Hierarchy and the role of the United States in the East Asian security order

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Abstract

To construct a coherent account of East Asia's evolving security order, this article treats the United States not as an extra-regional actor, but as the central force in constituting regional stability and order. It proposes that there is a layered regional hierarchy in East Asia, led by the United States, with China, Japan, and India constituting layers underneath its dominance. The major patterns of equilibrium and turbulence in the region since 1945 can be explained by the relative stability of the US position at the top of the regional hierarchy, with periods of greatest insecurity being correlated with greatest uncertainty over the American commitment to managing regional order. Furthermore, relationships of hierarchical assurance and hierarchical deference help to explain critical puzzles about the regional order in the post-Cold War era.

1 Introduction

Over the last 15 years, the East Asia security order has undergone significant development, underpinned by the rise of China and new strategic activism on the part of other major regional powers like Japan and India, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). China has increasingly become the central component of the regional order-building process, both

because of its growing economic and military strengths and as a result of its rising political and institutional influence. Because China's new position has been established in what is the world's wealthiest and arguably its most dynamic region, that country has arguably become the United States' most likely 'peer competitor' for the remainder of this century. How wider the US interests are interjected into this geopolitically vital region and juxtaposed against China's expanding national interests, and how other regional states respond to these changing dynamics will determine the security order in East Asia, and critically affect the global security environment.

Although it is generally accepted that the United States plays a critical role in East Asian security, there is no agreement on how the centrality of its position intersects with regional strategic impulses. Because they approach East Asian security with the primary purpose of explicating or recommending US regional strategy, US-centric analysts necessarily privilege Washington's regional position, and are inclined to see the US regional policies as mainly the regional manifestation of US national and global interests (Ikenberry and Mastanduno, 2003; Suh *et al.*, 2004). In contrast, scholars working from a region-centric perspective stress the importance of 'indigenous' security dynamics, and argue that while the United States is dominant in the region, it is not hegemonic, because it cannot manage security in Asia by itself (Mastanduno, 2003; Acharya and Tan, 2003). While the latter contention is true, it still does not comprise a satisfactory account for how the preponderance of United States interacts with regional forces to define and shape regional security. To better understand these processes, this paper investigates the following questions: What is the significance of US structural power in East Asia? Why do so many other regional powers choose to cooperate and align with the United States, and support its national strategy and regional policies? How and to what extent is regional order predicated upon the United States' role and position?

This paper accepts the cardinal assumption that East Asian security politics, and China's part in determining it, will constitute an increasingly central aspect of international security. Yet, the contemporary regional order is constituted (not merely shaped or defined) by the strategic interests and commitments of the United States, which is at once a global superpower and the largest power in East Asia. Notwithstanding its difficulties in Iraq, the United States still projects dominant material and ideational power attributes in East Asia. It has a defining military presence there, in the form of forward military deployment and bilateral alliances. It remains a top trading partner and investor for all the countries in the region. It wields very significant normative influence throughout the Asia-Pacific in terms of diplomacy, education, and popular culture. Its technological prowess remains unparalleled across the board. Although China and other Asian actors are working hard to narrow

the gap in these sectors, the sheer scale and dynamism underwriting American primacy will not be surpassed over the near-term.

In order to overcome such dichotomies and to investigate how the US dominance constitutes regional order in East Asia, the following analysis is organized in three sections. The first section addresses the question of how the US dominance in East Asia is best conceptualized. It argues that the nature of American dominance in East Asia, like US global preponderance, is neither imperial nor hegemonic. On the one hand, there is relative acceptance of (or at least lack of sustained direct challenge to) US preponderance; on the other hand, the United States relies significantly on cooperation from other states to maintain its power. Instead, the US dominance in East Asia should be understood as a form of hierarchy. In its basic sense, hierarchy refers to unequal relations among states. Recent International Relations scholarship has focused on hegemony or empire when thinking about hierarchy, but international hierarchies also include a wide range of relationships of subordination and superordination within the anarchical state system. This first section elucidates the key elements of the structure and social processes that constitute the latter types of hierarchical systems, concentrating on those with a preponderant power such as the United States in East Asia.

The second section explores the empirical basis for this hierarchical interpretation of the US dominance in East Asia since 1945. It starts from the innovative conceptualization of the contemporary East Asian regional security order as a *layered* hierarchical system, with the United States at the apex, and discernible layers of other regional powers underneath it. This analysis argues that key developments in the East Asian regional security order since 1945 can be explained by the stability and instability in this regional hierarchy. They can also be understood through regional players' attempts to manage strategic shifts and to reconstitute a preferred post-war regional hierarchy. The final section examines how this formulation of the US domination within a regional hierarchy helps to explain some key puzzles in regional security dynamics in the post-Cold War period, especially current under-balancing against both the United States and China.

This article finds that while the United States has consistently constituted regional order, many East Asian security actors have also sought to leverage on American power to maximize their own interests and to influence the development of regional security architecture, identity, and order. The conceptual framework used here builds on David Kang's thesis that there is a historical tradition of hierarchical political relations in East Asia, centered upon China (Kang, 2003). Although Kang concentrates on the central premise that the region is now more comfortable with deferring to a strong China than others might think, I argue that this hierarchical propensity is a more general tendency among states in the East Asian security complex. In recent history,

when China has been relatively weak, this tradition was transposed into a context of US dominance after the Second World War, with key states in East Asia accepting a US-centric regional hierarchical order. The conundrum today is how to reshape regional order without the United States, China, and potentially other high-ranked regional powers resorting to hegemonic war in order to re-establish a new hierarchy of power and prestige (Gilpin, 1981).

2 Conceptualizing hierarchy

The international system is characterized by inequalities and differentiation. While the assumption of anarchy suggests that states are 'like units' (Waltz, 1979), they are in fact differentiated according to functions, specializations, and degrees of authority. These differentiations and inequalities lead to super-ordination and subordination among states – patterns and relations that should be understood as hierarchies. In contrast to Kenneth Waltz's represen-tation of anarchy and hierarchy as dichotomous characterizations based on the presence or absence of overarching authority, international hierarchies refer to the range of inequalities and differentiation in authority relations in the international system.[1] An anarchical system then, can and usually does, contain systems and relations of hierarchy. At the extreme end of the scale, hegemony or empire is characterized by the existence of one super-ordinate authority in a unipolar system – this is the understanding of a hierarchical system in neo-realist models. At the other end of the scale is an anarchic, multipolar system with diffused coordinate authority (Donnelly, 2006). Between these extremes, however, there is a spectrum of possible international orders with varying degrees of hierarchy: these include preponderant but not imperial power, informal empires, great power concerts, security communities, and a range of semi-sovereign relationships (Buzan et al., 1993; Wendt and Friedheim, 1996; Clark, 1977).

The focus in this paper is on international systems made up of sovereign states, with one preponderant power but also a variety of smaller significant powers. The material dimension of such a hierarchical system may map directly from the distribution of power or capabilities, since these major powers are likely to be determined basically by their economic and military resources. Importantly though, such a system is characterized by a layered rank order of major states, rather than by polarity, which only takes into account the number of preponderant states. A layered rank order is more reflective of the reality of inequalities among states: regional and international orders are seldom simply two-layered and even if there is one predominant

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1   For the mainstream definition of 'hierarchy' in the International Relations literature as a state system in which there is no overarching central authority, see Waltz (1979), Chapter 5.

power, there are usually a number of other states less powerful than the domi-nant, but significantly more powerful than others (Buzan and Waever, 2003; Lemke, 2002). As the next section demonstrates in the East Asian context, such systems exhibit complex, multiple unequal relations and hierarchies among states; conflict might arise from jostling across the layers of a hierarchy and not just at the top, or from a clash between two hierarchies, or from a major state's defection to another hierarchy.

The key difference engendered by a move away from the anarchy assump-tions of structural realism is the need to analyze the ideational dimensions of the international order. Ideational aspects are particularly important to the type of layered rank order hierarchy that is examined here that is constituted and reproduced in relations of sub- and super-ordination among states. Subordinate relationships stem in part from dependencies that arise from inequalities, be they defense or economic dependencies. But they are also created and maintained by 'a bargain between the ruler and the ruled pre-mised on the former's provision of a social order of value sufficient to offset the latter's loss of freedom' (Lake, 2007). David Lake's analysis of hierarchy as differential authority relationships between a dominant state and lesser states highlights that there is a diffused pattern of hierarchical relations in the inter-national system, which may be better understood if we draw upon the analogy of domestic politics to elucidate the elements of social contracting between dominant and subordinate states.

One such social contract interpretation of hierarchical international relations is provided by John Ikenberry in his thesis of how victorious states have chosen to limit their own power to make it acceptable to other states. The victorious state creates institutions that credibly bind them to strategic restraint and reassure weaker states, in exchange for the latter's subscription to an international order led by the former (Ikenberry, 2001). Understanding hierarchical relations as social contracts highlight two critical points: first, these relationships are consensual in that the dominant state has no authority outside of the subordinate states' acknowledgement of their obligation to comply. In other words, hierarchy is 'a relationship between two (or more) actors whereby one is entitled to command and the other is obligated to obey, and the relationship is recognized as right and legitimate by each' (Hobson and Sharman, 2005). This entails the second point: hierarchical social compacts cannot be understood without analysis of the collective norms and beliefs that underpin the legitimacy of such relations. In this paper, we are particularly interested in the mutually constituted understandings of characteristics and norms that enable and sustain rank ordering within the hierarchy.

For the layered hierarchy studied here, two sets of ideational processes and norm-formation are important: first, the social identity formation processes

and social-ordering principles that constitute the identities and rankings of great power states; and second, the modes of social assurance and deference through which the hierarchical order is maintained.

If we accept that 'great powers are a socially constituted type of actor playing a particular (unequal) role in international society' (Donnelly, 2006, p. 153) then 'a state is defined as a great power to the extent that it conforms to the social discourse that defines great power status at any particular time' (Hobson and Sharman, 2005, p. 87) Because the criteria for great power status change over time, it is difficult to derive international generalizations in unspecified time frames. However, it is possible to suggest the following basic criteria for great power status in East Asia in the post-Cold War period:

1. The ability to make war and peace: a great power is a state that has demonstrated specific ability to initiate or engage in major warfare in the region, that has been party to and/or mediated and guaranteed peace settlements, and that is involved in managing major existing regional conflicts;[2]
2. Provider of security: it deploys military resources in the region and sustains significant alliances and military relationships with regional states that allow it to guarantee the security of individual states against aggression, and common security including sea lanes and air space;
3. Generator of wealth: it plays a central role in the economic order, providing market access, investment, production, as well as under-writing the core economic institutions;[3] and
4. It enjoys unequal representation in regional institutions and processes of rule-making;[4] and
5. It is recognized as such by other states in the region, at least in rhetorical and diplomatic terms (Bull, ch. 9).

A great power's specific rank in the hierarchy depends on the relative degree to which it possesses and is seen to possess, these attributes. The great power rank order is also dependent upon affinity – in terms of ideology, governance structures, language, and culture – with the dominant state at the top of the hierarchy (Kang, 2003; Neumann, 2008).

While a hierarchical system is constituted by great powers and their rank order, the maintenance and reproduction of such an order depends on social processes. Here, I posit that a hierarchical international order is sustained by hierarchical assurance on the part of the dominant state, and hierarchical deference on the part of subordinate states.

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2   This regulative function is best explored in the literature about European great powers – see, for instance, Dunn (1929) and Simpson (2004).

3   This derives from the hegemonic stability theory proposed by Gilpin (1981).

4   For a discussion of 'institutional power', see Barnett and Duvall (2005).

Hierarchical assurance by the dominant state consists of:

1. The stable provision of public goods, chiefly in the security and economic realms;
2. The credible demonstration of benignity, through (i) the assurance to other states that it has 'no territorial or overweening ambitions' (Kang, 2003, p. 166); (ii) institutionalized self-restraint; and (iii) long-term security and economic commitments to the region;
3. The provision of normative leadership, in the form of a socio-economic model and/or political ideology that other states should emulate and identify with; and
4. The provision of a mechanism for maintaining order, including ensuring means of assimilating new great powers to the hierarchy and readjusting the relative positions in the hierarchy in response to strategic changes.

In return, hierarchical deference from subordinate states consists of:

1. Acquiescence and lack of opposition or challenge to the dominant state's position;
2. Greater prioritization of their relationship with the dominant power than with any other great power;
3. Accommodation to the dominant power's security imperatives;
4. Adoption of policies to reinforce the dominant state's primary position;
5. Ideological affinity with the dominate state and imitation of its governance and social-cultural model; and
6. Support for the maintenance of the hierarchical order, including the rank order.

Because hierarchical relations depend upon the consent of the subordinates, hierarchical deference can often be more a result of choice than simple path-dependency. For instance, support for the primary state may be costly and may be based on normative (the logic of appropriateness that accompanies belief in legitimacy) rather than rationalist (for instance, the cost–benefit calculations based on the relative material strength that lead to bandwagoning (Schweller, 2006)) motivations. In a layered hierarchy, deference from the other major powers ranked below the dominant state is most costly, as they might find themselves in a position of sufficient strength or status to challenge the dominant state or another state ranked above them, and so improve their own ranking. At the same time, smaller subordinate states may also adopt selective alignment and engagement policies with secondary great powers within the hierarchy to help maintain regional order.

The centrality of these mutual processes of assurance and deference means that the stability of a hierarchical order is fundamentally related to a collective sense of certainty about the leadership and order of the hierarchy.

This certainty is rooted in a combination of material calculations – smaller states' assurance that the expected costs of the dominant state conquering them would be higher than the benefits – and ideational convictions – the sense of legitimacy, derived from shared values and norms that accompanies the super-ordinate state's authority in the social order. The empirical analysis in the next section shows that regional stability in East Asia in the post-Second World War years can be correlated to the degree of collective certainty about the US-led regional hierarchy. East Asian stability and instability has been determined by U.S. assurances, self-confidence, and commitment to maintaining its primary position in the regional hierarchy; the perceptions and confidence of regional states about US commitment; and the reactions of subordinate states in the region to the varied challengers to the regional hierarchical order.

3 Hierarchy and the United States in East Asia after 1945

> The U.S.' involvement has had a profound impact on [the] history of East Asia's development. America maintained an 'open-door' to China, twice transformed Japan, and spilt blood to hold the line against aggression and communism. The U.S. constructed and maintained the post-World War II international order that allowed East Asia to flourish. America's victory in the Cold War and its technology driving the new economy are continued influences. In the strategic sense, therefore, the U.S. is very much a part of East Asia. It has been, and still is, a positive force for stability and prosperity.[5]

The United States has been indisputably the preponderant power in East Asia since 1945. Throughout much of post-war Asia, it has largely been acknowledged as the central, or dominant, state with no local territorial ambitions. Washington's key allies which institutionalize this benign view through their defense treaties, but unallied countries such as those in Southeast Asia, and, more recently India, also see it as an honest broker and offshore balancer (Goh, 2000; Layne, 1997). The communist countries in the region, which have experienced containment, subversion, and invasion by US forces, have good reason to disagree. But even China has accepted the idea of the United States as a stabilizing force in the region since the 1970s.[6] Certainly, this is less

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5 Then-Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, keynote address to U.S.-ASEAN Business Council annual dinner, Washington DC, reprinted in *The Straits Times*, 15 June 2001.

6 One of the key themes that President Richard Nixon learnt from his landmark visit to China in February 1972 was that the Chinese leaders were deeply worried about the threat of resurgent Japanese militarism, and appreciated the U.S. military presence in the region for the restraining effect it had on its Japanese ally. See Goh (2004). For a discussion about the contemporary Chinese accommodation to U.S. predominance in the region, see Goh (2005a).

controversial a claim than that of other scholars who have argued for such a dominant position for China (Acharya, 2003/04). The United States has also been intimately involved in key regional conflicts in East Asia after 1945. It intervened crucially on the side of the Allied powers to win the war, and was a core player in the peace settlement for the Pacific theatre, especially in the occupation and rehabilitation of Japan. During the Cold War, Washington intervened in hot wars and led in containing communism, and after the Cold War, it has been critical in managing the main regional conflicts on the Korean Peninsula and across the Taiwan Straits.[7] Indirectly, it has provided a regional security umbrella, which may have dampened or limited the regional effects of other bilateral or domestic conflicts, such as the South China Sea territorial disputes.[8] The United States has also earned it dominant position at the top of the East Asian hierarchy because of its critical economic role, in providing vital market access to Japan and the other Asian 'tiger' economies for their remarkable development, and in continuing to provide significant investments to the region. Its socio-economic and political model has become even more attractive in the region after the dissolution of the Soviet model at end of the Cold War. In every way, the United States is the preponderant power and gatekeeper of the great power club.

Furthermore, the US-led hierarchy in East Asia since 1945 reflects our expectations of regional strategic behavioral in such an order. First, the centrality of acquiescence by subordinate states is clear: most of the main Asian states, with the partial exception of China, are either US allies or are cultivating closer security relations with Washington. As discussed below, even China today is not challenging but accommodating the interests of United States in the region. Second, the East Asian security order has been most unstable when the United States' commitment to the region and thus its position at the top of the hierarchy was uncertain and/or challenged.

The following analysis traces the East Asian security order through three periods after the Second World War. In the 1945–70 period, the United States consolidated its post-war dominance in the region and established a hierarchy of non-Communist bulwark states, and regional order was stable in spite of Communist challenges. After 1970, as China and the Soviet Union exerted more regional influence in the wake of the post-Vietnam American drawdown, the US preponderance was challenged and the regional hierarchical order destabilized as subordinate powers jostled for position and adopted a range of balancing and insurance policies. After the end of the Cold War, Asia's

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7 This conflict management element is one that Kang mentions, but does not develop, for the China case.

8 This is an indirect deterrence effect only, as the U.S. has specifically distanced itself from involvement in the South China Sea territorial disputes.

security order has been evolving again, with smaller states trying to bolster the US preponderance while facilitating the reconstituting of a hierarchical order that includes China, Japan, and India. The East Asian hierarchy is notable for its enduring layered nature. Within this US-dominated order, Japan has traditionally held the second-highest rank because of its alliance and strategic affinity with the United States, but after 1972, China entered the top ranks of this hierarchy and increasingly laid claims to the second position. During the Cold War, a looser Soviet-led hierarchical system did exist alongside the US-led hierarchy, but this disintegrated after 1972 and disappeared after 1989. In the post-Cold War period, the main challenge appears to be how to contain the incipient competition for the primary position in this hierarchy between the United States and China, but also how to manage potential contests over hierarchical rank between Japan, India, and China.

3.1 Consolidating U.S. preponderance, 1945–1970

After the Second World War, the United States emerged as the world's greatest power: the size of its economy was three times that of Russia and more than five times that of Britain after the war; it held two-thirds of the world's gold reserves and three-quarters of its invested capital, and more than half the world's manufacturing capacity (Leffler, 1992). This *status quo* preponderance was, however, perceived to have been threatened by the USSR's ascension to superpower status, especially in terms of rising Soviet military influence in Eastern Europe and Northeast Asia. While post-war American efforts to rally against Soviet geopolitical aspirations were concentrated in Europe and the Northern Tier, it was the Korean War that marked the beginning of the use of military force to counter communist expansion on a global scale.[9] The American decision to cross the 38th parallel was an attempt to secure preponderant power in East Asia, and establish a global containment posture against Moscow. China's entry into the Korean War launched its own quest to become a great power, and was, in American eyes, a corollary to Soviet expansionist aims to establish international communist domination and push back the US power from key geostrategic strong points on the Eurasian continent.

The Korean War decisively opened up Asia as an enduring theatre of the Cold War, in which future American policy calculations would have to take into account China as well as the Soviet Union. Because of its dominant power, the United States was able to throw a security cordon around China to contain Washington's growing fear of Asian revolution influenced by Chinese communists. This entailed primarily recognition and a commitment to the defense of the Republic of China on Taiwan, and an early end to the

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9   Gaddis argues that the Korean War was the real turning point which launched the Cold War as global containment of international communist domination. See Gaddis (1974).

occupation of Japan, a peace and security treaty granting American forces' extensive base rights in the post-Occupation period, and American sponsorship of Japanese re-development. Washington also signed security pacts with the Philippines, New Zealand, and Australia, and entered into defensive treaties with the Republic of Korea (1953) and Taiwan (1954). The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization was also created (in late 1954) and was comprised of non-communist states within and outside the Asian region. Moreover, the United States placed restrictions on European and Japanese economic relations with China (Schaller, 1985).

In these ways, the US strategy in the 1950s constituted the regional order at a time of post-war weakness of established East Asian states and decolonization of new states. The US resources, actions, and relationships helped establish a hierarchy with the United States firmly at the top. Its role in ending the Pacific war had already guaranteed it a vital role in post-war regional reconstruction, but by entering the Korean War, Washington further established security priorities in Northeast Asia, identified the other important major states in the region, and which it would make friends and enemies of in the unfolding global ideological contest. Thus, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan were incorporated into the US-led hierarchy by virtue of their strategic importance, and were extended hierarchical assurance by means of US security guarantees and economic aid and access for reconstruction and development. In return, these states deferred to US preponderance and leadership by their strategic dependence and clientalism, and by gradually evolving into bastions of capitalist democracies.

In contrast, the opening of the East Asian front of the Cold War in Korea created as challengers to US preponderance and hierarchy the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, and later the Indo-Chinese states. This communist bloc was a competing regional hierarchy of sorts, but one that was less defined because of the lack of clarity about rank ordering within the region, and thus continually subject to internal conflict and external disruption.[10] Yet, American dominance in East Asia was sustained in this period: even though there were many conflicts, the regional order was relatively stable because US commitment to sustaining its hierarchical preponderance was clear. This was seen especially in the offshore islands crises in the late 1950s, during which Chinese claims over islands near Taiwan met with little or no Soviet support, and the main incentive for Chinese restraint was the asymmetrical nuclear capability possessed by the United States (Chang, 1990). In the 1960s, the United States continued its policy of active containment in East Asia in the form of growing intervention in the Vietnam conflict, culminating in air

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10   The main problem was, of course, the Sino-Soviet ideological and geopolitical conflict. See, for instance, Westad (1998).

strikes and a land invasion in 1965. The application of this grand strategy to preserve the US regional and global preponderance to Vietnam in the 1960s, however, revealed new constraints of American power in terms of the limits of US public tolerance for protracted and destructive warfare in a distant land against an ideological enemy.

3.2 Hierarchical uncertainty and regional instability, 1970–90

The unwinnable war in Vietnam led to a transition period in East Asia marked by grave uncertainty about the global balance of power between the United States and USSR, and about the stability of the regional hierarchy. In his 1969 Guam Doctrine, Richard Nixon declared a scaling-down of US global aspirations. The United States was now a Pacific power with reservations; it had no intention of becoming directly involved again in any regional conflict in Asia, although it would support allies and friends with military assistance and diplomatic backing. Washington's unsuccessful and draining war in Vietnam had already undermined regional confidence in its continued willingness to shoulder the costs of regional primacy, and the Guam Doctrine was interpreted by Asian states as signaling the potential abandonment of American regional leadership all together. This acute uncertainty about the US position at the top of the regional hierarchy led to instability and war, as regional states engaged in self-help and balance of power politics more actively than at any time since the end of the Second World War.

The first significant change was that China became a much more prominent actor by being co-opted into the high levels of the US-led hierarchy. The bipolar superpower conflict underwent dramatic changes in the 1970s: the pre-existing Sino-Soviet strategic enmity intensified into a border war in 1969, and in response to the Nixon administration's overtures, China 'defected' from its alliance with the Soviet Union to a rapprochement and normalization with the US. The United States, meanwhile, sought a parallel détente with the Soviet Union. A strategic triangle thus emerged, with the United States as the pivotal player enjoying relatively good relations with the other two (Kissinger, 1977; Nixon, 1978). With the congruence between ideology and strategic affinity broken, the Cold War assumed an explicit realpolitik hue, focusing on state interests and capabilities. Within Asia though, the power competition developed along the Sino-Soviet fault-line, with the United States and China on the same side. The Sino-American rapprochement did not encourage Soviet conciliation, and instead heightened Soviet insecurity. Thus, one of the immediate Soviet reactions after the rapprochement was to encourage India to facilitate the breakup of Pakistan, a staunch ally of China. This forced the American 'tilt toward Pakistan' in 1971 in order to prevent India from destroying the Pakistani army and endangering China (Goh, 2004,

pp.185–192). The Sino-Japanese rapprochement and Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1978 further exacerbated the Soviet sense of isolation and encirclement. Moscow now saw itself as confronted in East Asia by an alliance of the most populous, most economically successful, and most powerful states, without the buffer of a friendly China to make up for the traditionally loose Soviet Far Eastern commitment (Solomon, 1982). This in turn contributed to more aggressive Soviet policy, such as the invasion of Afghanistan and the decision to support Vietnam (Yahuda, 1996). The Soviets granted Vietnam membership in COMECON and signed a formal friendship treaty with that Southeast Asian country in late 1978, which provided support for the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. China, in turn, was emboldened by its normalized relationship with the United States to attack Vietnam to 'teach it a lesson' for the Cambodian infringement (Ross, 1993).

Thus, by 1979, strategic enmities in East Asia followed the Sino-Soviet divide, which was reinforced by the breakdown of the Soviet-American détente. Without the direct intervention of the United States, this pattern of conflict remained localized, centered on Indochina and regional powers. Hanoi and Moscow had taken advantage of the declining US commitment to the region to push Vietnam's bid for hegemony in Indochina; and upon its cooption into the regional hierarchy, China had taken punitive military action against Vietnam to try to uphold the regional status quo. The destabilizing effects of uncertainty about continued US dominance in the regional hierarchy was further evinced in Southeast Asia by the formation of the ASEAN in 1967. This collection of small, non-communist states saw their existing policy of bandwagoning with the United States as unsustainable, and chose to band together in a diplomatic community to help ensure their autonomy and security (Leifer, 1989). The stalemate that materialized over the ensuing decade featured internationally isolated Vietnam depending upon the Soviet Union to sustain its dominant position in Cambodia while being confronted in the margins by resistance forces backed by China, the United States, and ASEAN countries.

It is possible to argue that for the Asian region as a whole, the late 1970s and 1980s saw a relatively stable pro-Western power equilibrium: apart from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, almost all the other countries in the region, including China, were tied into a Western alliance system in one way or another (Zagoria, 1982). Yet, the United States receded as the central state in the regional order during this time. In South Asia, as a result of the 1971 war and Pakistani fragmentation, a strengthened India moved closer to the USSR by signing a bilateral Friendship Treaty. In East Asia, China (as a US partner) and Vietnam (with Soviet backing) became the key protagonists on the regional stage, while ASEAN also developed a greater role with its international diplomatic activism. During this unstable period, the regional hierarchy was in flux as the United States withdrew from its dominant position; China was gradually

but uncertainly incorporated into the regional hierarchy and was the main pro-
tagonist in the conflict with communist Vietnam and the Soviet Union; while
Indochina and ASEAN developed their own dynamics outside of the shifting
regional great power hierarchy.

3.3 Reconstituting hierarchical order after 1990

The end of the Cold War brought about the most significant transition in the
global and Asian regional orders. Globally, the United States remained the
only superpower with resources that outstripped those of any other single
state. In Asia, China's position continued to strengthen, as concerns grew
about the further decline of American strategic interest in the region. The
1990s are notable as a decade in which regional actors become most promi-
nent in actively trying to reconstitute the regional hierarchy, to maneuver the
United States firmly back into a position of regional primacy. This activism
on the part of both important potential challengers and strategically less
powerful regional states is a strong indication of the mutually constructed,
consensual nature of the preferred hierarchical order.

The post-Cold War uncertainty about American commitment to Asia par-
ticularly affected Japan and Southeast Asia. Both reacted by trying to retain
the dominant US military presence and its important economic and political
influence in the region. The Japan–United States alliance could have been
undermined after more than a decade of trade conflicts and bilateral tension
over charges that it was free-riding on the US security guarantee, and by the
deepening uncertainty surrounding the US commitment to East Asia in the
early 1990s. Instead, the US policy-makers decided to strengthen their stra-
tegic ties as Tokyo likewise chose to enhance its alliance with Washington.
Japan's decision reflected a fear of abandonment by the United States and a
desire to continue to bind the US to the bilateral security guarantee and to its
dominant position in the region. At the most pragmatic level, given the dom-
estic political difficulties involved in constitutional amendment and in the face
of security threats from North Korea and China, Japan needed to maintain its
special relationship with the United States.

The April 1996 Japan–United States Joint Declaration on Security and
September 1997 Revised Guidelines for Japan–U.S. Defense Cooperation
allowed for the expansion of security cooperation, especially in supplies and
services to 'situations in areas surrounding Japan that will have an import-
ant influence on Japan's peace and security' (see guidelines available at
http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/guideline2.html). This
extended the Japanese Self-Defense Forces' mandate beyond defending the
home islands against direct attack, to more generally enhancing regional stab-
ility. More recently, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Japanese Diet passed

an emergency law in October 2001 that allowed the Japanese military to provide logistical support for United States and others in anti-terrorist missions, paving the way for Japan to provide support functions in campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.[11] These were decisions calculated to buttress the Japanese alliance with the United States, to assure the continuity of the US commitment to national and regional security in spite of changing strategic circumstances (Katzenstein and Okawara, 2004). This intensification of the United States–Japan alliance critically helps to underwrite the United States' position as the dominant state in the regional hierarchy in two ways: it enhances U.S. power projection both in the region and in the world; and it is a powerful symbol of the acquiescence and subordination of the main potential challenger for regional hegemony to the US domination (Nau, 2003, pp. 224–230). Thus, Japan's continued hierarchical deference to the United States vitally underpins its super-ordinate position in the region.

Owing to their peripheral location and relative lack of strategic importance to the United States, most Southeast Asian states were even more concerned about a potential American withdrawal after the Cold War in the face of a rising China. Much has been written about Southeast Asian policies of engagement with China to mediate the China threat (Ba, 2003; Shambaugh, 2004/5; Goh, 2007). At the same time, however, they have tried selectively to harness the superior US force in the region to deter the potential aggression from China. Two Southeast Asian states – the Philippines and Thailand – are formal allies of the United States, but neither plays host to American bases. Instead, they and a number of non-allied countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia – provide military facilities and access to the US naval and air forces. They also participate in bilateral and multilateral joint exercises with the US forces, and some countries have preferential military supply relations with the Americans (Goh, 2007/08, pp. 113–157). They further demonstrate hierarchical deference and support by additionally tying themselves more closely to the United States in the short- to medium-term fight against terrorism, to help anchor the United States in the region as a counterweight against China (Goh, 2005b; Khong, 2004). Rather than encouraging the United States to target its forces directly against China, though, the goal is to further buttress American military superiority in the region, or to demonstrate the ability to harness it in ways required to act as a general deterrence to Chinese (or other) aggression.[12] At the same time, they

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11 These policies remain subject to domestic politics though: Japanese support troops were withdrawn by Prime Minister Koizumi in June 2006, and the Fukuda administration does not intend to renew its air refuelling support function that expired in October 2007.

12 The United States is viewed as the key strategic force in the region for two reasons: its alliance with Japan forestalls Japanese remilitarization; and its military presence deters Chinese aggression in the Taiwan Straits.

also seek to strengthen their individual military capabilities by attracting the US military aid and training, trade, and economic assistance.

Southeast Asian strategies go beyond simple bandwagoning with the dominant power, though, because they pay great attention also to engaging China and other regional powers. For instance, ASEAN's efforts at developing closer economic relations, generating more sustained political/security dialogue, and establishing military exchanges and relationships, are aimed not only at China, but also at the United States, as well as other major regional players such as Japan, South Korea, and India. By enmeshing the United States, China, and other large powers into regional institutions and norms, Southeast Asian states want to involve them actively in the region by means of good political relationships, deep and preferential economic exchanges, and some degree of defense dialogue and exchange. Southeast Asian policy-makers believe that this creates greater long-term stability in the region (Acharya, 2002). The aim is not to produce a multipolar balance of power in the conventional sense, because the major powers involved here are not all equally formidable. Rather, many Southeast Asian countries prefer to retain the United States as the preponderant superpower, with China as the regional great power, and India and Japan as second-tier regional powers (Goh, 2007/08). This strategic vision reflects a surprising degree of activism on the part of subordinate states not only in helping to sustain hierarchical leadership, but also to innovate so as to buttress regional order. The key innovation here is to try to facilitate the further integration of China into the regional hierarchy, to lend more direction and substance to this process which began in the 1970s. The most important element though is how to integrate China at a level below that of the United States, that is, as the second ranked but still subordinate power. For the last 50 years, the East Asian hierarchy was US-dominated, with the rank order of states within the hierarchy dependent chiefly on alliance or other defense relations with the United States, while communist challengers were excluded from the hierarchy altogether. Now, China has to be integrated on the basis of its economic, political, and military strength, and perhaps more importantly, its right to be a leading power, as perceived by states the region.

This model of regional order coincides most closely with Kang's model, though with two significant differences: the United States, not China, is the primary state; and the hierarchical order is constituted by layers of major powers, rather than just the one.

4 Hierarchy and the East Asian security order

Currently, the regional hierarchy in East Asia is still dominated by the United States. Since the 1970s, China has increasingly claimed the position of second-ranked great power, a claim that is today legitimized by the hierarchical

deference shown by smaller subordinate powers such as South Korea and Southeast Asia. Japan and South Korea can, by virtue of their alliance with the United States, be seen to occupy positions in a third layer of regional major powers, while India is ranked next on the strength of its new strategic relationship with Washington. North Korea sits outside the hierarchic order but affects it due to its military prowess and nuclear weapons capability.

Apart from making greater sense of recent history, conceiving of the US' role in East Asia as the dominant state in the regional hierarchy helps to clarify three critical puzzles in the contemporary international and East Asian security landscape.

First, it contributes to explaining the lack of sustained challenges to American global preponderance after the end of the Cold War. Three of the key potential global challengers to US unipolarity originate in Asia (China, India, and Japan), and their support for or acquiescence to, US dominance have helped to stabilize its global leadership. Through its dominance of the Asian regional hierarchy, the United States has been able to neutralize the potential threats to its position from Japan via an alliance, from India by gradually identifying and pursuing mutual commercial and strategic interests, and from China by encircling and deterring it with allied and friendly states that support American preponderance.

Secondly, recognizing US hierarchical preponderance further explains contemporary under-balancing in Asia, both against a rising China, and against incumbent American power. I have argued that one defining characteristic of a hierarchical system is voluntary subordination of lesser states to the dominant state, and that this goes beyond rationalistic bandwagoning because it is manifested in a social contract that comprises the related processes of hierarchical assurance and hierarchical deference. Critically, successful and sustainable hierarchical assurance and deference helps to explain why Japan is not yet a 'normal' country. Japan has experienced significant impetus to revise and expand the remit of its security forces in the last 15 years. Yet, these pressures continue to be insufficient to prompt a wholesale revision of its constitution and its remilitarization. The reason is that the United States extends its security umbrella over Japan through their alliance, which has led Tokyo not only to perceive no threat from US dominance, but has in fact helped to forge a security community between them (Nau, 2003). Adjustments in burden sharing in this alliance since the 1990s have arisen not from greater independent Japanese strategic activism, but rather from periods of strategic uncertainty and crises for Japan when it appeared that American hierarchical assurance, along with US' position at the top of the regional hierarchy, was in question. Thus, the Japanese priority in taking on more responsibility for regional security has been to improve its ability to facilitate the US' central

position, rather than to challenge it.[13] In the face of the security threats from North Korea and China, Tokyo's continued reliance on the security pact with the United States is rational. While there remains debate about Japan's re-militarization and the growing clout of nationalist 'hawks' in Tokyo, for regional and domestic political reasons, a sustained 'normalization' process cannot take place outside of the restraining framework of the United States–Japan alliance (Samuels, 2007; Pyle, 2007). Abandoning the alliance will entail Japan making a conscience choice not only to remove itself from the US-led hierarchy, but also to challenge the United States dominance directly.

The United States–ROK alliance may be understood in a similar way, although South Korea faces different sets of constraints because of its strategic priorities related to North Korea. As J.J. Suh argues, in spite of diminishing North Korean capabilities, which render the US security umbrella less critical, the alliance endures because of mutual identification – in South Korea, the image of the US as 'the only conceivable protector against aggression from the North,' and in the United States, an image of itself as protector of an allied nation now vulnerable to an 'evil' state suspected of transferring weapons of mass destruction to terrorist networks (Suh, 2004). Kang, in contrast, emphasizes how South Korea has become less enthusiastic about its ties with the United States – as indicated by domestic protests and the rejection of TMD – and points out that Seoul is not arming against a potential land invasion from China but rather maritime threats (Kang, 2003, pp.79–80). These observations are valid, but they can be explained by hierarchical deference toward the United States, rather than China. The ROK's military orientation reflects its identification with and dependence on the United States and its adoption of US' strategic aims. In spite of its primary concern with the North Korean threat, Seoul's formal strategic orientation is toward maritime threats, in line with Washington's regional strategy. Furthermore, recent South Korean Defense White Papers habitually cited a remilitarized Japan as a key threat. The best means of coping with such a threat would be continued reliance on the US security umbrella and on Washington's ability to restrain Japanese remilitarization (Eberstadt et al., 2007). Thus, while the United States–ROK bilateral relationship is not always easy, its durability is based on South Korea's fundamental acceptance of the United States as the region's primary state and reliance on it to defend and keep regional order. It also does not rule out Seoul and other US allies conducting business and engaging diplomatically with China.

India has increasingly adopted a similar strategy vis-à-vis China in recent years. Given its history of territorial and political disputes with China and its

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13 A more convincing argument than Kang's explanation that Japanese non-normalisation is due to lack of threat perception and hierarchical deference vis-à-vis China.

contemporary economic resurgence, India is seen as the key potential power balancer to a growing China. Yet, India has sought to negotiate settlements about border disputes with China, and has moved significantly toward developing closer strategic relations with the United States. Apart from invigorated defense cooperation in the form of military exchange programs and joint exercises, the key breakthrough was the agreement signed in July 2005 which facilitates renewed bilateral civilian nuclear cooperation (Mohan, 2007). Once again, this is a key regional power that could have balanced more directly and independently against China, but has rather chosen to align itself or bandwagon with the primary power, the United States, partly because of significant bilateral gains, but fundamentally in order to support the latter's regional order-managing function.

Recognizing a regional hierarchy and seeing that the lower layers of this hierarchy have become more active since the mid-1970s also allows us to understand why there has been no outright balancing of China by regional states since the 1990s. On the one hand, the US position at the top of the hierarchy has been revived since the mid-1990s, meaning that deterrence against potential Chinese aggression is reliable and in place.[14] On the other hand, the aim of regional states is to try to consolidate China's inclusion in the regional hierarchy at the level below that of the United States, not to keep it down or to exclude it. East Asian states recognize that they cannot, without great cost to themselves, contain Chinese growth. But they hope to socialize China by enmeshing it in peaceful regional norms and economic and security institutions. They also know that they can also help to ensure that the capabilities gap between China and the United States remains wide enough to deter a power transition. Because this strategy requires persuading China about the appropriateness of its position in the hierarchy and of the legitimacy of the US position, all East Asian states engage significantly with China, with the small Southeast Asian states refusing openly to 'choose sides' between the United States and China. Yet, hierarchical deference continues to explain why regional institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN + 3, and East Asian Summit have made limited progress. While the United State has made room for regional multilateral institutions after the end of the Cold War, its hierarchical preponderance also constitutes the regional order to the extent that it cannot comfortably be excluded from any substantive strategic developments. On the part of some lesser states (particularly Japan and Singapore), hierarchical deference is manifested in inclusionary impulses (or at least impulses not to exclude the United States or US proxies) in regional

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14 The obvious exception here is of course Taiwan. The deliberate U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity leaves Taipei and its supporters with significant doubts about the reliability of the deterrent effect on the mainland.

institutions, such as the East Asia Summit in December 2005. Disagreement on this issue with others, including China and Malaysia, has stymied potential progress in these regional institutions (Malik, 2006).

Finally, conceiving of a US-led East Asian hierarchy amplifies our understanding of how and why the United States–China relationship is now the key to regional order. The vital nature of the Sino-American relationship stems from these two states' structural positions. As discussed earlier, China is the primary second-tier power in the regional hierarchy. However, as Chinese power grows and Chinese activism spreads beyond Asia, the United States is less and less able to see China as merely a regional power – witness the growing concerns about Chinese investment and aid in certain African countries. This causes a disjuncture between US global interests and US regional interests. Regional attempts to engage and socialize China are aimed at mediating its intentions. This process, however, cannot stem Chinese growth, which forms the material basis of US threat perceptions. Apprehensions about the growth of China's power culminates in US fears about the region being 'lost' to China, echoing Cold War concerns that transcribed regional defeats into systemic setbacks.[15] On the other hand, the US security strategy post-Cold War and post-9/11 have regional manifestations that disadvantage China. The strengthening of US alliances with Japan and Australia; and the deployment of US troops to Central, South, and Southeast Asia all cause China to fear a consolidation of US global hegemony that will first threaten Chinese national security in the regional context and then stymie China's global reach.

Thus, the key determinants of the East Asian security order relate to two core questions: (i) Can the US be persuaded that China can act as a reliable 'regional stakeholder' that will help to buttress regional stability and US global security aims;[16] and (ii) can China be convinced that the United States has neither territorial ambitions in Asia nor the desire to encircle China, but will help to promote Chinese development and stability as part of its global security strategy? (Wang, 2005). But, these questions cannot be asked in the abstract, outside the context of negotiation about their relative positions in the regional and global hierarchies. One urgent question for further investigation is how the process of assurance and deference operate at the topmost levels of a hierarchy? When we have two great powers of unequal strength but contesting claims and a closing capabilities gap in the same regional hierarchy, how much scope for negotiation is there, before a reversion to balancing dynamics?

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15 This tendency is best illustrated by the 'domino theory' that permeated American strategic thinking during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, which in turn provided strong motivation for the war in Vietnam.

16 It was then-Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick who initiated the call for China to become a 'responsible stakeholder – see Zoellick (2005).

This is the main structural dilemma: as long as the United States does not give up its primary position in the Asian regional hierarchy, China is very unlikely to act in a way that will provide comforting answers to the two questions. Yet, the East Asian regional order has been and still is constituted by US hegemony, and to change that could be extremely disruptive and may lead to regional actors acting in highly destabilizing ways. Rapid Japanese remilitarization, armed conflict across the Taiwan Straits, Indian nuclear brinksmanship directed toward Pakistan, or a highly destabilized Korean peninsula are all illustrative of potential regional disruptions.

5 Conclusion

To construct a coherent account of East Asia's evolving security order, I have suggested that the United States is the central force in constituting regional stability and order. The major patterns of equilibrium and turbulence in the region since 1945 can be explained by the relative stability of the US position at the top of the regional hierarchy, with periods of greatest insecurity being correlated with greatest uncertainty over the American commitment to managing regional order. Furthermore, relationships of hierarchical assurance and hierarchical deference explain the unusual character of regional order in the post-Cold War era.

However, the greatest contemporary challenge to East Asian order is the potential conflict between China and the United States over rank ordering in the regional hierarchy, a contest made more potent because of the intertwining of regional and global security concerns. Ultimately, though, investigating such questions of positionality requires conceptual lenses that go beyond basic material factors because it entails social and normative questions. How can China be brought more into a leadership position, while being persuaded to buy into shared strategic interests and constrain its own in ways that its vision of regional and global security may eventually be reconciled with that of the United States and other regional players? How can Washington be persuaded that its central position in the hierarchy must be ultimately shared in ways yet to be determined?

The future of the East Asian security order is tightly bound up with the durability of the United States' global leadership and regional domination. At the regional level, the main scenarios of disruption are an outright Chinese challenge to US leadership, or the defection of key US allies, particularly Japan. Recent history suggests, and the preceding analysis has shown, that challenges to or defections from US leadership will come at junctures where it appears that the US commitment to the region is in doubt, which in turn destabilizes the hierarchical order. At the global level, American geopolitical over-extension will be the key cause of change. This is the one factor that

could lead to both greater regional and global turbulence, if only by the attendant strategic uncertainly triggering off regional challenges or defections. However, it is notoriously difficult to gauge thresholds of over-extension. More positively, East Asia is a region that has adjusted to previous periods of uncertainty about US primacy. Arguably, the regional consensus over the United States as primary state in a system of benign hierarchy could accommodate a shifting of the strategic burden to US allies like Japan and Australia as a means of systemic preservation. The alternatives that could surface as a result of not doing so would appear to be much worse.

Acknowledgements

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