status is no longer being fought on battlefields for the purpose of establishing a preferred political, religious, or ideological order. These kinds of conflicts have been replaced by a far less dangerous but equally brutal global competition among the developed countries to attract investment, to strengthen the global competitiveness of their national firms and workers in key high-tech sectors, and, most noticeably, to assist (by any means necessary) domestic firms competing for a share of the more than one trillion dollars in infrastructure megaprojects...in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.³¹

China may not yet be involved in this sort of positional competition against the US – not in any significant way at least – but its economic muscle is already being felt by some Southeast Asian countries particularly over the migration of foreign capital and investment from the latter to the former. From the vantage of the US whose goal is,

²⁶ G. John Ikenberry, “Getting Hegemony Right,” *National Security* 63 (Spring 2001), p. 21.

²⁷ Comment made at a track two security conference in Kuala Lumpur, June 2001.

²⁸ Van Ness, “Hegemony, Not Anarchy.”

²⁹ Condoleeza Rice, “Promoting the National Interest,” *Foreign Affairs* 79, 1 (January/February 2000), p. 56.

³⁰ Mastanduno and Kapstein, “Realism and State Strategies...,” p. 5.

according to Bush's Trade Representative, Robert Zoellick, to establish "a strategy that will shape the world so as to protect and promote US interests for the next 50 years,"³² the spectre of a rising China raises the prospects of future intense positional competition. Indeed, as John Mearsheimer recently argued, American interests are so entrenched in East Asia that Washington "has not wanted a peer competitor," remaining to this day "firmly committed to its goal"³³ of preserving a certain regional order that precludes another great power from hogging the limelight.

MD as a Destabilizing Factor

Loud if not boisterous are the voices decrying the missile defence agenda as a major destabilizing factor in East Asian security. The most prominent of these belong to the Chinese. China sees the US as employing MD as an effective military means to enhance its strategic superiority in East Asia. According to this reasoning, the US will guard against any potential development on the strategic front in the region that might be at odds with its will and interests, such as the growing economic and military power of China.³⁴ In so doing, this reasoning concludes, America seeks to preserve its unipolar position in the world. I too want to suggest that the US's aggressive promotion of missile defence will likely destabilize the East Asian region. However, the notion of the Bush Administration as being motivated by the obsession to maintain American unipolarity is, to my mind, rather suspect. But equally troubling, to an extent, is the Bush Administration's view of China as a plausible "rogue state" or, to paraphrase National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice, a non-status quo power.³⁵ A US-China reconciliation or, at the very least, a joint commitment by the two powers to managing their differences via peaceful means is cardinal to the current and future stability of the East Asian region.

³¹ Randall L. Schweller, "Realism and the Present Day Great Power System: Growth and Positional Conflict Over Scarce Resources," in Kapstein and Mastanduno (eds.), *Unipolar Politics*, p. 47.

³² Robert B. Zoellick, "A Republican Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 79, 1 (January/February 2000), p. 63.

³³ John J. Mearsheimer, "The Future of the American Pacifier," *Foreign Affairs* 80, 5 (September/October 2001), p. 46.

³⁴ Qun Wang, "TMD and US-China-Japan Cooperation," p. 1. (Downloaded on 23 May 2001 at <http://www.nautilus.org/nukepolicy/TMD-Conference/wangpaper.txt>.)

China

Today, no one contests the notion that China is a rising power, and for good reason. Since opening its doors in 1978 and embarking on its four modernizations, China, first under Deng Xiaoping and now Jiang Zemin, has worked hard to “save the social revolution,” so to speak, by way of a reconciliation with a decidedly capitalist mode of production and consumption. Put differently, China has benefited immensely through its participation in a global economic system largely underwritten by the US. In short, China, as Van Ness has put it, is a strategic dependent of the US, rather than a revisionist power seeking to revise the existing rules of the international system under which it has gained so much.³⁶ As such, the status quo has been good for China. Contrary to the Bush Administration’s view of China as a non-status quo power with revisionist intentions, China has sought, for the most part, to play by the rules that have served its agenda well.

But US concerns over alleged Chinese ambitions are not totally off-kilter, however. China rankles in its dependent role – a dissatisfaction that has become more apparent today in the light of strong nationalist pride that serves, for all intents and purposes, as the ideological glue holding the Chinese together in lieu of the now bankrupt Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology. Historical affiliations once denied by red book-carrying Maoists in the disastrous period known as the Cultural Revolution now rekindle Chinese imaginations seeking to reconnect with the glories of their Middle Kingdom past.³⁷ Add to this the painful memory of Chinese humiliation at the hands of Western powers and Japan during the 19th and early 20th centuries, and what emerges is a powerful contemporary reaction to the fear that the US is committed to opposing China's rise to power.

As such, against American protestations that missile defence is essentially a defensive system that will, in effect, stabilize the East Asian region, the Chinese understandably see missile defence, among other things, as an instrumental means to deny China its “rightful” place among the world’s great powers. Beijing therefore sees US-led alliances as the means to encircle – i.e. “engage” or “congame” – China. Further, China

³⁵ Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 79, 1 (January/February 2000), p. 56.

³⁶ Van Ness, “Hegemony, Not Anarchy.”

sees American intervention in Taiwan as a bald-faced attempt by the former to interfere with a so-called “family concern,” an in-house matter. From Beijing's vantage (in rhetoric at least), two “alleged points of contention”³⁸ are notable: first, the potential direct provision by the US to Taiwan of MD systems and related paraphernalia; second, the potential incorporation of Taiwan into the US-Japan protection umbrella.³⁹

Fundamentally, MD, as a contemporary expression of the doctrine and policy of extended deterrence, constitutes a significant strategic problem for the Chinese if the deterrence umbrella is expanded to cover Taiwan. Strategic deterrence theory, culminating in the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), is predicated upon what Henry Kissinger once called “the balance of terror.” In this respect, an effective missile defence system would destabilize the entire structure of strategic deterrence, MAD, and arms control.⁴⁰ The logic of destabilization, understood in this context, is simple. If State A fears that State B is building a missile defence system that can effectively neutralize State A's nuclear arsenal, State A might be compelled to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike against State B. At issue here is Beijing's concern that MD would effectively neutralize China's second-strike capability.

Ultimately, as David Shambaugh has noted, Taiwan is a “hot-buttoned issue” as far as Beijing is concerned. In contrast to China's readiness to compromise, say, in the US spy plane incident, Taiwan is an entirely different matter altogether. In the words of one Chinese analyst, “China has no room whatsoever for any compromise on this issue [i.e. Taiwan]. This is a red hot line. Untouchable.”⁴¹

³⁷ Van Ness, “Hegemony, Not Anarchy.”

³⁸ We use “alleged points of contention” for good reason, for though China is understandably concerned about a Taiwanese missile defence capability, the following conditions hold, nonetheless. (1) China can easily saturate any Taiwanese defence with missiles based in Fujian and other littoral provinces. (2) China can just as easily pilfer missile defence technology from the Taiwanese – a possibility that might have partly influenced Mr. Bush's decision in April 2001 to drop the coveted Aegis destroyers from the arms package bound for Taiwan. Friedman, “The Wrong Debate Over Missile Defense,” p. 5.

³⁹ Wang, “TMD and US-China-Japan Cooperation,” p. 3.

⁴⁰ George Friedman, “The Wrong Debate Over Missile Defense,” p. 3. (Downloaded on 23 May 2001 at http://www.stratfor.com/US_Canada/commentary/0105012210.)

⁴¹ Wang, “TMD and US-China-Japan Cooperation,” p. 3.

Japan

Much has been made of the fact that Japan, as the world's second largest economy and boasting the most modern conventional military in East Asia after the US, is not a "normal" nation because it continues to opt for strategic dependence on the US. Part of the answer, of course, has to do with history, notably, its self-image as a "pacifist state," the strong opposition from its Asian neighbours to a greater military role for Japan, and its dubious distinction as the only country ever to have been attacked with nuclear weapons.

North Korea's surprise launch of a multi-staged ICBM over Japanese airspace in 1998 has been cited as the motivation for the Japanese to embark on a MD joint development program with the US. However, some analysts, particularly Chinese, seem to think that there are other more compelling reasons than merely responding to the North Korean missile threat. They point to Japanese collusion in the US goal to maintain strategic deterrence and superiority in the East Asian region via MD as an effective means.⁴² In this respect, Japan's contribution can also be interpreted as an expression of Tokyo's desire to substantially enhance its overall military strength and aggrandize its political position on the international stage – a move that is partly "legitimated" by coupling its goals with those of the broader US strategic enterprise. Indeed, it has been suggested that Japan's concern is less with North Korea than with China.

It is quite possible that US-Japan cooperation on MD might well be the prelude to a resurgence of Japanese militarism. The same concern has again been raised most recently in view of Japan's participation in the Washington-led coalition against terrorism. This is clearly a "non-negotiable" for many East Asian countries, and may trigger an arms race in the region. Indeed, even in the unlikely event that Japan's Asian neighbours may not regard Japan's potential military resurgence as threatening, that defence spending rose in post-Cold War East Asia, especially Southeast Asia, at a time when the rest of the world was cutting back does not augur well for the region.

To be sure, post-1997 defence spending in the region has markedly decreased because of the recent financial crisis. But the likelihood that the situation will revert once

⁴² Wang, "TMD and US-China-Japan Cooperation," p. 2.

regional economies pick up again is strong. Hence, even if MD does not engender a regional arms race spiral, a militarising imperative born largely of so-called “prestige acquisitions” – keeping up with the Joneses, in short – is not inconceivable, with missile defence systems being the “Hello Kitty” of military acquisitions rather than, say, F-16s. The US is expected to lean on its alliance partners for burden sharing insofar as MD is concerned. Japan is no exception. Although committed to joint R&D with the US on missile defence, Tokyo has, for the most part, been tacit in its support for an operational commitment on its part, due in part to the opposition it will likely face from other East Asian countries.

The United States

The US's relatively recent history pales in comparison with China's millennia of rich historical experience. At the risk of oversimplification, the Chinese seem to treasure continuity and privilege the social collective, whereas Americans celebrate revolution and valorise autonomy and the “can do” spirit – or at least their ideals. This is not to imply that Americans do not believe in continuity or group identification. But it offers some glimpses into an American psyche that is short on memory and prone to unilateral thinking and doing. Is the US, by way of strengthening its alliances and rejuvenating extended deterrence, bent on maintaining and enhancing its alleged strategic unipolarity, as the Chinese seem to think? Is the US, as the existing hegemon, wilfully resisting the balancing effects of emerging Chinese power in the gradual transition of the international system, as neorealists have postulated, from a state of unipolarity to one of multipolarity?

Attention to the Bush administration's rhetoric and to the written comments of some of Bush's top officials suggests that the US's evolving policy toward East Asia is less about preserving American unipolarity. Rather, as William Tow has observed, Bush is concerned with generating a functionalist, realist, and selective foreign policy aimed, quite specifically, at promoting and protecting US interests in the region.⁴³

If so, what, then, are America's interests in East Asia today, particularly in the light of MD? Several analysts have noted that the key issue is no longer about the strategic

nuclear balance. Instead, in the words of a commission chaired by Donald Rumsfeld on outer space management and organization – the other better-known, Rumsfeld-led commission being on missile defence – the US may someday soon face a “Space Pearl Harbor” – that is, a devastating sneak attack against US satellites orbiting the planet.⁴⁴ In other words, it is very possible that the US fears a growing vulnerability of satellite communications and sensor systems to missile attack. Understood in these terms, US missile defence is principally about seizing the strategic high ground of space. To be sure, there is a symbiotic logic to this, for missile defence systems cannot function properly unless the space-based surveillance systems on which they depend are free from the threat of being tampered or destroyed. If so, missile defence, especially space-based systems, may not prove the best option for the US to pursue given the huge price tag from R&D through actual deployment. Missile threats from rogue states, as George Friedman has suggested, are better addressed by way of subsonic Tomahawk or ALCM cruise missiles.⁴⁵

If the protection of space-based assets is what ultimately concerns the Americans, then current attempts by the Bush administration to either revise or abandon the 1972 ABM Treaty should not detract us from what the real issue at hand might be. That is, the 1967 Outer Space Treaty – signed by the US and USSR during the height of the Cold War – that bans the deployment or use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) whether in the earth's orbit or in deep space.⁴⁶ As such, the US push to abrogate the ABM Treaty could well be the preliminary step toward subsequent efforts to seek the revision or elimination of the Outer Space Treaty. From this vantage, American protestations that China is not and never was the primary target of missile defence may well be true. This may partly explain why some US officials seem to think – erroneously so – that if the Bush administration can successfully convince China of the merits of missile defence, China would agree to TMD deployment in Australia, though certainly not in Taiwan or Japan.⁴⁷

⁴³ William Tow, “Asian Perceptions of BMD: Defense or Disequilibrium?” Presented at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, 16 May 2001.

⁴⁴ Michael Krepon, “Lost in Space: The Misguided Drive Toward Antisatellite Weapons,” *Foreign Affairs* 80, 3 (May/June 2001), p. 2.

⁴⁵ Friedman, “The Wrong Debate Over Missile Defense,” p. 5.

⁴⁶ Krepon, “Lost in Space,” p. 4.

⁴⁷ Tow, “Asian Perceptions of BMD.”

All this, of course, neither undermines the claim that the US desires to remain, in Joseph Nye's words, the “top dog,” nor does it call into doubt America's commitment to protecting Taiwan, or possibly even future Taiwanese independence at least where some members of Congress are concerned. If anything, China cannot afford to commit the analytical error many pundits have attributed to Iraq regarding the Gulf War, namely, Baghdad calling Washington's alleged “bluff” – only to discover it was no bluff – because of the erroneous conjecture that post-Vietnam America is war-shy. Indeed, in the light of the US's success in the Gulf, it might not be inconceivable to suggest that the Bush administration may have coupled extended deterrence with the Powell Doctrine's “neo-Clausewitzian” concept of total war fought with clear political objectives. If so, then MD can be understood as a technologized – in the RMA sense – version of the Powell doctrine.⁴⁸

A Call to Reason, Restraint and Responsibility

Given the US's overwhelming military superiority and China's rapidly modernizing, but still modest, capability, few if any analysts doubt the outcome of a hot war between the two powers. My plea is that the great powers in East Asia would refuse the temptation to take the unilateral route. The ASEAN states do not want to be put in a position whereby they are forced to choose between the US and China in a conflict. MD will certainly complicate, and quite possibly destabilize, the East Asian region. The great powers need to be sensitive to the region's needs and to be committed to processes of multilateral consultation; they ought to resort to quiet diplomacy, rather than grandstanding and finger pointing, to manage and resolve disputes. Better, in Churchill's terms, to “jaw, jaw” than “war, war.” In other words, careful reasoning and strategic restraint in the making and practice of great power foreign policy and collective responsibility to the stability and well being of the region are both called for. In short, one pleads against arrogance but welcome prudence in the great powers: that they stay the course of reason, restraint and responsibility not only where the MD question is concerned, but, indeed, where all regional security questions are concerned. Indeed, by collectively refusing the all-too-easy recourse to ethnocentric policy thinking and doing,

⁴⁸ Tow, “Asian Perceptions of BMD.”

and, instead, to aim for a “fusion of each other's security horizons,”⁴⁹ so to speak, the great powers, in conjunction with the rest of East Asia, can write the region’s future together in cooperation than apart in conflict.

⁴⁹ The notion of “fusion of horizons” is borrowed from the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer.

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