

BETWEEN KANTIAN PEACE AND HOBBSIAN ANARCHY: SOUTH KOREA'S VISION FOR NORTHEAST ASIA*

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Despite the demise of the Cold War system, Northeast Asia is far from achieving a stable peace. Instead, it has encountered a much more complicated landscape of security dynamics where legacies of the Cold War are intricately intertwined with new sources of actual and potential conflicts. The inertia of the Cold War and its built-in strategic instability, the uneven spread of a market economy and democracy, and widespread nationalist sentiments all cloud the future of a Northeast Asian security system.

Having been a perennial victim of geo-political dynamics, Korea has always been sensitive to shifting security environments. Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910 was made possible not only by Japan's victories over China and Russia but also by American recognition of Japan's influence over Korea through the Taft-Katsura agreement. Insomuch as Korea's independence was an outcome of the Allies' victory in World War II, the great powers' "divide and rule" policy at the Yalta Conference paved the way to Korea's division. The tragedy of the Korean War can also be attributed partly to the strategic rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Indeed, great power politics and the resulting regional security dynamics have long affected the destiny of Korea and Koreans.

What is the most preferable vision of Northeast Asia for South Koreans? I would argue that it is a new regional order founded on the notion of "Kantian peace." German philosopher Immanuel Kant long ago envisaged that the best way to achieve a stable and permanent peace is through a free market and republican polity. Deepening and expanding market interdependence through trade can reduce the likelihood of war and enhance the prospects for peace, as market expansion creates vested commercial interests across borders that would oppose any outbreak of war that could undermine their wealth. According to Kant, republican (democratic) polity can also prevent war by assuring openness, transparency, and domestic checks and balances in the management of foreign and defense policy. As Bruce Russett observes through extensive empirical works, democracies do not fight each other [e.g., OECD members]. Thus, enlarging democracy

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serves as the essential precondition for a stable peace.

As an extension of capitalist and democratic peace, forming a community of security can be another precondition for building a stable and permanent peace. A free market and democratic polity can foster the formation of a community of security through shared norms and values, common domestic institutions, and high levels of interdependence. At the regional level, a community of security can be manifested in terms of a collective security system, multilateral security cooperation regimes, or total regional integration à la “a unified Northeast Asia.”

The Kantian peace scenario might sound too idealistic because China and North Korea are still short of embracing a free market and democratic polity. But China is rapidly moving toward a capitalist economy, and North Korea is also trying to undertake opening and reforms, albeit in a limited manner. As the historical experiences of South Korea and Taiwan demonstrate, capitalist economic growth is bound to melt authoritarian political templates, paving the way to an expansion of civil society, the rise of the middle class, cultural shifts, and ultimately, democratic changes. China is exhibiting many signs of such changes, and I believe that democratization in China is simply a matter of time. North Korea will be much slower in following China’s example in the sequence of opening, reforms, and democratization. But it cannot avoid the process. The spread of a market economy and democracy in China and North Korea will eventually turn them into constructive members of a Northeast Asian community, making a Kantian peace more viable.

The most nightmarish scenario is the revival of anarchical chaos reminiscent of the late 19th century. An anarchical regional order, which resembles the Hobbesian world of all against all, is rather rare in reality. However, diffused power, a deformed governance structure, and individual maximizing behavior for power, wealth, and status can lead to an anarchical regional order. The only viable rule in a Hobbesian world is the survival of the fittest through either maximizing national power or utilizing alliance politics.

An anarchical regional order might become plausible under three circumstances. First is hegemonic rivalry between China and the United States. Despite Beijing’s denials, a power transition is taking place. When and if China possesses national power comparable to that of the United States and becomes dissatisfied with its international and regional status, major conflicts between the two might become plausible, jeopardizing peace and

stability in Northeast Asia. A cross-strait crisis could provide the key flashpoint. Second is American disengagement from the region and the outbreak of a power rivalry between China and Japan. China's rise and Japan's efforts to realign itself as a "normal state" could put the two on a collision course, especially without an American presence. Third is the transformation of North Korea into a *de facto* nuclear state, which would spark intense nuclear and conventional arms races on the Korean peninsula and in the region. The transformation of Korea, whether unified or divided, into a middle power with nuclear capability could worsen the situation.

A clash of national identities among China, Japan, and Korea could make this nightmarish scenario all the more plausible. Historical memories of domination and subjugation have shaped exclusive and even combatant collective identities wrapped around nationalism. Collective cognitive dissonance over the reversed Confucian order is seen as a primary source of Northeast Asian instability. Such collective identities have turned the structure of finite deterrence into an integral part of the Northeast Asian security system, heightening suspicions, feeding rivalries, and complicating the process of peace-building. As a result, mutual perceptions among Northeast Asian countries have not been favorable. South Korea dislikes Japan and is suspicious of China. Japan dislikes South Korea and is suspicious of China. China dislikes Japan and suspects the motives of a unified Korea. South Korea fears the revival of Hobbesian anarchy in the region.

While conservative South Koreans are trying to avoid Hobbesian anarchy through the continuation of *status quo* based on the R.O.K.-U.S. alliance, liberals' primary goal is attaining Kantian peace through multilateral security cooperation regimes.

Conservatives favor the *status quo* scenario because they believe it to be the best way to secure peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Any deviation, be it a breakdown in the balance of power system or a power transition, could precipitate strategic instability and elevate the potential for conflict escalation. Military deterrence and alliance politics constitute the core of the realist *status quo* perspective. The bilateral alliance with the United States and its military presence in South Korea are perceived to be vital for deterring war on the Korean peninsula as well as for preventing a power vacuum that could enable a regional rivalry between China and Japan. In view of this, a loose hegemonic order under American influence, where bilateral alliance politics can be coordinated through American leadership, is considered to be the most viable option for maintaining peace in the region.

However, the effectiveness of this hegemonic order under U.S. influence is limited by at least three major drawbacks. First, maintaining the *status quo* through military deterrence and alliance politics can be conducive to managing an unstable peace but cannot ensure a stable peace on the Korean peninsula and in the region. Second, strengthening the bilateral alliance between the United States and South Korea, while treating China and North Korea as potential or actual threats, could foster a new strategic divide reminiscent of the old Cold War structure between the northern axis (China, Russia, and North Korea) and the southern axis (the United States, Japan, and South Korea), portending an uncertain strategic future. Finally, excessive dependence on the United States could bring about serious negative boomerang effects should the United States disengage from the region.

Meanwhile, liberal South Koreans favor a new regional order based on norms, interests, and institutional cooperation. They believe that regional actors can display rule-governed behavior not only because of the salience of gains from patterned regularity and cooperation but also because of norms, practices, and even institutional inertia. They strive to form a collective security system that can overcome the shortcomings of the alliance system. A collective security system—a new regional order based on a collective identity that transcends parochial individual interests—can surely be conducive to building and sustaining a stable peace. Or regional-level regimes can be created and maintained in order to govern the security behavior of regional actors.

Recent debates on the creation of multilateral security cooperation regimes exemplify this aspect. Although regional security cooperation regimes might be weaker than a collective security system in enforcing common security and peace, they can still be much more desirable options than military deterrence or alliance politics for peace-building. Despite some contextual differences with Northeast Asia, the European experience [e.g., the Conference on Security Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and the Organization of Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)] clearly indicates that multilateral security cooperation could develop into an effective regional security architecture. In this regard, the September 19, 2005, joint statement of the Six-party Talks, which includes multilateral security cooperation as a major agenda, represents a meaningful step forward. Some liberals even suggest permanent neutrality, which is predicated on ending the alliance with the United States, as another viable option to maintain peace and stability.

The most likely vision for South Korea will fall between the realist *status quo* and a

new regional order. South Korea will want to continue the ROK.-U.S. alliance, even after Korea's unification. But the bilateral alliance alone cannot ensure peace and stability in Northeast Asia. It should either be transformed into an all-encompassing NATO-type open alliance or be supplemented by a multilateral security cooperation regime similar to OSCE. In fact, such a vision has been the core of President Roh Moo-hyun's controversial and misunderstood "balancer" concept, which attempts to achieve a pragmatic balance of the conservative and liberal views. Roh understands the value of the ROK.-U.S. alliance to avoid Hobbesian anarchy (which he believes to be a viable danger in Northeast Asia, as conservatives do), but at the same time, wants to revise and update it to be more compatible with Kantian peace by creating a viable peace regime on the Korean peninsula and institutionalizing a multilateral security cooperation regime in Northeast Asia (which he believes to be a desirable goal, as liberals do).

In my opinion, South Korea will continue to pursue this policy line, and it is not likely to resort to the politics of "bandwagoning." Riding on China's rise will not only bring Korea back into the old hierarchical order but also accelerate the process of power transition and conflict escalation by adding power to China. And bandwagoning on Japan will be inconceivable because of the fear of retaliation from China. Korea might consider the status of a middle power with nuclear capability, but this could be a much more treacherous path. The only viable option for South Korea is to work toward a multilateral security cooperation regime in the region, while maintaining a comprehensive and dynamic bilateral alliance with the United States. The United States also needs to give greater attention to this option, and any future vision of the ROK.-U.S. alliance should take this aspect into consideration. Ultimately encouraging Kantian peace in Northeast Asia will be in the interests of the United States.