

Sino-American Geographical Competition in Northeast Asia after the Cold War

A Neorealist Perspective and its Reflection

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It is now widely accepted that neorealism founded by Kenneth N. Waltz has dominated International studies for the last 25 years due to its theoretical parsimoniousness and simplicity. After neorealism experienced various challenges from schools such as neoliberalism and post-modernism in the 1980s, this theory regained its commanding high by the revisions from both offensive and defensive realists in the 1990s. Among the new inputs into neorealism, the author will argue, John J. Mearsheimer's offensive version of neorealism is the most notable and compelling drive. What Mearsheimer has contributed are mainly geographic factors, which have no place in Waltz's prototype.

This research examines both Waltz and Mearsheimer's neorealist propositions against Sino-American geographic competitions surrounding China after the Cold War. The focus is especially located in Northeast Asia. The findings of this research, while partly confirmed Mearsheimer's predictions in Northeast Asia, provide a few anomalies which deserve further historical as well as theoretical reflection. The author would argue that exceptions appear because Mearsheimer further naturalized and reified the neorealist model. In effect, Waltz has allowed the legitimacy of these exceptions by relaxing his positivist and determinist stance: a possible opening to a more classical approach advocated by Morgenthau and others, in which "politics" and "history" can reclaim its place in regional and international studies.

Keywords : Sino-American relations, Geopolitics, Northeast Asia, Neorealism, China's foreign policy

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Power will balance power, and there isn't any doubt that the Chinese are smarting, very uncomfortable with the extent to which the United States dominates the world militarily. I'm not implying that it doesn't bother other countries as well. But China, if it maintains its political coherence, its political capabilities, will have in due course the economic and the technological means of competing. But how far away is that? Certainly, twenty years. Probably more than twenty years.

K. Waltz (2003)

If China's economy continues growing at a robust pace,...it would almost certainly use its wealth to build a mighty military machine ... it would surely pursue regional hegemony, just as the United States did in the West Hemisphere during the nineteenth century....it might be far more powerful and dangerous than any of the potential hegemons that the US confronted in the twentieth century."

J. Mearsheimer (2001a)

I. Introduction

It is now widely recognized that the rise of China will pose a significant impact in the Northeast Asia region and the globe as a whole. But how would such impacts occur and then change the regional security structure remain intensely debated. Within these debates a dilemma surfaces up. On the one hand, researchers are urged to draw support from specific theoretical frameworks to manifest the causal chains. Among various options neorealism is one of the most adopted approaches to fulfill this demand. The above two quotations are simply the most known examples offered by prominent American theorists. On the other hand, evidence from historical and regional studies are heavily required in order to offer a more detail observation on what had happened and are still being happening. While pure historical investigations seem fragmental and under-theorized, pure theoretical studies also appear dreary, suffer a lack of the fruitfulness of historiography.

This article picks up this issue by examining the dominant mainstream framework of neorealism against the interaction between two great powers, China and the United States, after the Cold War. Since Northeast Asia is a region where China's growing influences are apparent while American interests here remain vital for Washington, this article will focus on this region which consists of two case studies: the East China Sea and the Korean Peninsula.

The author believes that China is still a regional power, although this could change with China's expanding economic influence in future. It can be reasonably argued that China has tended to focus on its more local interests while the United States has tended to be more concerned with its global interests. As David Lampton (2001: 82) points out: "for China, security on its border was at stake"; for America, its "global commitment" was the issue. Furthermore, the Asia-Pacific region, especially the northeast Asia, is the area where the United States and China have the closest contact with each other, in which significant

cooperation and dangerous conflict are both possible. Meanwhile, the more modernized provinces that are also the most affluent with the densest population, 380 million out of 1.4 billion, inhabit China's east coast facing the Pacific Ocean (Lampton, 2001: 78). China's rise in Northeast Asia has been a source of concern in America as the U.S. naval and air power could no longer be unrivaled from California to the Chinese coast (Cody: 2005b). However, the Chinese feel their rich provinces are extremely vulnerable to attack from the United States and its allies.

Before substantial issues are dealt with, it is necessary to elaborate a number of neorealist assumptions regarding theory and geopolitics. A good start of this elaboration would be a discussion on the concept of "position".

II. Neorealist framework and background discussions on international politics in Northeast Asia

Neorealist theory emphasizes the importance of the "positions" occupied by units in a given international or regional system—the globe or the Northeast Asia. Waltz (1979: 80; 1986: 71, 80) defines international structure by ignoring functional differentiation among nations and concentrating on how units are arranged or positioned. Such an arrangement is a system-level feature which produces patterns of repetition and similarity in international politics. For the founding father of neorealism, namely Waltz (1979: 131), the position of a country in a given system is determined by its "combined capabilities", which include the size of its population and territory; its resource endowment; its economic and military capabilities and its political stability.

However, while Waltz refers to the size of a unit's territory, he does not clarify whether or not its geographical location is critical, nor does he specify whether the geographical positions of great powers are enduring factors that produce structural consequence. As Hans Mouritzen (1997:

80-81) argues, Waltz seems to treat these units as mobile molecules or firms in a market system irrespective of their salient geographical location.

By introducing concepts such as “regional hegemon” and “off-shore balancer”, Mearsheimer (2001a) provides important geographical complements to Waltz’s prototype, which had been generally ignored by neorealists (Mearsheimer, 2006b: 241). This is because geographical locations could be long-lasting constraints. This innovation is useful. However, from Waltz’s perspectives which privileged the system level rather than the unit level, Mearsheimer’s revisions can still be theoretically “reductionist”—a flawed stance which messes up the purity of the theory. For this reason, the analysis of the geopolitical¹ balance between great powers may only be an auxiliary element for neorealism. Geopolitical elements could be an extension of neorealist analysis, but by no means fundamental.

In addition to the more theoretical concerns, geopolitical security and advantages are almost equivalent to survival for most nations in their daily lives. Some countries are said to suffer from unfavorable positions, such as being surrounded by other powerful units or hostile civilizations; and are thus vulnerable to foreign invasion. A few great powers are regarded as possessing superior positions from both a defensive and offensive perspectives, or in Mearsheimer’s words, fulfill the “balancing and buck-passing” roles. For example, because of its location at the centre of Europe, without effective natural barriers to its east and west, Germany typically expanded its power by controlling its neighbors in order to reduce the risk of invasion by its enemies (Mearsheimer, 2001a:

¹ In this article I prefer the concept of “geopolitics” to “geography”. This is because geopolitics is a more comprehensive concept which indicates the causal relations between political power and geography. It suggests the strategic core areas and the necessary deployment of naval and terrestrial forces. It highlights the political consequences of geographical placements. See Osterud (1988: 191).

181). As Russia became a Euro-Asian empire bordering various religions and regimes, it considered itself permanently threatened (Kissinger, 1994: 140).

Similarly, Chinese scholars tend to agree that China's difficulties are no less pronounced than those of Russia. It shares its land borders with 15 countries² and almost all major religions in the world. It has common maritime borders with seven other nations; this is not including the far-reaching western sea powers such as America and Britain.

China and its neighbors have in total a population of 3 billion people—a potentially formidable army reserve. Besides, according to Ye Zicheng (2003:303-307), a noted researcher based in Beijing, China's geopolitical location carries with it three kinds of dangers: First, a possible nuclear proliferation among neighbor nations; Second, the outbreaks of regional conflict or terrorist attacks in neighboring countries, despite no direct, immediate Chinese involvement (India and Pakistan, the two Koreas, extremist religious attacks in Southeast Asia and the former Soviet republics in Central Asia); Third, the disputed territorial claims between China and its neighbors. All of these disadvantages could be exploited by a powerful third party outside the region. In the post-Cold War era, the United States is the only candidate capable of doing so.

Before I move on to the substantial discussion on Northeast Asian international politics, two more unsettled issues need mentioning. The first issue concerns the analysis of the current distribution of power (structure) after the Cold War. For neorealism, it is more structural change, rather than the individual intentions of various nations, that

²The bordering countries include: Afghanistan (76 km), Bhutan (470 km), Burma (2,185 km), India (3,380 km), Kazakhstan (1,533 km), North Korea (1,416 km), Kyrgyzstan (858 km), Laos (423 km), Mongolia (4,677 km), Nepal (1,236 km), Pakistan (523 km), Russia (northeast, 3,605 km), Russia (northwest, 40 km), Tajikistan (414 km), Vietnam (1,281 km); *regional borders*: Hong Kong 30 km, Macau 0.34 km. See CIA's *Fact Book*, <<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ch.html>>, accessed on 25, October, 2007.

decides states' behavioral patterns. Furthermore, with such a structural perspective, most strategists of both China and the United States agree that America enjoyed a considerable lead over China in the most vital elements of a modern military force. That is to say, in the foreseeable future, American supremacy in East Asia may well continue to increase, rather than diminish (Schwarz: 2005). Hence, the current world can be cautiously presumed unipolar, and a few thinkers had accordingly suggested "American freedom of action" in a unilateral sense without "playing the docile international citizen" any more (Krauthammer: 2001). In Chinese terms, the world after the Cold War can be viewed as "one superpower and several great powers" (yichao duoqiang) (Chih-yu Shih, 2005: 758). In effect, the United States may have gone beyond the status of a superpower, and the current international system is not built on a balance of power but on an "unbalanced multipolarity", perhaps America's hegemony. In Nye's words, the United States is "bestriding the globe like a colossus" (Nye, 2002:1).³

However, the situation becomes more complicated when we bring geopolitical considerations into the picture. When the issue is a Northeast Asian balance, applying the global balance to a specific region could be problematic. Has the United States been qualified as a unipolar hegemon, which could at least temporarily cut its link with the "theory of international politics" and invite more domestic political analysis, or only as a regional hegemon as Mearsheimer has suggested?

The second unsettled issue we need to bear in mind relates to the reasonable extent of power expansion for the United States and China. For Waltz, too much expansion or empire-overstretch is national suicide. In essence, power is a means for security, not an end in itself (Waltz, 1990; Snyder, 2002). Waltz (2002) further warns that pernicious domestic atmospheres could lead a unipolar hegemon to unwise

³ Nye's word is quoted from *The Economist*, October 23, 1999, p.23.

expansion.

Mearsheimer tends to maintain Waltz's original position, which avoids domestic-level explanations. He contends that even a rational expander could lose a game simply because it guesses wrong, but all great powers' goals are still the same: namely, to maximize their share of world power and eventually establish hegemony in the system. The only reason to rationalize Washington's self-restraint is the "stopping power of water", which makes the deployment of a large land force in Asia impossible (Mearsheimer, 2001a: 211; 2005b: 47). Since the United States is alleged to have been the sole "regional" hegemon after the Cold War, it is expected to act more like a balancer than aggressor. In other words, according to Mearsheimer's (2001a: 168-169; 236-237) analysis, the United States would be a status quo power in the Sino-American competition, while China would act as a revisionist. If China's expansion was not fruitful, it is because China was effectively balanced and thus deterred by the United States.

The above two cautious presumptions can be summarized as: 1). America as the hegemon defending a favorable status quo, and 2). China as a revisionist power.

However, criticisms of the neorealist predictions also sound reasonable. Based on the fact that China has begun to comply with the regional and global institutions it once opposed, a few American officials and scholars have found China shouldering some of the responsibilities that come with its new role as a great power. In this sense, China could be called a "stakeholder" and could be expected to shoulder even more responsibility (Johnston: 2003; Medeiros and Fravel: 2003; Zoellick: 2005). Chinese scholars even believe that China can "transcend" the "great power tragedy" and rise peacefully, rather than repeating the strategies of the old empires that established colonies and annexed new lands (Zheng: 2005).

Based on the discussions mentioned, this essay aims to answer the following questions: First, did the United States or China expand their

power in Northeast Asia and how? Could these actions be theoretically explained by neorealism? What is the causal connection between the two countries' status in the system and their actions (balancing or non-balancing)?⁴ Second, for what reasons, and when, did America or China take action to balance the other in the Northeast Asia region? Did these actions stem from the other's regional expansion? What are the roles played by other regional actors, such as the two Koreas and Taiwan? Do they matter in determining the Northeast Asia balance and how?

Third, in those non-balancing cases, did the United States and China choose the strategy of "passing the buck" to a third party at its expense? How can the relationship between a specific buck-passing behavior and the perpetrator's geopolitical status be specified? Two issues to be further clarified under this question are: One, did specific "buck-passing" actions result from geopolitical considerations such as the lack of common borders⁵ (Mearsheimer, 2001a: 267-268)? Two, what are the criteria for distinguishing "buck-passing" actions from "bandwagoning", when both look like non-balancing behavior?

The next section will deal with geopolitical interaction between China and America in the East China Sea region, in which another power, Japan, will involve. Then I move to the turbulent Korean peninsula. The early development of the Six-Party Talks will be especially highlighted.

⁴ Both Waltz and Mearsheimer exclude the legitimacy of bandwagoning in a neorealist framework. However, Mearshemer (2001a: Ch. 8) suggests another "offensive" option of non-balancing behavior: passing the buck to a third part to afford the price of balancing and waiting for chance to exploit the results. "Buck-passing" happens more in a balanced multipolar system because of the existence of a capable third country to catch the buck.

⁵ Mearshimer (2001a: 271) argues that "common borders promote balancing; barriers encourage buck-passing." But in a bipolar system, balancing is the only choice because there does not exist a powerful third party to contain the threat effectively.

III. Presence of a strong third party: Japan and the East China Sea

Japan has been a major global player in both the world economy and world politics since the late 19th century and was a global military power in the first half of the 20th century. After the United States, it is now the world's second largest economy and has the second largest military expenditure. To a certain extent, Japan enjoys considerable autonomy in world politics compared with other regional players in East Asia. In some instances, Japan is actually an independent agent rather than merely being an auxiliary agent in the United States-China-Japan triangle. Therefore, it could be argued that in the Northeast Asian region, Japan is the most crucial factor in the Sino-American competition. For this reason, Sino-Japanese relations deserve closer analysis in order to set the scene for the larger Sino-United States geographical competition.

1. Legacy of history

Historically, China and Japan took periodic turns in leading East Asia: China took the lead before the mid-18th century, and Japan during the late 19th as well as the early 20th century (1895-1945). Both had their own idea of a “tribute system” for governing foreign relations and tried to conquer the other by force, though all operations failed on both sides. However, the two Asian titans have never been as powerful as they are now. On the basis of realist theory, the current tension between them, in addition to the factor of America, is caused by their unprecedented co-existence as global major powers. This tension could also be a structural result of a power shift as China grows more powerful and Japan leans closer to Washington in order to safeguard its interests (Yu, 2005: 5).

A neorealist reading of modern Northeast Asian history shows that Washington has tended to favor each side at different periods for

different reasons, according to its geopolitical interests. In contrast, Japan itself had been powerful enough and had issued its own version of the Monroe Doctrine for East Asia, which resulted in Washington's "buck-passing" behavior in the late 1930s and early 1940s, as the United States did not immediately balance Tokyo, but passed the duty to Britain and China (Mearsheimer, 2001a: 259).⁶ However, once the Allied Forces won the Great War and discord emerged between Washington and Moscow, the United States abandoned its demilitarization policy in Japan in order to rearm and enlist Japan's support to deter the Soviets. America's strategy was fruitful as Japan joined operations with the United States to keep the Soviet navy out of the Pacific Ocean.

Meanwhile, China and Japan were not always rivals—that is, if they were facing a common threat. Tokyo, Beijing and Washington were virtually unspoken allies coping with Moscow's expansion during the late 1970s and 1980s. China not only kept silent when Japan dared to challenge the United States economically and developed its aspiration of being a "normal state", but also encouraged Tokyo to build up its independent force (Lampton, 2001: 235).⁷ Such amicable relations continued up until the mid-1990s, with Japan being the first country to lift sanctions against the PRC after the Tiananmen crackdown.⁸ China was the top recipient of Japan's ODA (Official Development Assistance)

⁶ Tokyo published a historic document on April 18, 1934 claiming that East Asia was in Japan's sphere of influence and warning the West not to intervene in its business in China. London had proposed a pull out of its forces from Asia in order to concentrate on the Nazi's Germany, but Washington warned that should London lessen its efforts on balancing Tokyo in the East, the US might not help London to balance Berlin. The result was that the British Empire remained engaged in Asia and was confronted and defeated by Japan in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Burma (Mearsheimer, 2001a: 180, 259).

⁷ Prime Minister Nakasone first pushed this idea of 'normal state' strongly and publicly in the 1980s (Jain and Bruni: 2003). Former Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng had appreciated "Japan's efforts to strengthen its alliance with the United States" during his visit in Tokyo in 1980. See Lampton (2001: 239). Concerning the rise of Japan's economic power which had been deemed a challenge to Washington, see Ito(1990), Packard (1987), and Morita & Ishihara (1989).

⁸ See "Japan backs China on rights", *International Herald Tribune*, March 22, 1994, p. 5.

before 2002, through which Japanese business benefited considerably in the Chinese market.⁹ Japan's Emperor Akihito and General Secretary Jiang Zeming of the CCP exchanged visits in 1992, while other western countries were reluctant to allow their senior officials to visit China.

As China's growing economic power became a regional concern—in sharp contrast to Japan's stagnation and the so-called “lost decade” for its economy in the 1990s—the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis eventually became a watershed in Sino-Japanese relations. Closer United States-Japan defense cooperation was implemented as several old and new disputes between China and Japan were re-ignited, which included the contending territorial claims over the gas-rich East China Sea and Sankaku/Diaoyu Islets, the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and the “historical issues” concerning the Second World War. As a countermeasure to the strengthened United States-Japan cooperation after the 1996 crisis, China's military modernization further facilitated the “general turn to conservatism”¹⁰ by Japan's population with a special regard to historical and foreign policy issues. The result seemed that the

⁹ Japan's loan and grant aids to China reached a recorded 1.4 billion USD in 1994 and then decreased gradually. Japan's disbursement has been the largest foreign aid to China, triple that of the second largest donor—Germany. From 1978 to 2004, the total of Japan's ODA to China is around 25 billion USD. The PM of Japan—Mr Koizumi—had announced that due to the economic progress China had already achieved, Japan's ODA to China would be ended by 2008 in order to help other less developed countries. Since 2002, India has replaced China as the top recipient of Japan's ODA. See Japanese Foreign Ministry and the BBC: http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/summary/1999/ap_ea01.html#CHINA; http://news8.thdo.bbc.co.uk/chinese/simp/hi/newsid_4310000/newsid_4315300/4315387.stm. Accessed on November 21, 2007.

¹⁰ The most significant sign of this “turn to conservatism” was the extinction of Japan's pro-pacifist parties, including the then major opposition party—the Japanese Socialist Party (JSP). The JSP once kept 149 seats in Japan's Lower House in the early 1990s, but only won 6 seats in the election of 2003. It changed its name into the Japanese Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1996. A recent example (Onishi, 2005) of this trend was a speech delivered by the newly appointed foreign minister Taro Aso, in which he claimed that Japan was a unique country of “one culture, one civilization, one race, one language”—a statement reminiscent of the Minji Constitution's Article One: “the country shall be reigned over and governed by a line of rulers unbroken for ages eternal.”

more China (and South Korea) protested against Japan's stance on historical and territorial issues, the more conservative the Japanese became: in other words, it was a downward spiral (Yu, 2005: 2).

The following contemporary issues between China and Japan, as well as Washington's attitude toward these issues, are crucial in United States-China Relations.

2. Sino-Japanese territorial disputes over the East China Sea

Theoretically speaking, a body of water should be an effective barrier to thwart the great powers from attacking each other.¹¹ However, the disputes between China and Japan and their respective concerns might be an exception. After the end of the Cold War, many of these disputes between Beijing and Tokyo concerned the waters between the two nations. Behind the territorial claims were explosive dangers regarding oil, sea lanes and Taiwan. As a growing power thirsty for energy, it has become increasingly unacceptable for China to be caged in the continent. As an insular power with little natural resources, to keep surrounding waters under control is in Japan's vital interest. This geo-strategic tension provides opportunities for the United States to exploit.

Japan has unsolved territorial disputes with all three of its neighbors: The Japan-China disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands; the demarcation of the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) between China and Japan in the East China Sea; The Japan-Russia (from the Soviet Union) disputes over the Southern Kuriles/Northern Territories; and the competing Japanese-Korean claims over the Tokdo/Takeshima Islands. The focus here will be on those between China and Japan.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are composed of eight uninhabited

¹¹ Mearsheimer (2001a) believes that continental powers can hardly attack well-built insular powers as insular powers are less capable of crossing water bodies to deploy forces in continents.

volcanic islets located 160 km northeast of Taiwan and 400 km west of Okinawa (Ryukyu Is.). Although encompassing merely 7 square kilometers of land, the location of these islets is key to connecting Taiwan with Okinawa and a barrier blocking Chinese naval forces from entering the Pacific Ocean—a water body almost entirely controlled by America. The PRC and the ROC (Taiwan) both insist that these islets were ceded to Japan as a part of Taiwan in 1895 under the Treaty of Shimonoseki after the Chinese defeat of the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895).¹² As a result of Japan's defeat in World War II, and based on the United States-United Kingdom-China Cairo Declaration (1943), the Alliance's Potsdam Proclamation (1945), and the San Francisco Treaty (1952), Taiwan (and the Diaoyu Islands) was returned to China.¹³

However, Japan claims that its surveys since 1885 had confirmed this area as uninhabited lands. The Japanese Empire formally incorporated the Senkaku into Okinawa in January 1895, four months before the conclusion of the treaty of Shimonoseki. After World War II, the U.S. Navy had occupied Okinawa and made use of the Senkaku/Daoyu as a drill site. In 1971, the United States and Japan agreed to restore Tokyo's "administrative rights" over Okinawa, according to the United States-Japan Ryukyu Reversion Agreement. This means that, according to Tokyo, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have never been a part

¹² The Chinese claim their historical records have detailed the discovery of these islets since the early 15th century, and these islets have been "exclusively" utilized by Chinese fishermen from Taiwan. Japan's invasion and annexation of Okinawa from China's protectorates in 1874 did not include the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Besides, Taiwan and China believe that the Diaoyu group is geographically a part of Taiwan, which is in the northeast edge of the Taiwan Sea Basin, and then separated from the Okinawa Chain by the 1000-meter-deep Trench of Ryukyu (Trench of Okinawa). See National Policy Foundation (Taipei) paper, <<http://www.npf.org.tw/publication/ns/091/ns-c-091-486htm>>, accessed on November 12, 2007.

¹³ Because of the Korean War, both the PRC and the ROC were absent in the San Francisco Conference. The PRC rejected the treaty's legitimacy. It signed another peace pact with Tokyo in 1978, after Japan and the PRC restored official relations. The ROC (Taipei) and Japan concluded another peace pact in 1954. Both treaties Taiwan and China signed with Japan did not specify the status of the Senkaku Island.

of Taiwan.¹⁴

Both Taipei and Beijing protested the reversion of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands to Japan in the early 1970s. However, after the rapprochement between the United States and China and the implicit United States-China-Japan united front against Moscow was built, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping allowed this sovereign issue to be shelved. It is only after the Cold War, with a reformulation of the United States-China-Japan triangle, that the Senkaku/Diaoyu problem surfaced again. Japan then claimed that Taiwan and China's protests were derived from the discovery of oil resources in the surrounding area.¹⁵

America's stance has been double-handed. On the one hand, the United States has repeatedly claimed that it will not support any side's claim to the Senkaku/Diaoyu and called for a peaceful resolution. On the other hand, given America's 'longstanding view' that Washington does not take a position on the ultimate sovereignty ownership, the United States has continued to insist that since the Senkaku Islands have been under Japan's 'administrative control' under the Reversion Agreement, these islets should be covered by the 1960 United States-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security.¹⁶

The Senkaku/Diaoyu disputes have been more complicated and intense due to the contending claims of the EEZ in the nearby East China Sea. The width of the East China Sea is 360 nautical miles, while both tried to claim 200 miles on their own side.

China's position is based on the 'continental shelf' while Japan prefers a 'median line'.¹⁷ Both Japan and China have granted their petrol companies the rights to drill in the disputed waters, and the Chinese

¹⁴ See <<http://www.indiana.edu/~japan/iquides/disputes.htm>>, accessed on November 13, 2007.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2004/30743.htm>>, accessed on November 13, 2007.

¹⁷ See <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/senkaku.htm>>, accessed on November 18, 2007.

launched their first drilling project—the Chunxiao field—in 2003, located just 5km west of the Japan-claimed ‘median line’ dividing the EEZs of the two countries. It has been estimated that the oil reserves there amount to 25 billion tones (Onishi and French: 2005).

Japan fears that China’s drilling will affect the reserves stored in the seabed near its side of the waters. China’s proposal of joint exploration was rebuffed by Tokyo in late 2003. From 2003, several Chinese civilians as well as naval survey vessels were found by Japan invading its EEZ to survey subsea resources and routes, perhaps for China’s submarines to enter the Pacific. In addition, two incursions of Japan’s territorial waters, one by China’s Ming Class submarines, the other by its Han-Class nuclear submarine,¹⁸ were reported in 2003—the first time in history that China’s naval presence was found in those waters (Tkacik: 2005).

Another sticking point for Japan and China, which looks likely to have an American military involvement in the future, is Taiwan. Almost all the oil Japan needs is imported and much of it has to pass through the waters surrounding Taiwan. Given the facts that China pledges to reunify Taiwan at any cost, China’s assertiveness over the territorial disputes in the East China Sea, as well as its rapid military modernization, a Taiwan controlled by communist China is very likely to be the country’s base to disrupt Japan’s oil access. The Chinese Navy could utilize Taiwan’s east coast deep-water ports to launch its advanced submarines toward the Pacific Ocean—a scenario also unacceptable to the Pentagon. The 1996 Taiwan Missile Crisis reminded both Tokyo and Washington that a Chinese invasion and expansion into Taiwan was no longer unforeseeable.

Immediately after the Taiwan crisis in March 1996, President

¹⁸ See Guardian, April 17, 2005, <<http://observer.guarden.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1461648,00.html>>, accessed on April 19, 2007.

Clinton and Prime Minister Hashimoto issued in April “The Japan-United States Joint Declaration on Security-Alliance for the 21st century” to reaffirm the alliance forged in 1960 and to agree to review the 1978 Defense Guidelines—a blatant warning to China’s operations in the Taiwan Strait.¹⁹ After a one-year negotiation, the “New Guidelines for United States-Japan Defense Cooperation” were issued, in which the scope and domain for bilateral military cooperation was expanded from the invasion of Japan’s homeland to “situations in areas surrounding Japan”.²⁰

In Chapter Five, this revised guideline specified that the “situations in areas surrounding Japan” was not “geographical but situational”. In responding to such situations, measures taken “may differ depending on circumstances” (Green and Cronin, 1999: 339). With this clarification, the Clinton administration and the Hashimoto government enlarged and strengthened their geopolitical cooperation—an effective preventive measure for balancing China. However, while the military cooperation had been advanced, the Clinton administration did not abandon its comprehensive engagement strategy toward China. On the contrary, by exchanging state visits, Clinton even announced a “Constructive Strategic Partnership” statement with Jiang Zemin in 1997. As the “historical issues” spoiled the 1998 state visit of President Jiang to Tokyo,²¹ the Clinton administration had won and kept a pivotal position in the Northeast Asian triangle and successfully avoided resentment from

¹⁹ Lampton(2001: 237-238) argues that the preparation of this declaration started from 1994, which was aimed at a possible crisis in the Korean Peninsula. But the timing of its accomplishment and publication—April 1996—made this document look like a warning to China.

²⁰ See “*The Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation*”, issued on September 23, 1997 (Green and Cronin, 1999: 333).

²¹ During the visit, Jiang failed to obtain Japan’s promises on opposing Taiwan independence. He also failed to obtain an apology for Japan’s war time atrocities. Clinton offered a commitment not to support Taiwan’s efforts for independence when he visited Shanghai in 1998 (Chang, 2002: 133).

China.

3. Japan catches the buck?

Since George W. Bush's administration abandoned Clinton's strategy of engagement, suspended all high-rank exchanges with Beijing and renamed China as a "strategic competitor" early into the new millennium, Sino-Japanese relations continued deteriorating particularly due to issues such as: the repeated visit to the Yasukuni Shrine by Prime Minister Koizumi and his cabinet members, where fourteen Class A war criminals of the Second World War are deified; the approval of a new history textbook that was alleged to whitewash Japan's wartime atrocities; and the long-standing territory disputes.

As a result, the more the Chinese pressured Japan to face up to its past, the more the younger generations of Japan aspired to a "normal state" that could abandon the pacifist constitution and resume the sovereign rights of waging war. This helps explain why Tokyo was more willing to assume the responsibility of defense and global peacekeeping operations while Washington might be "passing the buck."²² Two instances of a new assertive Japan can be found in its former cabinet members' remarks on defense: In February 2003, Japan's then Defense Minister Shigeru for the first time warned that Japan had the right to launch a preemptive strike for self-defense. In September, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo claimed that the constitution did not prevent Japan from possessing nuclear weapons. Both statements were aimed at Pyongyang on the surface, but were also directed at Beijing implicitly.

²² Washington's "buck-passing" behavior could be dated to the early and mid-1990s as Japan was invited to deploy minesweepers to the Gulf in 1992. The Clinton administration had made it clear that the US would support Japan's bid to the UNSC seat, if Japan could share more responsibilities on regional security with the US (Lord, 1996: 5; Chiu, 1996: 6-7). Another factor facilitating Japan's willingness of greater military role was the unstable situation caused by North Korea.

As some Chinese strategists had found, hardliners in Washington might think that the United States would benefit from a souring of Sino-Japanese relations (Wang, 2005). Meanwhile, more skeptical of China than Clinton, the Bush administration believed that China had gradually filled a vacuum in the Asia Pacific as the United States continued to be swamped in Iraq. That is why the Bush cabinet had to elevate Japan as a powerful ally through the measures agreed in the United States-Japan 2+2 conference in Washington DC in February 2005.²³

1. To encourage Tokyo to revise the Constitution, especially Article 9, which renounces the right to sustain an army and wage war, in order to undertake more responsibility for its own defense;
2. To deploy an advanced radar and missile defense system to intercept missiles directed at Japan and the United States;
3. To integrate the air forces of the United States and Japan by establishing a common operation center at Yokota Air Base, where the Japan Air Defense Command would be put “side by side” with the U.S. 5th Air Force;
4. To strengthen data-sharing, joint training, intelligence sharing, and military exercises inside and outside Japan, but not for Japan to insert combat troops into combat zones;
5. To allow U.S. nuclear carriers to use Japan’s ports as host ports;
6. To declare that the state of affairs in the Taiwan Strait is a “common strategic objective” of both Washington and Tokyo.

In addition to those above mentioned common measures, both Japan and America have taken other steps to strengthen their defense postures in Northeast Asia. Japan has decided to purchase Aegis and PAC-3 missile defense systems from the United States in order to intercept missiles

²³ See Shanker (2005), Tyson (2005).

from North Korea and China, and to redeploy its army away from northern Japan in order to reinforce Okinawa, where the pressure from China is growing. Japan has also agreed to shoulder all budget costs caused by the realignment of U.S. forces in Japan. At the same time, the Pentagon has started to cut the number (about 7,000) of marines in Okinawa and transfer them to Guam—a revived Pacific stronghold where advanced B-2 bombers are replacing the aging B-52s.

4. Analysis

A brief reflection can be drawn on the developments in United States-China-Japan relations after Cold War:

First of all, bodies of Water have not reduced the fear of foreign attacks. Second, China adopted a balancing strategy by increasing its military presence and modernizing its equipment as its main strategy in this area, while the United States passed defense burdens to Japan and reinforced a rear base—Guam. Third, the Taiwan Crisis was an important incident which revealed the changing balance in this region. Fourth, Japan seemed to have maintained a buck-passing strategy in the United States-China-Japan triangle in the early 1990s, which was terminated by the Taiwan Crisis. Fifth, whereas George W. Bush's policy choice was quite comprehensible in terms of neorealism, the Clinton administration's policy was much vaguer. Last, domestic atmospheres were important in facilitating or easing tension.

IV. The Korean Peninsula and the Six-Party Talks

1. Wars for a buffer state

Although there have been various regimes on the Korean Peninsula, for China, the Korean Peninsula was seen as a buffer state to prevent its resource-rich northeast provinces from foreign incursion. This pattern dated from the Ming Dynasty (1361-1644) up until the PRC era. The Ming's 1592 campaign was an important marker for future development in this region.²⁴ As Jonathan D. Spence (2005: 45) put it: any foreign power interfering with the peninsula would face China's firm reaction, even at great cost to itself.

In fact, Chinese interventions in Korea occurred twice after the Ming's 1592 campaign. The first time was to ensure that Korea remained China's (Qing Dynasty) protectorate. This was seen as necessary because Japan had expanded its military presence to Korea, trying to remove Seoul from Qing's list of allies and place it under Tokyo's dominance in the 1890s. China's strategy failed due to its defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War in 1895, which led to the final annihilation of the Korean monarchy and its annexation to Japan in 1901.

The second Chinese intervention was undertaken in order to ensure that the America-led U.N. forces were not able to control the whole north of the peninsula and reach the Yalu River during the Korean War in the 1950s—an apparently successful operation shown by the fact that the Korean War was won by nobody and resulted in a stalemate (You: 2004).

²⁴ One rarely known example was China's earlier Korean War in 1592, as the ambitious Japanese warlord Hideyoshi sent a fleet and ground forces to invade Korea, hoping to subordinate the country and force a passage into northeast China: the first try of Japan to forge a "Great East Asia Circle." The Ming court responded immediately and resolutely by sending a competent expeditionary force to check the Japanese advance and back the Korean King. With huge numbers of casualties on both sides, the Sino-Korean forces prevailed and the Japanese began to withdraw in 1598 (Spence, 2005:44-45).

Such a backdrop illustrates that the controversial issue on the denuclearization of Pyongyang in the last decade has in effect a significant historical lineage of hundreds of years. Such kind of events has never purely been an issue of Korea's domestic decision-making. It is, in fact, a struggle for power and security among Korea's neighboring major powers. The contemporary Sino-American geopolitical competition in the peninsula has to be placed in such a context for further investigation. Furthermore, sometimes Beijing and Washington are not the only protagonists; other powerful regional players could be invited, for various reasons, to form a multilateral forum to address any crisis.

2. Contemporary focus: Pyongyang and the Six-Party Talks

The major post-Cold War concern for China and the United States in the Korean peninsula has been the unpredictable regime of Pyongyang and its nuclear ambitions. However, behind the sessions of the Beijing-hosted Six-Party Talks, which attracted huge media interest, the real concerns for the two major players, from a neorealist perspective, should be who can harvest more from the negotiations in terms of power and regional influence. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that the two Korean regimes were effective agents in this dynamic process. Their initiatives deserve more attention.

After the disintegration of the Soviet bloc and China's commence of massive economic reform, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) became one of the most isolated and totalitarian regimes to survive the Cold War. Its fragile economy and closure to foreign influence worsened its predicament, as it had to rely on foreign aid such as food, energy and other consumer goods. This aid was dispatched largely from China and partially from the Republic of Korea ROK, including indirect donations from the United States and Japan.

Due to its severe energy shortage, an embargo imposed by the United States and its allies, and the sense of insecurity caused by

Washington's possible invasion, the DPRK started its nuclear program in the early 1990s. This program could potentially be used to produce nuclear weapons—a cause of concern for Washington, which several times considered removing DPRK's nuclear facilities by force. Meanwhile, the North developed its own middle-range surface-to-surface missiles capable of loading nuclear warheads and targeting the major cities of Japan and South Korea, as well as U.S. military bases in Japan.

However, the Clinton administration adopted a moderate approach to the nuclear crisis and did achieve a few positive results. It reached a bilateral agreement with Pyongyang by agreeing that Washington would take responsibility for the provision of two light water reactors (LWRs) in order to meet Pyongyang's "peaceful use of nuclear energy" needs and urgent domestic energy demand. These measures were also echoed by the then South Korean government which was calling for a separation of economy from politics.²⁵ The organization KEDO (The Korea Peninsula Energy Development Organization) was founded in 1995 with investment from South Korea, Japan and the United States to provide two South Korean-built nuclear power plants designed by the Americans.²⁶ Nine new members, including the EU, Australia, and New Zealand, joined KEDO to provide funds in the following few years. Their participation made KEDO a multilateral institution aimed at managing the stability of the peninsula. North Korea promised that after three years of well-tested reactor completion, it would repay the loan to the related

²⁵ The then President of the ROK, Kim Dae Jung called the measure as "sunshine policy" which stressed "reconciliation, exchanges, cooperation and non-aggression" between the north and the south. See Desaix Anderson's speech: "Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization," a speech for address the Congress hearing on July 14, 1998. See <http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/congress/1998_h/s980714-and.htm>, accessed on November 23, 2007.

²⁶ KEDO had 12 members later, including the European Union (EU), which joined KEDO as an Executive Board member in 1997, Australia, Argentina, Canada, Chile, Finland, Indonesia, New Zealand and Poland. KEDO's executive chief Anderson claimed that the diversity among KEDO's members was a sign of growing international support for KEDO's work and a recognition of its accomplishments from 1995 to 1998. See Anderson's speech at the Congress hearing, *ibid*.

investors within 17 years (Lee: 2003). China was not invited to the KEDO project. The reason seemed to be its rapprochement with Seoul—a move which somewhat disappointed Pyongyang. Nonetheless, China was not worrying about KEDO because Beijing still remained the largest source of foreign aid to Kim Jongil regime.²⁷

During the Clinton years, Beijing seemed less active, at least in the multilateral efforts to stabilize the peninsula. But South Korea's economic and commercial ties with China improved dramatically.²⁸ This would increase China's leverage in the peninsula for the longterm (Chung: 2001).

However, the KEDO project was delayed for many years, not completed, and was eventually terminated just after George W. Bush took office.²⁹ The change of America's Korean Peninsula policy can be seen as a combination of the general jettison of Clinton's engagement strategy and a response to the 9/11 attack. Tougher measures were deemed necessary toward the so-called "rogue states". Regarding North Korea, Washington accused Pyongyang of secretly enriching uranium, developing WMD (weapons of mass destruction) programs and harboring terrorists. A U.S. DoD report in January 2002 categorized North Korea, along with Iraq, Iran and Syria as "immediate" contingencies, which require reliable U.S. strike capabilities (Lu, 2004: 166).³⁰ In response, Pyongyang raised the stakes in October 2002 by

²⁷ China's aid accounts for over 70% of North Korea's fuel imports. See Abramowitz and Bosworth (2003: 122).

²⁸ The size of the bilateral trade between South Korea and China increased from \$19 million in 1979 to \$ 31 billion in 2000. See Chung (2001: 781).

²⁹ Peter Hayes et al., "Light Water Reactors at the Six Party Talks: the Barrier that Makes the Water Flow", see <<http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/0578LWR.html>>, accessed on November 20, 2007. The construction of the two reactors completely stopped in mid-2002 (Lee: 2003). Concerning the decision made by the KEDO board to suspend the reactors' construction, see KEDO official site: <http://www.kedo.org/au_history.asp>, accessed on March 17, 2007.

³⁰ See US Department of Defense: *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington D.C., January 8, 2002), pp. 16-17.

pronouncing that it not only had the right to develop nuclear weapons, but also reserved the right to acquire other “more powerful items.” Pyongyang’s withdrawal from the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) in January 2003 elevated the tension to a crisis level (Lee: 2003).

The timing was not a coincidence. The United States was preparing the disarmament of Iraq and its regime change by force in early 2003.³¹ At this moment, the Korean Peninsula crisis, together with the U.N. Security Council’s resolution to Saddam’s alleged storage of WMDs, had offered Beijing an excellent chance to reshape Washington’s skeptical attitude toward China: China could have an opportunity to help defuse Pyongyang’s challenge so that Washington could concentrate on the Gulf.

After the Second Gulf War was launched in March 2003, Washington agreed to hold talks with North Korea, hosted by Beijing on April 23, 2003. A series of high-ranking meetings between Washington and Beijing, Washington and Seoul, Washington, Tokyo and Seoul, and Pyongyang and Seoul were organized. As a result, the United States and North Korea announced their agreement to a six-party talk, which would be hosted by China on August 27. China, Russia, South Korea and Japan would also be invited to the talks. A continued session was held on February 28 2004 and the Six-Party Talks then became a regular mechanism, despite the fact that no definitive solution has been arrived at so far.

In these talks, China’s bottom line was based on two principles: 1) the Korean Peninsula must be free of nuclear weapons; 2) the disputes must be resolved peacefully, and any blockade or sanction imposed on North Korea must be avoided (Ye, 1998: 392-393; You: 2004). The single but nonetheless important consensus of all sessions up until early

³¹ See William Hamilton: “Bush Began to Plan War Three Months after 9/11”, *Washington Post*, April 17, 2004, p. A01; Richard Norton-Taylor: “Blair-Bush Deal before Iraq War Revealed in Secret Memo”, *Guardian*, February 3, 2006, p.1.

2008 was that all parties, including Pyongyang, endorsed a nuclear-free future for the region.³²

Despite being a minor agent in the struggle between great powers, certain influence caused by Seoul's domestic trends should not be ignored. As the direct victim of the Korean War, the former Korean President Kim Daejung's introduction of the "Sunshine Policy" of engaging North Korea was an unpleasant surprise for Washington.³³ Kim's successor, President Roh Moohyun continued President Kim's policy under a more anti-American social sentiment. With its booming economy, South Koreans have been using economic strength to move the South-North relationship from the Korean War standoff to a cautious but peaceful coexistence. South Koreans are now allowed to meet their relatives and invest in a few programs in the North with government permission.³⁴ As a result, South Koreans regard the impoverished Pyongyang's nuclear program as less threatening. They are more worried about the collapse of the hermit regime than its weapons. Unsurprisingly, the highly visible military presence of U.S. forces in their country has become more questionable (Abramowitz and Bosworth, 2003: 121).

With their closer economic ties mentioned, both Beijing and Seoul became more confident in engaging with each other. In 2002, China surpassed the United States as South Korea's largest export destination. South Korea has become China's third largest trade partner since 2003.³⁵ As China became increasingly important in Seoul's calculations,

³² See the statement of China's Deputy Foreign Minister Wang Yi after the first round of the six-party talk. See Foreign Ministry of the PRC: <<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/gjw/gjrdwt/t25501.htm>>, and the Chairman's Statement of the second-round Six-Party Talks: <<http://news.tom.com/1002/20040228-711139.html>>, accessed on February 7, 2007.

³³ President Kim took office in 1998 and was succeeded by President Roh Moo Hyun in 2003.

³⁴ During President Kim's period (1998-2003), the ROK had provided aid to the DPRK amount to \$1.2 billion. President Roh's government, up to the end of 2005, had offered the DPRK more than \$2.3 billion. See *China Times* (Taipei), October 13, 2005, p. 15.

³⁵ For the statistics, please refer to the Ministry of Commerce of the PRC: <<http://gcs.mofcom.gov.cn/tongji.shtml>>, accessed on February 12, 2007.

Koreans' perception of China gradually improved, while the Chinese public was also responding more positively toward the ROK (Johnston, 1998: 63, 2003: 42; Chung, 2001: 778-779).³⁶

Furthermore, since Korean reunification requires a consensus among the major four parties concerned (i.e. Seoul, Pyongyang, Washington and Beijing), there are Korean strategists who feel they should find a suitable middle ground and avoid making a premature choice between Washington and Beijing. Some of them refuted the “negative Cs” of the “China threat,” advocating instead the “positive Cs” derived from “the ASEAN style of diplomacy”³⁷ (Kim, 1998: 356-357; Chung, 2001: 779). A few researchers even predicted a remote possibility of Korea allying itself with Beijing or at least announcing neutrality, not for the first time in history (Chung, 2001: 790; Chang: 2004; Kang: 2005). In any case, if China's influence on the peninsula is amplified, from a zero-sum perspective, this will be at Washington's expense.

Beijing's North Korea policy was as ambivalent as Seoul's China policy. But its delicate maneuvering after 2003 seemed successful. Beijing did not actively try to sabotage the United States-South Korea alliance, because the current division on the peninsula served its interests. A hard landing of the North Korea nuclear crisis—development such as a coup, economic bankruptcy, or additional acquisition of WMDs—could very likely invite Washington's military intervention

³⁶ It is noteworthy that there was a sharp division between the South Korean public and the policy elites in their respective perceptions of China. According to Chung (2001: 783-786), policy elites remained more status-quo oriented, preferring the US-aligned structure. All interviewed experts in his study believed that the security role of the US in this region was absolutely necessary. The study also pointed out that there are still two million Korean Chinese living in Northeast China (Manchuria): another source for strong emotional attachment. The highest position the Chinese Korean has achieved in the PRC's political system is Army General by Mr Zhao Nanqi, former Commander of the Department of General Logistics of the People's Liberation Army.

³⁷ According to Shee Poon Kim (1998:356-357), a Korean scholar based in Seoul National University, these “negative Cs” include “conflict, confrontation, containment, contradiction, clash of civilizations and conspiracy. The “positive Cs” include consultation, compromise, consensus, confidence-building, co-existence, and cooperation.

(Wang, 2005: 9). Besides, a nuclear-armed North would create a ‘cascade effect,’ justifying nuclear weapon development by South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. A nuclear Japan or Taiwan would be China’s worst case scenario (You, 2004: 5). Such a situation would be highly unpredictable and out of Beijing’s control. A better scenario would be for Pyongyang to adopt China’s reform model gradually and maintain stable relations with its neighbors. American intervention would prove to be unnecessary. This scenario would also be in Seoul’s interest (Johnston, 2003: 40-41).

China repeatedly indicated its distance from endorsing DPRK’s nuclear ambition (Jisi Wang, 2004: 9-10). A few strategists openly criticized North Korea for acting irresponsibly toward regional security and endangering itself as well as its only ally “sealed in blood” (Wenzhong Wang: 2004). They believed North Korea would eventually collapse. For this reason, Beijing’s support for Pyongyang must be conditional and limited. These strategists argued for the importance of cooperating with the United States to maintain the status quo (You: 2004),³⁸ and being prepared for a future reunification by the South based on a consensus of China and America (Tang, 2003: 212-213). In fact, during the preparation of the first round of the Six-Party Talks in the summer of 2003, China once suspended crucial oil shipments to North Korea, delayed its parliamentary speaker’s visit to the DPRK, and moved troops to the Sino-Korean border to pressure Pyongyang (You: 2004; Lampton, 2003: 40). After the first round of meetings, aid to North Korea was resumed. Based on these facts, it is argued that China’s Korean Peninsula policies marked a departure from buck-passing and passivity to active involvement (Medeiros and Fravel: 2003). Zhao (1998: 313)

³⁸A study authored by Wang Wenzhong, entitled “New Perspective to Understand the Korean Problem and Situation in Northeast Asia”, was going to be published in a well-known Chinese journal: *Strategy and Management* in August 2004, but was later banned, because the study had been released by a South Korean newspaper. The bimonthly journal was later closed due to Kim Jon Il’s strong protest. You (2004:2) claimed that in effect the former Chinese President Jiang Zheming represented this perspective.

further claims that Beijing's balancing act actually tilts toward the South.

To sum up, relations between China and the United States significantly improved after 2004. This was largely due to their cooperation on the Korean nuclear crisis. Two key events show this trend: 1) U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, a famous China alarmist in Washington, went on his first trip to Beijing in autumn 2005; and 2) Deputy Secretary of State Zoellick expressed hope that a rising China could become a "responsible stakeholder in the international system" (Zoellick: 2005; DeTrani: 2005; Christensen: 2005).

However, the United States did not soften its insistence on a comprehensive, verifiable, and irreversible nuclear disarmament of Pyongyang (DeTrani: 2005). It is also clear that even if Pyongyang agreed to give up its nuclear program, Washington would never assure the survival of Kim Jongil regime (Spring and Hwang: 2005)³⁹.

In addition, based on its technological advantages and the aforementioned trends, the Bush administration seemed to adopt a buck-passing policy toward the Peninsula. The countermeasures of the Bush administration toward the Korean Peninsula were the redeployment of its ground forces in the ROK, a closer cooperation with Tokyo, and the eventual reduction of the U.S. military presence in Korea⁴⁰. Such measures would help U.S. forces avoid running risks of being threatened by direct land as well as missile attacks from North Korea and China (Abramowitz and Bosworth, 2003: 124).

Consequently, America's appreciation for China's mediation was actually increasing Beijing's stake and burden in future talks. However, maintaining a mutually acceptable negotiations process was especially

³⁹ President Bush and Secretary Rice had promised that the US had 'no intention of invading or attacking North Korea.' See Joseph E. DeTrani (2005). DeTrani was the Special Envoy of the US for Six-Party Talks.

⁴⁰ Regarding the details on the reduction and close of a few US posts near the DMZ, see < <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/rok/1992/920526-rok-usia.htm>>, accessed on March 25, 2007.

essential for China because it still faced trade disputes with Washington, territorial disputes with Japan, and the Taiwan problem. None of these can be solved in the foreseeable future.

3. Analysis

First of all, no significant relative gains of military power were made by any of the major players on the Korean Peninsula. Next, the Clinton administration assumed a pro-engagement policy through KEDO when China took a passive role in the 1990s. In contrast, the Bush administration undertook an offensive policy toward the DPRK before 2003 but adopted a more moderate stance from 2004 by allowing a multilateral channel to address the problem.

Meanwhile, China's increased influence was based on improved economic connections with South Korea and successful mediation of the Six-Party Talks rather than its traditional military alliance with the North. This is in part because domestic variables, such as the change in leadership and public preference in South Korea, were important for both the China and America when considering their options. Besides, technological advantage, urgent issues such as Iraq and Al Qaeda, and the changing public support in South Korea made Washington assume a buck-passing policy on the Peninsula. Finally, concerning geographic factors, it is found that sharing land borders did not lead China to a policy of balancing.

V. Conclusion

Through the above examination of the geopolitical factors at play in Sino-American competition in Northeast Asia after the Cold War, this essay can be summarized by the following four points of reflections, extending from practical and concrete analyses to abstract and theoretical reflections.

First of all, the sharing of land borders did not cause a pro-balancing policy against China in the Korean peninsula.⁴¹ As a result, Washington could not fully realize its advantage as an “off-shore balancer”. Furthermore, innovations in military technology and the revolution of military affairs significantly reduced geographical restrictions upon the projection of forces of great powers. This trend is especially evident for the most powerful player, the United States, which has continued to invest the most in military-related technology during the last two decades. Moreover, the technology gap in military arena between the United States and China is widely recognized (Shambaugh: 2002). In this respect, it may be debatable that precise bombing and prompt deployment of special secret units are enough to eliminate a well-defended land power. However, it is now also clear that modern war could be initiated and concluded by heavily crippling enemies’ command, control, communications systems and vital economic infrastructures. The rival regime’s legitimacy can subsequently be damaged to an ungovernable level. There is no necessity to remove the rival’s existence as a valid unit in the system. The essence is to replace the heads of enemy regimes. This aim could be reached without employing nuclear weapons or causing a terrible death toll.

The above argument explains why China and other minor powers worried about “peaceful evolution”, “regime change”, and “regional war under high-tech conditions.” The damage and loss resulting from a regional conflict can trigger the collapse of a great power, especially if that power is struggling with domestic turbulence and economic problems (Schwarz: 2005). In this respect, China’s feeling of

⁴¹ Mearsheimer’s revision of neorealism by adding up the geographical factors like “sharing land borders” may become much more applicable if the concept changes into ‘sharing water bodies of moderate size’. One example can be found in Sino-Japanese relations in the last decade. The two neighbors share the resource-rich East China Sea, of which greater strategic importance is attached to both Japan and China’s energy transportation. This geographic reason helps to partially explain Japan and China’s pro-balancing reaction to each other.

encirclement by the West is unambiguously sensible. It seems to have been suffering from a sense of being a “less legitimate” regime vis-à-vis Western liberal democracies. In sum, “the stopping power of large bodies of water” reduce China’s fear of a potential hegemon (Schmidt, 2004: 437). With this factor relating to technology, great powers look more like Waltz’s mobile molecules in a frictionless system, and not like geopolitical positionists.

Secondly, in the two case of the Korean Peninsula, rapidly growing and mutually beneficial trade with other regimes might considerably reduce suspicion and antagonism of neighboring countries toward China. Through this non-military tactic, China could expand its influence in advantageous areas (or maintain a balance when it was not favorable), changing the geopolitical balance through trade and investment without causing an immediate balancing reaction: a headache for Washington.⁴² China seemed to be accumulating non-military “relative gains” without openly challenging Washington’s regional presence. In effect, by recognizing the deepening interdependence between units in the system, many Chinese as well as a few American strategists are now advocating the coexistence of a peaceful rising China and a hegemonic America. They argue that such a coexistence is in both countries’ interests, and will help nurture a culture of the sharing of public goods as well as initiate new agendas (Tang, 2004: 9-10; Medeiros and Fravel, 2003: 9; Lampton, 1996: 56-57).

This explains in part why while enjoying increasing military advantage against all other powers as a whole, Washington is still anxious about the rise of China and trapped in endless debates on China’s strategy and intentions: Is China really a “responsible stakeholder”? (Zoellick: 2005) or is it intending to build a benevolent hegemonic

⁴² See Stephen King: “Deng’s Revolution means China is set to overtake America as the biggest economy in 30 years”, *The Independent*, Feb 13, 2006, p2.

subsystem in Asia through “patronage” (Shambaugh, 1996: 187)?

Thirdly, it has been found that unit-level factors are important for systemic results such as the intensity of great power competitions. Two types of examples can demonstrate this fact:

First is the preferences of individual leaders or regimes of units concerned. This variable was recognized by Waltz (1979: 251) and his moderate critic Krasner (2001) when Waltz said that unit-level factors had ‘proportional causal weight’. Successful statecraft can occasionally resist the shoving power of the structure (Waltz, 1986: 328-331). For instance, the domestic conditions of Seoul made Washington unable to pass the buck to South Korea. With respect to China, specific historical legacy such as the long-term feeling of humiliation, insecurity and identity searching could play important role at unit level with systemic impacts: courting minor bordering countries while passing the buck of balancing the hegemon to the willing ones (Hurrell, 2006:19; Fravel: 2005). This has been specifically demonstrated in the case of Sino-Japanese relations.

Next is, the domestic conditions of the dominant power and its assessment of the current balance. The analysis of this paper indicates significant differences in policy preferences between the administrations of Clinton and Bush Junior. Theoretically speaking, as Waltz points out, a dominant unit with a non-realist “fancy” is less able to resist temptation of “excessive power”. The result is its ignorance of structural as well as geopolitical restrictions, and accordingly, growing unpredictability, and probably, overextension (Mearsheimer, 2006a: 119; Wang Jisi, 2005; Waltz: 2003). For this kind of superpower, the systemic prescription of “socialization” may fail to curb its ambitions, because it is driving the system to an empire, beyond the sphere of international politics.

Finally, based on the above discussion, the geopolitical analysis of the Northeast Asian regional politics after the Cold War offers two important theoretical implications: 1) the geopolitical factors Mearsheimer provided are useful complements to the abstract neorealist

framework. However, although these revisions did a good job in regional analyses, they still failed to overcome many anomalies; 2) In contrast, the prototype of Waltz, which embraces a more abstract style and looser restrictions, may survive many tests without geopolitical amendments. In this regard, it can be concluded that the geopolitical factors may have committed the “reductionist” defects Waltz strived to avoid. Meanwhile, the usefulness of geopolitical analyses also demonstrates the theoretical openings such as the causal power of geographical location and technological advantage at the unit level in the neorealist framework.⁴³

In short, the neorealist framework, as a “mainstream school” in U.S. international studies, is only a theory embedded in the historical circumstances of a dominant unit in the international system, and therefore, is able to shed more light on this hegemonic power in relation to other major powers. Since the end of the Cold War, Sino-American relations have had a relatively increasing impact on the destiny of the world in terms of war and peace. In analyzing this relationship, neorealism, according to advocates, has the advantage of being able to devise various tests suitable for studying different issues, as well as different geographical areas in assigned time frames. Through a multi-pronged test and reappraisal process in the Northeast Asian case, it can be claimed that neorealism provides and will continue to provide a useful mental picture for historical researchers and policymakers to contemplate and reflect, but only under the cautious vigilance of preconditions.

The reasons for this are threefold. First, although neorealism is sharp enough in providing a simple conceptualization of the reality of international politics, like neo-classical economics, its basic concepts and propositions are far from conclusive, as are its explanations, and perhaps, predictions. My study demonstrates that the core neorealist tenets feature

⁴³ One intense exploration of this opening is the study on the “balance of threat”, in which geopolitical location is crucial for threat formation (Moritzen, 1997: 80-82; Liberman, 1996: 151).

cracks from which stem some serious anomalies. Some of these can be reconciled with the support provided by other amendments that embrace a common meta-theoretical ground of rationalism. Some of the anomalies, however, cannot be explained without introducing the criticisms of radical reflection. Such a situation leads us to reflect on a different level of the problem, which constitutes a second and deeper consideration of neorealist understandings of and insights into international politics as a whole.

Second, given various anomalies I revealed in the case study, neorealism has secured its legitimacy not only by a relatively higher testability (or falsifiability), but also by a strong relevance to ongoing international politics, with special respect to certain patterns found in military build-up and regional balances. In this sense, neorealism remains practically “useful”.

Third, I suggest a cautious vigilance, because as recognized by Waltz himself, theories are not detachable from historical facts. That is why Waltz admitted that a theory is an artistic work out of a theorist’s hand and taste. By observing the accumulating evolution of human history from the Greek city states, China’s warring states, through the medieval feudal order to the modern sovereignty system, theorists are fully eligible to argue for certain “repetitive”, “small” but “important” things. But this is exactly what an ideal type in social science should do. An ideal-type theory could be useful simply because it highlights a small number of relevant causal relationships. It can thus be subjected to further debates, applications and modifications. Neorealism is no less than this, but also no more than this. Blindly extending a specific history-bound ideal type, such as neorealism, to all regions and historical systems can only lead to the fallacy of reification and ahistoricism. That is to say, we need more hands of artists to address the ever changing world politics, not a “single hand” claiming a solely outstanding “taste”.

As the history of the several waves of debate on international studies has demonstrated, no theory can hold without internal or external

compromise. The former refers to a tradeoff between concision and comprehension; the latter, necessary concessions to rival schools and theories. The reasons behind this are not only because of the ever changing historical reality, but also the honesty of all intellectual enterprise. Although it is not possible to illuminate “every nook and cranny” (Mearsheimer, 2001a: 11), only with such vigilance can various perspectives serve as flashlights that provide, from different angles, a glimpse into the eternal darkness of international politics.

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