Understanding Northeast Asian regional dynamics: inventory checking and new discourses on power, interest, and identity

Jong Kun Choi and Chung-in Moon

*Political Science, Yonsei University, Shinchondong 134,
Seoul, Republic of Korea*
E-mail: jongchoi@yonsei.ac.kr or cimoon@yonsei.ac.kr

Abstract

Northeast Asia has emerged as the center of gravity in contemporary international relations (IR), partly owing to China's rise, over the past two decades. In understanding regional dynamics in Northeast Asia, the (neo-) realist perspective has been dominant. Despite its rich analytical and empirical contribution, however, preoccupation with power and its distribution, blurred geographic focus, and built-in *status quo* bias have prevented the existing realist literature to capture the new reality of the region that can be characterized by trends toward liberal transition, the politics of national identity, and growing correlates of perception, domestic politics, and regional interactions. Against this backdrop, we attempt to undertake an inventory checking of new discourses on power, interest, and identity in accounting for regional

change and stability as well as to shed new light on debates on theorizing of IR in Northeast Asia.

1 Introduction

The restructuring of the international system during the Cold War was founded on the logic of bi-polarity, one that was characterized by a strategic rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. In this formula, Northeast Asia was considered a peripheral area of an Asian sub-system where the Northern axis (i.e. the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea) confronted the Southern axis (i.e. United States and its allies, mostly Japan and South Korea). Strategic interactions between the two superpowers dictated Northeast Asia's geo-political destiny. What mattered most in this context was the power configuration among major actors and their strategic calculus. Other countries in the region were treated as residual actors whose behaviors were structurally conditioned by the superpowers, and regional dynamics was presumed as a mere reflection of system-level interactions.[1] Balance of power and interaction among four major powers became the primary units of analysis in the study of Northeast Asian regional politics, and there was a paucity of scholarly efforts to theorize about IR of Northeast Asia in its own context (Choi, 2008, p. 194–195).

Since the end of the Cold War, however, we are witnessing a new phenomenon. Northeast Asia can no longer be seen as a passive subsystem whose fate is tied to the international system. The region has become the dynamo of the world economy whose economies performed well even in times of the current global financial crisis (Atkins, 2009; Schwartz, 2009). And three major nations of the region, namely China, Japan, and South Korea, accounted for 18.9% of the world's GDP, 23.6% of the world's population, 15.7% of the world's exports, 13.4% of the world's imports, and 38.1% of the world's foreign exchange reserves, as of 2006 (World Bank, 2007). Moreover, the region has tremendous economic potential. China, with a vast potential market of 1.3 billion

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1 In this article, we specifically refer to Northeast Asia as a sub-region of East Asia, consisting of North and South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia. And Southeast Asia is defined as a sub-region consisting of Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, and Indonesia. East Asia is, thus, composed of two sub-regions, namely Northeast and Southeast Asia. Our focus in this paper is Northeast Asia.

people, is rapidly becoming one of the world's largest manufacturers, while Japan maintains competitiveness with its cutting-edge technology and capital holdings. South Korea has risen to the global stage through its vitality, dynamic human resources, and innovative capabilities. And Russia has an enormous economic potential because of its resources in the Far East. The only exception is North Korea whose economy has been faltering. The region as a whole includes nations whose economies continue to exhibit some of the world's highest growth rates and whose potential for expansion is considered among the greatest.

Northeast Asia has also its own distinctive security dynamic independent of the international system. The most pressing security concern is the North Korean nuclear crisis, but crisis escalation over the Taiwan Strait could also endanger overall peace and security in the region. Unresolved territorial disputes could become another source of inter-state tension. More troubling is future strategic uncertainty. Major American strategic realignments in the post-11 September era, the ascension of China as a global power, and Japan's move to resuscitate its military power further complicates the strategic uncertainty in the region (International Crisis Group, 2005; Ikenberry and Moon, 2008).

Socio-cultural challenges are also equally profound. With the exception of North Korea and Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea have become much closer than ever before through active social and cultural exchanges. But the cultivation of a common regional identity continues to be hampered by lingering parochial nationalism and deepening mutual distrust. Traumatic memories of past history characterized by colonial domination and subjugation still haunt the people of the region. As ongoing disputes over history and national identity among China, Japan, and Korea demonstrate, collective memory of the past, assertive nationalism, and subsequent cognitive dissonance pose critical obstacles to region-building and cooperation in Northeast Asia (Moon and Suh, 2007, p. 33–49).

It is in this context that mainstream scholars and practitioners of IR have begun to pay attention to the regional dynamics of East Asia in general and Northeast Asia in particular (Lake and Morgan, 1997; Solingen, 1998; Lemke, 2002). China's rise, Japan's efforts to become a normal state, the uncertain future of American hegemony and regional order, and the North Korean nuclear quagmire have led to a rich body

of new literature on the region. Against this background, the article aims at undertaking a critical review of the existing literature on regional politics in Northeast Asia, delineating the underpinning analytical and empirical problem, and discussing alternative ways of understanding new reality of Northeast Asia focusing on power, interests, and identity. The article also presents a brief introduction of local debates on how to theorize the IR of Northeast Asia in the concluding part. Our findings show that although the (neo-)realist paradigm has remained dominant in analyzing regional dynamics, new approaches involving liberal transition, identity politics, and domestic politics have recently been drawing a growing scholarly attention. And the existing literature seems to suffer from two major weaknesses: one is the fallacy of blurred geographic focus in which Northeast Asia, East Asia, Asia, and the Asia-Pacific are interchangeably used and the other is the *status quo* bias that appears to be closely associated with the fear of China's rise. Some scholars in the region have advocated the development of a local version of IR theory that can fit its conjunctural context, but the mainstream view seems to favor the acceptance of Western theories as universal ones and their application to local historical cases in a refined manner.

2 Northeast Asian regional dynamics and the primacy of (neo-) realism

A review of IR literature on East Asia in general and Northeast Asia in particular since the end of the Cold War reveals two interesting trends. One is the predominance of a (neo-) realist paradigm that emphasizes power and its distribution and transition as the key variable of international and regional politics, and the other is a pessimistic outlook on regional order and stability. At the forefront, in 1993, Aaron Friedberg saw Asia as 'a cockpit of great-power conflict' and concluded, 'What is unfolding in Asia is a race between the accelerating dynamics of multipolarity, which could increase the changes of conflict, and the growth of mitigating factors that should tend to dampen them and to improve the prospects for a continuing peace', and for him, 'Europe's past could be Asia's future'. Paul Bracken even went further by stating that 'The post-Cold War never came to Asia (Friedberg, 1993, p. 7). It was a Western conceit' (Bracken, 1999, p. 148). As John Mearsheimer laments, the tragedy of great power politics haunts the region (Mearsheimer,

2001), while the structure of finite deterrence embedded in East Asian geopolitics still persists (Kurth, 1989, p. 34–45).

Richard Betts alluded to this development as 'a bad combination, precisely the opposite of that in Western Europe' that should generate instability in Asia (Betts, 1993, p. 34). Gerald Segal also emphasized structural uncertainty that would generate systemic instability by claiming, 'East Asia has never known an indigenous pattern of IR that was not dominated by China. The states of maritime East Asia surely have no nostalgia for their region before the Cold War and the coming of European imperialism' (Segal, 1994). Klare envisaged that without regional institutional arrangements, 'the Pacific Rim could be the site of periodic military convulsions in the 21st century, as Europe was in the 20th century' (Klare, 1993, p. 152). Walden on the same note characterized Northeast Asia as a region that resembled 'inter-war Europe: a society of strong nation-states, increasingly well armed and in possession of conflicting visions of the future, and in the shadow of an erratic and sometimes menacing power' (Walden, 1995, p. 21). Evaluating these arguments about the future of Asian security and stability, Buzan once concluded, 'The fear is that the pessimists may be closer to the truth' (Buzan and Segal, 1994, p. 3).

Such negative outlooks still persist. As theorists of power transition expound, China's ascension and increasing dissatisfaction with its status in regional politics could pose a direct challenge to the American hegemonic position, undermining strategic stability and deepening conflict potential with the United States (Kim, 1997; Tammen and Kugler, 2006; Legro, 2007). American disengagement from the region could further complicate its strategic outlook. A sequential development of American disengagement, Japanese remilitarization, Chinese hegemonic ambition, and new developments on the Korean peninsula, be it unification or heightened military tension, could all contribute to reviving the nightmarish memory of the late 19th century anarchical order (Mosher 2000; Pyle 2007; Hughes, 2009). What is particularly threatening is that Northeast Asian countries possess or have the potential of possessing daunting new military capabilities, including weapons of mass destruction, which could inflict considerable damage to outside powers.

Given these structural uncertainties, the risk of misperception—fueled by historical animosity—can serve as a key trigger in producing miscalculation and eventually confrontation. Nicholas Kristof, a veteran

observer of Asian affairs, characterized peace and stability in Asia as 'a fragile one, concealing dormant antagonism and disputes that could still erupt' (Kristof, 1998, p. 38). Mearsheimer also added that 'Northeast Asia is multipolar, a configuration more prone to instability,' and 'there is potential for serious trouble involving the great powers' (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 362) In other words, the defenders of the *status quo*, such as Japan and the United States, would increase its defensive capabilities as reactions to a rising China, which in turn should encourage China's aggressive impulses. Thus, from the realists' perspective, East Asia is a volatile region, 'in which all the major players—Japan, China, Korea, Russia, and Vietnam—are candidates to become involved in a large-scale war' (Layne, 1996, p. 72). In 2003, Ikenberry and Mastanduno pictured this region as 'a mosaic of divergent cultures and political regime types, historical estrangements, shifting power balances, and rapid economic change,' and considered it 'plausible to imagine security dilemmas, prestige contests, territorial disputes, national resentments, and economic conflicts swelling up and enveloping the region' (Ikenberry and Mastanduno, 2003, p. 2).

These gloomy predictions emanate from the perception of the rise of China as a medium to long-term danger to Asia security (Friedberg, 2005). Their theoretical premise is predicated on China as a revisionist power in which China would attempt to change the current regional or international order to suit its power status and interest (Gilpin, 1981, p. 208–209). Thus, China's rise has been automatically equated with China as a threat to regional and international order created and sustained by the United States. This so-called 'China Threat' prediction has operated according to the logic of arguments on a rapidly growing national capability, which is believed to reflect its expansionary intentions. As early as 1994, Denny Roy stated that 'If behavior reflects capabilities, China's potential to build a larger economy also makes it likely to be assertive and uncooperative' (Roy, 1994, p. 165). Mearsheimer again projected a very pessimistic view on Asia in 2005 while debating with Brzezinski, who argued for a peaceful China, by asserting, '*China cannot rise peacefully, and if it continues its dramatic economic growth over the next few decades, the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war*' (Brzezinski and Mearsheimer, 2005). They argued that a rising China would challenge the U.S.-centered regional and international

order, by aggressively seeking to resolve territorial disputes with the other Asian states, especially with Japan, and that a rising China would promote itself to a regional hegemon that desired to regain its prestige (Kristof, 1993, p. 59–74; Downs and Saunders, 1998; Segal, 1999; Gertz, 2000; Scobell and Wortzel, 2002).

According to this mainstream interpretation, Northeast Asia's relatively long peace and stability was due to the bipolar structure between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War era and to American hegemony in the post-Cold War period. At the turn of the century, however, such an order and stability became questionable because of a shifting configuration of power. Drastic changes in the distribution of power have heightened concerns for structural uncertainties by activating states to engage in a competition for power that would create more unstable external environments (Waltz, 1979; Brown *et al.*, 1995). Proponents of power transition theory have been contending that China's rise and its quest of relative power and prestige and the American failure to handle China's dissatisfaction could cause major conflicts in East Asia (Goldberg and McFaul, 1992; Friedberg, 2000). In view of this, a hegemonic rivalry between China and the United States seems unavoidable, making the future of Northeast Asia uncertain and precarious (Mosher, 2000).

3 Ontological flaws: blurred geographic focus and *status quo* bias

The realist diagnosis of and prescriptions for the regional security dilemma seems appealing and persuasive. Most national security planners in Northeast Asian countries have been incorporating the realist guide in formulating their national security strategies, further complicating the collective management of the region's security dilemma. But a careful examination of the realist literature reveals two crucial shortcomings.

3.1 Blurred geographic focus and misplaced concreteness

The first shortcoming comes from a failure to define the geographic scope in a precise manner. Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, Asia, and Asia-Pacific constitute distinctively different regional and sub-regional features, but the majority of existing literature, including

(neo-)realist ones, have interchangeably used them without any qualification. As Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde have warned, a loose definition of region and sub-region is bound to produce serious analytical flaws because a region or sub-region bears its own distinctive ontological meaning as a unit of analysis. They argue:

> All of the states in the system are enmeshed in a global web of security interdependence. But because most political and military threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones, insecurity is often associated with proximity. Most states fear their neighbors more than distant powers; consequently, security interdependence across the international system as a whole is far from uniform. The normal pattern of security interdependence in a geographically diverse, anarchic international system is one of regionally based clusters, which we label security complexes (Buzan *et al.*, 1997, p. 11–12).

They define a security complex as 'a set of states whose major security perceptions and concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another' (Buzan *et al.*, 1997, p. 11–12). Central to the concept of security complex is geographic proximity. Security issues become more salient among actors within one region than those between regions, and distance becomes a crucial predictor for regional security dynamics. Equally critical is the distribution of power in the region, which is responsible for shaping the relative intensity of interstate security relations and distinctive regional patterns. They also argue that historical relations of amity and enmity can profoundly affect the pattern of security relations in the region.

However, in the age of globalization, as Katzenstein perceptively observes, it is difficult to analyze a region in isolation from the other parts of the world as the reality of the world politics is highly interconnected and interactive. In other words, regions are porous in which the boundary of inclusion and exclusion becomes blurred (Katzenstein, 2005). Nonetheless, each region or sub-region maintains its own distinctive security complex that differentiates oneself from others. For example, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, Asia, and Asia-Pacific have a rather disparate security complex, respectively. Whereas big power politics, traditional security agenda, and lack of institutionalized sub-regional cooperation characterize the core of security dynamics in

Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia is less inflicted by big power politics and is much more concerned about non-traditional security agenda with a higher level of sub-regional cooperation as evidenced by Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Despite conscious efforts to connect the two sub-regions through the East Asian Summit, the ASEAN + 3, and the Asian Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia seems to be devoid of any meaningful security complex character due to geographic distance, different economic size, and divergent security concerns. In a similar vein, Asia and the Asia-Pacific appear too vast to be dealt with as one analytical and empirical category.

To substantiate further, India's nuclear capability does not threaten South Korea's security, but North Korea's does. Thailand's acquiring an aircraft career does not threaten the national security of China, Japan, and South Korea,[2] whereas South Korea's acquisition of Dokdo LPX could alarm its neighboring states. The same can be said for US–Japan's Missile Defense program, which could threaten China, North Korea, and Russia, but not India and Southeast Asian countries. Likewise, there is a need to disaggregate regional dynamics, be it security dilemma or economic cooperation, by sub-region.

The existing literature appears to fail to pay attention to the issue of sub-regional disaggregation and differentiation. To Ikenberry and Moon, East Asia, while composing Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, is 'interchangeably used with Northeast Asia, comprising China, Japan, Russia, North and South Koera, and the United States' (Ikenberry and Moon, 2008, p. 15). Acharya equates East Asia with Southeast Asia, while David Kang treats it as Northeast Asia with a rising China in mind (Acharya, 2003; Kang, 2003). To Katzenstein, the dynamics of East Asian regionalism works around the varying degrees of Japan's role related to 'the ASEAN' through market connections of Japanese corporate structures (Katzenstein, 1997). Meanwhile, Pempel's East Asia includes Northeast and Southeast Asia, whereas to Calder and Fukuyama, East Asia is Northeast Asia, excluding Southeast Asia (Pempel, 2005). Suh, Katzenstein, and Carson, in their edited volume

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2   In August 1997, Thailand acquired the vertical/short take off and landing (VSTOL) carrier Chakri Naruebet, built by Bazan-Ferrol of Spain, and delivered to the RTN in 1997. The 11,400-ton displacement ship was the first air-capable vessel to enter service in Southeast Asia. See GlobalSecurity.Org at http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/thailand/navy-intro.htm.

Rethinking Security in East Asia, give a more weight to Northeast Asia in their conceptualization of East Asia (Suh *et al.*, 2004). Samuel Kim is one of rare scholars who focused solely on Northeast Asia without mentioning East Asia (Kim, 2004). Ikenberry and Mastanduno see the Asia-Pacific in terms of East Asia and the United States (Ikenberry and Mastanduno, 2003). In terms of the future prospects of Asia, Kang and Acharya's recent debate is particularly informative. In Kang's version of Asia's future, South Asia is not included (Kang, 2003), whereas Acharya includes South Asia.

With a few exception (e.g. Samuel Kim), most analysts appear to commit a fallacy of reductionism in which they deduce the regional dynamics of East Asia, Asia, and the Asia-Pacific from that of Northeast Asia. Regional dynamics vary by sub-region (Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia), region (East Asia), meso-region (Asia), and mega-region (Asia-Pacific), depending on sheer size, geographic distance, historical and cultural background, economic interdependence, levels of institutionalization of regional cooperation, and overall security environment. Thus, the level of analysis needs to be differentiated with some analytical and empirical qualification.

3.2 Preoccupation with stability and status quo bias?

Selection bias seems to be another shortcoming of the existing literature, especially realist one. Units of analysis in IR of Northeast Asia are diverse, ranging from probability of war such as great power conflicts, regional stability or instability to peace-making, regional cooperation and integration, and institutionalization. Among these, stability turns out to be the favored research topic. Preference of stability as the unit of analysis at a structural level has been quite common across the political science discipline (Duff and McCamant, 1968; Hurwiz, 1973; Ake, 1975). But a conceptual understanding of stability seems faulty. Let's take an example from Northeast Asia. For some, the region is extremely unstable due to North Korea's nuclear quest and/or a newly emerging hegemonic rivalry between the Uuited States and China. For others, East Asia in general and Northeast Asia in particular are unusually stable because of the prudent and patient security management by the regional states (Solingen, 2007; Tonneson, 2009). Likewise, the concept of stability is over-used but under-specified and under-conceptualized.

The concept of stability in IR has been implicitly understood as a static notion that illustrates peacefulness, harmony, and absence of conflictual elements. It is then inferred that the presence of conflictual elements has been assumed to mean instability *per se* in a political system (Kaplan, 1957). If analysts observe temporary activation of unstable elements or threats to the system, then they tend to treat them as evidence of systemic instability. Northeast Asia has been seen as one of the most unstable regions in the world because of such uncertain elements as a rising China and power transition, North Korea's nuclear ambition, historical animosity, territorial disputes, and lack of institutional templates. Structural realists have been particularly adamant about such a position. For them, stability in world politics is believed to come either from the equal distribution of power (i.e. balance of power; the equilibrium perspective) or from the condensed concentration of power (i.e. the hegemonic stability; the concentration perspective). Both, however, do not directly operationalize the concept of stability, but essentially equate it with the presence or absence of general wars among major powers.

According to structural realism, the notion of stability is consequential, not procedural. It depends on what types of distribution of power constitute the 'peacefulness' of a system. In this vein, structuralists regard the level of systemic stability as a function of polarity in the system (Powell, 1996). Waltz defines stability in terms of 'the level of peacefulness,' which is in turn a function of material polarity measures, mostly, a product of a balance of power among major powers in the world (Waltz, 1964). Thus, from a neo-realist perspective, stability is assumed to be certain equilibrium points that sustain and control destabilizing elements in the system. With such secured equilibrium, system is said to be balanced, therefore stable. From the concentration perspective, however, the international system becomes stable as long as a dominant actor sets the norms and regulations within the system. For the remaining of members in the system are assumed to follow the hegemonic leadership, as they have no material incentives to go against it, due to the preponderance of material power enjoyed by the hegemonic power.

Regardless of the contending perspectives, one may argue that a region is stable as long as it can illustrate the intrinsic capacity to avoid and manage major harms that would devastate the existing regional order. Stability as an observable phenomenon is a function of regular

behaviors conforming to the prevailing codes of conduct among the constitutive actors. In a stable system, actors should have no incentives to defect from the *status quo* but much-enhanced motives to cooperate with each other. Therefore, stability can be also a measure of cooperation among actors in a given system. In an unstable system, actors have strong inclination to defect, namely not cooperating with others but seeking to change the *status quo*. The key to understanding stability should then lie in the effective management of conflictual elements in the system. In this sense, all major actors might desire stability in a system, but they must agree on what constitutes stability (Alagappa, 2002, p. x).

Realist observers of Northeast Asian regional dynamics have been preoccupied with this stability and instability dimension. While power transition precipitate a new hegemonic rivalry between China and the United States at the systemic level, structure of finite deterrence among major actors in the region, along with suspicion and distrust emanating from the intrinsic disagreements over history, territories, and even trade, is likely to shape hostile terrain at the sub-systemic level (Kim, 1997; Tammen and Kugler, 2006; Legro, 2007). They favor the continuation of *status quo* under American hegemonic leadership, while raising concerns over China's rise. However, this line of reasoning needs to be re-examined. Notwithstanding visible signs of power transition between the United States and China in recent years, the region has not suffered from instability. Moreover, we have increasingly witnessed that newly emerging regional norms and expectations as well as cultivation of policy networks and constant dialogues among countries in the region have to some extent mitigated perennial security dilemma in the Northeast Asia. Major ideational shifts in favor of solidarity order in China, Japan, and South Korea must have also contributed to the trend (Alagappa, 1998). Of course, the idea of power balancing that would normally accompany strategic misperceptions has not vanished yet, but may be no longer dominant. A shared norm on 'regionality' that pushes for prudent and patient cooperation has become much more pronounced. Evidently, a strong but maybe still implicit sense of agreement on such ideas as aversion of war, regional stability for economic development, and the need for multilateral security cooperation has been arguably ingrained in the mental template of Northeast Asian countries (Choi, 2006a,b). Thus, excessive preoccupation with stability in terms of

continuation of American-centered regional order may not reflect an accurate reality of the new regional landscape.

4 In search of alternatives? Interests, identity, domestic political dynamics, and Asian ways of theorizing

The realist perspective, which has been dominant in accounting for regional dynamics in Northeast Asia, is still valid and rich in theoretical, empirical, and policy implications. Nevertheless, the over-emphasis on power, alliance, and regional stability led many analysts to under-specify the finer pictures of regional dynamics, resulting in the diverging gap between regional realities and the theory-based predictions for the region. Close examinations of regional interactions reveal that interests and identity have played an equally important role. Although distribution of power and the resulting external security environment essentially delimit the scope of maneuver by state actors, they do not necessarily determine and dictate their behavior. They simply serve as input variables or necessary conditions. They are perceived, processed, and ultimately translated into policy outcomes after going through tense domestic political bargaining process in which interests, identity, and domestic political dynamics are closely intermeshed.

4.1 Liberal transition and the politics of national identity

As a Norwegian scholar Stein Tonneson aptly puts, one of the greatest puzzles in East Asia in general and Northeast Asia in particular is the phenomenon of an amazingly long peace (Tonneson, 2009). Enormous conflict potential notwithstanding, the Northeast Asian region was devoid of any overt and full-scale conflicts since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Although realists could argue that this is an outcome of military deterrence based on the balance of power, newly emerging norms, interests, and formal and informal networks have played a crucial role in mitigating conflict potential and sustaining the relative long peace (He, 2004; Suh *et al.*, 2004; Katzenstein and Shiraishi, 2006; Kang, 2007). We coin this new trend as 'liberal transition', as opposed to the power transition one (Choi, 2006a,b; Solingen, 1998; Tonneson, 2009). Liberal transition projects pacification of inter-state relations through

proliferation and intensification of economic interdependence, multilateral cooperative platforms and democracies.

Whereas the realist vision is predicated on a gloomy portrayal of regional order, proponents of liberal transition project a much more optimistic outlook. According to liberal transition perspectives, Northeast Asian countries can escape from the trapping structure of the security dilemma by forming a security community as Western European countries have done. But the formation of a community of security is predicated on the satisfaction of two pre-conditions. One is the region-wide spread of the free market system, and the other is the enlargement of democratic political structures. Shared norms and values, increased economic, social, and cultural interdependence, and institutionalized cooperation can remove the fear of negative spirals of mutual suspicion, eventually leading to a stable and durable peace in the region. Such a liberalist position essentially challenges the realist premise about the structural impact of various polarities (i.e. balance of power and power transition). Commercial liberalism and democratic peace epitomize the essence of liberal transition perspective (Hass, 1964; Doyle, 1986, 1997; Rosecrance, 1986; Keohane and Nye, 1989). Strengthening economic interdependence promotes systemic gravitation towards peace-making while enabling states to increase their wealth without using forceful means. On the other hand, liberal states become more accountable for their domestic constituencies and less conducive to violent means for resolving conflictual issues. Thus, if the regional interactions gravitate towards one set of shared code of conducts, namely, *political democracies with interdependent economic relations through multilateral cooperative platforms*, then such code of conducts among states will enhance the incentives to avoid the use of military forces to settle disputes between regional states.

A reality check shows that the Northeast Asian region is far from achieving a European type of liberal transition (Choi, 2006a,b; Capannelli, and Filippini 2009). However, the concrete Northeast Asian phenomenon is a natural formation of intensified trading zone of Northeast Asia without artificial institutional designs. In 2008, the volume of NEA intra-regional trade tripled in eight years expanding to US\$ 524.6 billion in 2008 from US\$ 166.8 billion in 2000 (IMF Direction of Trade Statistics, 2009). South Korea, Japan and China have drawn their economic developments and prosperity from export-driven

outward policies. According to its proponents, however, democratization of China and North Korea, along with the introduction of market economy, can facilitate the diffusion of shared norms and values, ultimately leading to a community of security and stable peace (Moon, 2003; Kahler, 2006; Haggard and Noland, 2008). While South Korea and Taiwan have achieved a mature market economy with a high degree of democratic consolidation, Japan is a stable democracy with strong market economy. When and if China and North Korea join the liberal camp of democracy and market economy, intra-regional peace-building will be much more plausible. The expectation is that such developments can foster the rise of open regionalism and intra-regional security cooperation, further facilitating the transition to liberal peace in the region.

Such transformation will inevitably entail concurrent changes in domestic political structure. As historical experiences of South Korea and Taiwan demonstrate, capitalist economic growth is bound to melt authoritarian political templates, paving the way to expansion of civil society, the rise of the middle class, culture shifts, and ultimately democratic changes. China is full of signs of such changes. Although the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) holds a firm grip on political power, local politics in China has undergone remarkable democratic changes, especially in the Southern provinces such as Guangdong. And China is known to have more than 3 million NGOs that affect Chinese foreign and public policy. As civil society expands and activates, the Chinese government has become increasingly responsive to citizen demands (Wang, 2003). Thus, no matter how tardy and incremental, democratization in China seems to be an irreversible trend (Dicson, 1997; Friedman, 2003). North Korea will be much slower in following China's suit in sequencing of opening, reform, and democratization. But it cannot avoid the process either (Ahrens, 2007). Likewise, the spread of the free market and democracy in China and North Korea will make Northeast Asia all the more freer and safer.

Along with these domestic changes, there are other important signs of liberal transition in the region, in particular, the increasing trend toward multilateral security and economic cooperation. Deepening intra-regional economic interdependence and dense informal networks have propelled more formal economic cooperation and social and cultural exchanges among countries in the region (Katada and Solis, 2008).

Institutionalization of tripartite summit talk involving China, Japan, and South Korea, along with various joint inter-governmental efforts to foster intra-regional cooperation, underscores this trend such as the Tripartite Environmental Ministerial Meeting and the Tripartite Summit. These three powerful engines of the global economy have interlocked themselves and produced a very condensed 'natural' trading zone without much artificial arrangements that in turn is critical to each state's economic development (cite Katzenstein and Shiraishi's network power and TJ Pempel's work too). Although there is no formal mechanism to address security and peace in the region, Northeast Asian countries have been active in promoting the idea of multilateral security cooperation. The Six Party Talks, along with the ARF, are good examples in this regard. And an array of security dialog among government officials and non-governmental organizations has been instrumental in cultivating a sense of epistemic community among regional actors.

Liberal transition offers us good news, but as with power, the politics of national identity has surfaced as another hindrance to peace and stability in the region. Diffusion of liberal democracy and market economy cannot heal the past scars of colonial domination and subjugation. Shared traumatic memories have shaped opposing collective identities, which have in turn led to antagonistic forms of nationalism. Collective cognitive dissonance over the reversed Confucian order and subsequently changed status are seen as the primary sources of Northeast Asian instability. Such collective identity has made the structure of finite deterrence an integral part of conflict system in Northeast Asia. When and if the overlay of the Cold War is completely lifted, new patterns of bilateral suspicion and rivalry are likely to ensue, complicating the process of peace building. For students of constructivism, identity, rather than power and interests, is a more reliable predictor for strategic interactions among countries in the region. Identity-driven regional politics, as manifested through the revival of right-wing nationalism and ramifications in foreign and national security policies, is likely to make Northeast Asia more unstable than before (Lind, 2008; Moon and Suh, 2008). For example, one may argue that preexisting antagonistic memory has been causing spirals of persistent suspicions manifested in an arms race and security dilemma between China and Japan (Christensen, 1999, 2000). Violent nationalist outrage in China and South Korea in 2005 over the issues of then prime minister Koizumi's tribute to the Yasukuni Shrine and amendment of Japan's middle school

textbooks also presents a vivid testimonial to profound impacts of collective memory of past history and national identity on foreign policy. While China and South Korea have maintained an amicable relationship since diplomatic normalization in 1991, a recent dispute over the Koguryo historiography symbolizes a delicate dimension of Northeast Asian regional dynamics from the identity perspective (Moon and Li, 2008; Chung, 2009). Likewise, historical memory and the politics of national identity would generate negative perceptions with intrinsic mistrust, which would become an impediment to forming a stable regional order (Manning and Stem, 1994; Duffield, 2008).

4.2 Perception, domestic politics, and regional interactions

What should be kept in mind is that collective memory of past history and national identity tend to remain dormant unless they are misused or abused for domestic political purpose. For instance, neither realist nor liberal perspectives could offer an adequate explanation for the recent anomalous behavior of Japan. At the risk of international isolation and defamation, Koizumi and Abe pursued a hard-line nationalist foreign policy on neighboring countries by proposing a coalition of democracies against China, undertaking tough sanctions on North Korea, claiming territorial sovereignty over Dokdo, paying tribute to the Yasukuni Shrine, and whitewashing Japan's past colonial injustices, such as the issue of comfort women. Such policy behavior was not a response to changes in the external environment in Northeast Asia, but a calculated move to win domestic political support by appealing to national populist sentiments. Harsh policy reactions to Japan by China and South Korea were also driven by domestic political considerations. The same can be said of the new Hatoyama cabinet that has been taking a foreign policy initiative based on 'anything but Liberal Democratic Party.' Its assertive efforts to resolve history issues, seek a more balanced diplomacy between China and the United States, and renew Asian diplomacy, while hesitating to accommodate American demands on its Okinawa military base, reveal not only the perception and preferences of political leadership, but also those of domestic political constituents.

China's foreign policy behavior also seems to be dictated more by domestic political and economic factors than by strategic calculus with the outside world. The China Community Party leadership's emphasis

on peaceful rise underscores this point par excellence. The sheer size of China, its economic vitality, impressive military build-up, and the world economy's increasing dependence on it have bred the outside fear of China threat. The 'peaceful rise' thesis was nothing but a move to defuse the China threat and a commitment to steer economic development in an atmosphere of internal harmony and external peace by managing negative consequences of opening and reform such as severe energy and resource shortage, environmental degradation, and economic, social, and regional polarization (Zheng, 2005 and 2006; Moon 2009). Although China is characterized by an authoritarian regime, to its political leadership, foreign policy is increasingly being seen as a tool for enhancing domestic political legitimacy and public support.

South Korea seems no different from China and Japan. The change of government from Roh Moo-hyun to Lee Myung-bak accompanied a drastic policy shift. Assertive engagement with North Korea, balanced diplomacy between China and the United States, and the primacy of multilateral approach, especially in favor of Northeast Asian community building under the Roh government was replaced by isolation and containment of North Korea, the ultimate emphasis on the South Korean–US alliance, and the pursuit of new Asian initiative based on bilateralism under the Lee government. The drastic discontinuity stems from not only President Lee's conservative policy preference, but also his domestic political support base. Lee won the presidential election on the conservative policy platform and is obliged to satisfy his conservative constituents. Likewise, South Korea's foreign policy behavior can be explained more by domestic factors than by external and structural parameters.

Thus, it seems quite difficult to understand Northeast Asian countries' foreign policy behavior without elucidating leadership perception and preference as well as domestic political dynamics. In a similar vein, the goals and preferences of Northeast Asian states profoundly affect patterns of regional interactions. For example, Northeast Asian countries are export-oriented states, which prefer more stable and predictable external environments and understand the necessity of reducing the probability of internal and external conflicts (Solingen, 1998). And their leaders have linked political legitimacy to economic development as well as national security (Amsden, 1989; Haggard and Kaufman, 1995). States create, or have preferences for, a particular regional order, and work to achieve them.

Viewed from this, regional orders can be seen as products of layers of multiple interactions by deliberately chosen strategies of countries in the region which are in turn shaped by the interplay of leadership perception and preference and domestic political coalition building. Divergent positions on intra-regional FTA offer us an interesting story in this regard. Of three Northeast Asian countries, China is known to be a late comer in free market economy and to be mercantile. But China is most aggressive in pushing for the Northeast Asian FTA, whereas Japan, the most advanced among the three, has been hesitant to enter FTA with China and/or South Korea. South Korea has been in-between. Why such divergent posture? It has something to do with domestic political calculus. Japanese political leadership cannot risk losing political support from farmers' group by opening up agricultural market, whereas China has everything to gain. For South Korea, such intra-regional FTA would bring about a mixed outcome. Likewise, foreign policy behaviors of Northeast Asian countries are dictated by the internal logic of salience of gain.

4.3 'Asianizing' IR theory?

The field of IR in Northeast Asian countries has been profoundly influenced by Western, especially American, intellectual tradition. A majority of leading IR scholars in China, Japan, and South Korea are American educated, who served as the transmission belt of American theories, empirical works, and even policy (Choi, 2008). (Neo-)realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism constitute popular discourses in this part of the world, all of which have been extensively applied to Northeast Asian reality (Acharya and Buzan, 2007).[3]

With China's rising, however, some scholars have been trying to develop an endogenous IR theory, mostly relying on China's diplomatic history with neighboring East Asian countries. They seemed to find an answer in the model of the 'tribute system' and Chinese world order, which was ironically developed by an American sinologist, John King Fairbank (1968). The Fairbank's model is based on three inter-related concepts: sinocentrism, hierarchical order based on tribute and suzerainty, and peace and stability. This model was later further elaborated

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3   See the special issue of International Relations of the Asia Pacific, 2007 on 'Why is there no non-Western IR theory: Refection on and From Asia'.

into the 'Tianxia' or 'Huayi (civilized Chinese vs. uncivilized peripheral barbarians)' order in which the Chinese emperor ruled the 'tianxia', and China was at its center to govern barbarians, while the barbarians were at the China's periphery to serve China (Zhang, 2010).

This China-centric hierarchical model is being favored by a growing number of Chinese scholars. For example, Yaqing Qin, an influential IR theorist at the Chinese Foreign Affairs University, argues that China could not have its own IR theory because of three reasons: the unconsciousness of 'international-ness' in the traditional Chinese worldview, the dominance of the Western IR discourse in the Chinese academic community, and the absence of a consistent theoretical core in the Chinese IR research. And Qin suggests the Tianxia worldview and the tribute system in Chinese history as one of the promising research site from which a Chinese theory of IR theory can be developed (Qin, 2007). Even Western IR scholars such as David Kang see the tribute system and China-centered hierarchical order as a viable alternative to the future regional order (Kang, 2003 and 2007). A more ambitious attempt was recently made by Tingyang Zhao, a philosopher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Zhao develops a new concept of Tianxia from Chinese classics, not from diplomatic history, while rejecting the traditional one based on Chinese empire. His Tianxia (All-under-Heaven) is characterized by a utopian world governance in which all the nations and people are equal and freely communicate and accept each other's culture and identity. And Zhao believes the ancient Chinese theory of Tianxia which he helps reconstruct is the best philosophy for world governance where there is no empire, no hierarchy, no central government, and therefore no exploitation and repression (Zhao, 2006; Zhang, 2010).

But the 'Asianizing' or 'Chinanizing' IR theory encounters two major problems. One is the theoretical soundness of the Chinese IR theory, be it the tribute system or the Tianxia order. Feng Zhang (2009) argues that neither the tribute system nor the Tianxia order is 'Chinese' in origin. They were Western inventions in the 19th century, which were translated back into Chinese as chaogo tixi (tribute system). They are not only faulty in historical facts, but also limited in their utility in practical applications. They are nothing but a modern intellectual construct that needs refining or being abandoned (Zhang, 2009). Zhang (2010) also raises a critical question on Zhao's Tianxia theory. Although Zhao's

theory is fresh and authentic, it is too utopian to be a generalizable theory. The other is a more profound challenge raised by Xuetong Yan at the Tsinghua University. Yan rejects the idea of establishing Chinese IR theory or school because IR theories are not by nature universal. He argues that the role of Chinese IR scholars is to enrich the current Western IR theories with traditional Chinese history, philosophy, and political thought. Yan and his colleagues at the Tsinghua University have undertaken an extensive joint research to rediscover and reevaluate Chinese ancient political thoughts from contemporary Western IR theories (Yan and Xu, 2009).

Similar debates have been taking place in Japan and South Korea. For example, the IR community in Korea illustrates how a non-Western IR community has tried to build up its own academic identity vis-a-vis the West—which has dominated the field—and mend the perpetual gap between scientific universalism and exceptionalism under the self-imposed motto of creating 'distinctively Korean IR theories'.[4] This has been done by critically reflecting on the utility of Western IR theories when applied to Korea's IR experience, and by constructing its own IR theories to explain Korea's unique history (Choi, 2008). Despite some normative claims on the development of endogenous IR theory, there is still a long way to go (Choi, 2008). Nevertheless, there were some noticeably innovative approaches; Akihiko Tanaka's application of the European model of new medievalism to the region has drawn attention (Tanaka, 1996). All in all, theoretical challenges still remain ahead, and the roadmap for Asianizing IR theories must be able to communicate with the rest of the IR academic communities elsewhere while projecting the analytical reality of Northeast Asia regional order.

5 Conclusion

Despite a recent surge in the study of Northeast Asian regional dynamics by the mainstream IR scholars, the existing body of literature reveals several drawbacks and limits. First, the concept of a Northeast Asian region has not been clearly defined, causing a major analytical confusion. The most serious problem is the interchangeable use of East Asia

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4 See the special issue of *Korean Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 46, special edition (2007) in Korean.

and Northeast Asia. Geographically speaking, Northeast Asia is a subset of East Asia, but cannot be used interchangeably. Second, a *status quo*-bias directs most literature to focus on whether the United States can maintain its hegemonic leadership role in Northeast Asia in the face of China's rise. A continuing American hegemonic presence might not be the Northeast Asian destiny and new avenues need to be deliberated on. The existing literature suffers from a narrow ontological margin by failing to pay attention to the dynamics of change, new horizons of regional cooperation and integration, and national identities. Third, the majority of IR literature on Northeast Asia adopts a realist perspective in accounting for regional dynamics, and subsequently overemphasizes structural parameters resulting from new power configurations, while neglecting individual states' perception and domestic political processes.

What implications can we draw from this discussion? Contextual sensitivity matters. The definition of a region can vary by country. For example, Koreans pay a greater attention to Northeast Asia, whereas Japan is much more concerned with an East Asia comprising Northeast and Southeast Asia. In contrast, China and the United States are also interested in the entire region of Asia. Likewise, the geographic boundary of each country tends to define its IR scholars' regional focus of research. Thus, it is important that researchers should specify their regional focus in a more precise manner. Preoccupation with American hegemonic role and its continuation needs to be reconsidered, since such preoccupation could intentionally distort the empirical reality of Northeast Asia. A growing number of scholars have been paying attention to alternative futures of Asia without America (Zakaria, 1998, 2008). We believe this is a positive development. The future of Asia can never be monolithic or linear. The decline of the United States, China's rise, Japan's transformation into a normal state, Korean unification, India's new power venture into Asia, and Russia's return to the Far East must be considered potential factors that can profoundly reshape the geo-political and geo-economic foundation of Asia in general and Northeast Asia in particular. The ontological purview must be expanded to include change and stability, multi-polarity and uni-polarity, traditional and non-traditional security agendas, convergence and divergence in interests and norms, and shifting national identities as relevant research agendas.

Power and its distribution are still relevant explanatory variables for Northeast Asian regional dynamics. But we need to go beyond them. In

the Northeast Asian context, national identities, deeply embedded in the collective memory of the past, matters. As much as states are concerned with the present and future aspects of their national interests, they are not also free from the past history that generates behavioral and cognitive continuity into the present. Collective memory carries on. Constructivists and political psychologists generally account for the importance of memory and emotion as crucial parts in or the whole of collective identity. Identity illuminated by historical memory is as important as power and interest in shaping and sustaining regional order. It is also an important factor of the region in forging shared values and common goals vital to more stable and progressive regional order. However, we are not sure of the impact and directionality of change that the rise of emotion by conflicting memories of each regional state has on regional and international interactions. But one thing is certain: memory and politics are inseparable.

In politics, history is essentially a narrative that allows for the creation of a powerful group identification, which in turn serves as a critical element in the making of national identity. History provides the raw materials from which political mechanisms can be created by leaders for dividing or uniting states for political purposes. Therefore, how the state goes about representing and interpreting history may be political, as well as the psychological decisions made by state elites who are motivated by current political circumstances. Different historical representations on the same temporal domain influence one nation's perception of its potential ally and enemy. Pre-existing emotions derived from past relationships may essentially affect states' formulation of internal and external balancing strategies (Crawford, 2000). All in all, history as collective memory is a consequence of subjective representations and recognitions of the past by the present generations. E.H. Carr points out, 'we can view the past, and achieve our understanding of the past only through the eyes of the present' (Carr, 1962). From this perspective, history is re-created; history as a memory has to be remembered and stored in people's cognition in order for it to have any impacts on ones' behavior. Thus, the contextual circumstances and ontology of people will generate different representations of the past (Sylvan and Thorson, 1992). How and what is remembered in relation to the current circumstance simply remain an empirical question that requires rigorous investigation through microfoundation analysis (Herrmann, 1988).

In this vein, national interest and national identity continue to be powerful forces throughout Northeast Asia. The regional interconnectivity in material and ideational realms essentially constitutes and shapes the unfolding characters of regional interactions. This has been most vividly observed in Northeast Asia. Conflicting historical memories and their behavioral manifestations in today's Northeast are the powerful factor hindering the regional states from conspicuously promoting intra-regional cooperation although, for the period leading up to 2001 from the end of the Cold War, the regional states have made quite impressive efforts to overcome historical disputes by concentrating more on tangible issues.

One implication is that, as the regional interaction becomes more multilayered, compounding complicated economic and social contact at governmental and non-governmental levels, unresolved memory issues among regional states may receive more political and media attention, which may be framed as hindering regional states from maintaining progressive and stable regional order-making. However, the three states of Northeast Asia may have fewer incentives to permit regional interaction, which has so far been very beneficial and productive, hemmed in by what the regional leaders may perceive as non-solvable issues. Bilateral government-to-government cooperation may slow down. But it does not mean that it will be reversed. In other words, non-governmental and market-driven interactions will sustain the cooperative regional order. As Northeast Asian states commonly realize the necessity of maintaining regional stability for their own national interest, they may not want the memory issue to dominate the regional political agendas. Likewise, identity, interest, and domestic politics are intertwined. Future interest may push even as past memory also pulls. When memory meets interest, states are cognitively tied to their memory of subjugation and/or domination, thereby casting doubt on the intentions of other regional states and beginning to be hostile and antagonistic. Thus, identity, interests, perception, and domestic politics should be new epistemological angles guiding our research on the external behavior of regional actors.

Finally, should or can we develop alternative localized perspectives that transcend Western IR paradigms? We are quite skeptical of this possibility and underlying normative claim. The master variables so far suggested such as power, interests, norms, and identity have universal appeals that can be effectively applied to the analysis of Northeast Asian

countries' external behavior. No matter how idiosyncratic these countries might be, their behavior cannot go beyond the analytical nets of power, interests, norms, and identity. Thus, it seems implausible to invent Asian paradigms of IR that defy Western ones. Nevertheless, we need to adopt a more pluralistic epistemological stance, to fine tune existing Western theories to fit the Northeast Asian regional context, and to generate richer empirical works from Northeast Asian sources.

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