

Power and Security in Northeast Asia: Shifting Strategies

Byung-Kook Kim and Anthony Jones

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This book highlights the shifting power structure of Northeast Asia. In the introduction, the editor considers a variety of issues in perspective, and power transition, economic interdependence, and democratization are viewed as key concepts in analyzing the radical transformation of the region. The impact of rising China on the power balance of the region is substantial, and the dynamic growth of the economy and the resulting growth of interdependence are the distinguishing characteristics of the region. The region is witnessing an ongoing process of democratization, possibly inviting an unpredictable future. While realistic predictions tell us that these dynamic changes will bring about armed conflicts among nations, the authors however conclude that power politics in Northeast Asia indicates ‘an uneasy but resilient “equilibrium” of spatially and temporally asymmetric power relations’ (p. 279). This equilibrium is termed uneasy because two elements of revisionism stand out, one being the Korean Peninsular and the other being Sino-Taiwan relations. The players involved all have unilateral revisionist incentives, but the likelihood of small crises escalating into major armed conflicts is remote, and their ‘hedged engagement’ strategy should control tensions and not allow them to spiral.

Two chapters dealing with the United States describe the regional strategy of the United States as a hedged engagement. Stephen Haggard points out in the second chapter that economic interdependence such as expanding Free Trade Agreements brings about a moderation of Chinese foreign policy, because economic growth depends on the regional free trade system supplied by the power preponderance of the United States.

Jonathan Pollack argues that George W. Bush adopted a policy that differed from the preceding two administrations. The current Bush administration ‘emphasized the prospect of renewed great power rivalry and the continued potential for a major regional crisis’ (p. 66). However, Pollack highlights the odd circumstance where neither the use of US

military force nor diplomacy is suitable in solving regional security problems. His analysis should therefore be differentiated from the simplistic criticisms of the Bush administration.

In the fourth chapter, Minxin Pei presents China as a major power with hedged acquiescence. China's strategy consists of three elements: conflict avoidance, limited cooperation, and strategic hedging. China carefully avoids conflicts with Taiwan and other surrounding nations and does not hesitate to cooperate with the United States in dealing with North Korea's nuclear proliferation. It cultivates friendly relations with Southeast Asian countries so that they may take its side in contingencies. Overall, China's strategy is defensive, and the probability of conflict with the United States seems to be low.

In the fifth chapter, Yamamoto characterizes Japan as activism lite, meaning the expansion of its security role in the world consists in using its Self Defense Force more for the purposes of peace keeping and logistic support for the US and the coalition forces. He concludes that the current Japanese strategy is 'bandwagoning' US hegemony with activism lite, underscored by a web of institutions such as the Japanese Constitution, the United Nations, and the United States–Japan alliance.

Russia's future foreign policy behavior is uncertain. In the sixth chapter Alexander Lukin refers to Russia's use of the China card as a balance against the United States, but he also pays attention to the fact that Russia looks toward both West and East, and that cooperation with the United States and European countries are in the interests of her foreign policy.

Byung-Kook Kim refers to North Korea's strategy as 'hedged brinkmanship', and by using this strategy North Korea resorts to a restrained escalation and strategic ambiguity, so that it may manipulate the United States, South Korea, on the other hand, has been working to mediate between North Korea and the United States but its efforts only end in failure.

In the eighth chapter, Yun-han Chu analyzes Taiwan's strategy and concludes that both independence and unification are far off, and that the status quo will prevail not only because China avoids unification by coercive methods and the United States checks Taiwan's radical movement toward independence, but also because Taiwanese identity makes the status quo most likely.

The strength of this book lies in providing us with a bird's-eye view of the reality of Northeast Asian regional politics. The individual chapters

remind us of important facts and issues, but there exist certain shortcomings. First, the use of the word 'revisionism' is questionable. If, for instance, Japan responds to the changing environment and expands its security commitments overseas, would this be revisionism? Revisionism should be a change of the status quo through the use of force, and hence the term is used rather frivolously.

Second, the book applies multiple theories, including realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Needless to say realism cannot explain everything, but it is not a good idea to compensate what realism does not tell us with what liberalism or constructivism can tell us. If power and security in Northeast Asia form the theme, then realism would be the most suitable instrument.

Third, and most important, there is a section missing in this book. Little consideration has been given to the military affairs of the region. This book concludes that revisionist challenges come from the behavior of divided nations and not from major powers, and rejects as alarmist the realist's perspective of threats posed by a rising China. As pointed out, it seems true that every player in the region takes the strategy of hedging. The book claims that even when a crisis occurs, it will reach an 'equilibrium of controlled tension'. This prediction, however, is not so certain. As long as Northeast Asia is a region of revisionist states a spiral of tension could occur, and to prepare for this one needs to understand the military capability at a deeper level. What kind of weapons or weapon systems does a state try to purchase and develop? Is the military capability enough to change the status quo or just enough for defensive purposes? What are the state's strategic goals? How have they used their armed forces in the past? What are the characteristics of its force structure? How good is the state's military intelligence? With a proper knowledge of military affairs, researchers can get a firm grip over the core of hard reality in Northeast Asia.

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