Set for stability? Prospects for conflict and cooperation in East Asia

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Abstract. The Asian Pacific region is highly unstable, but not for the reasons usually assumed. Contrary to the assertions of Realists, who argue multipolarity makes Asia ‘ripe for rivalry’, overwhelming US strategic preponderance should make the balance of power quite stable. Likewise, while much is made by more liberal International Relations theorists of the relative absence of strong international institutions and democracy in Asia, recent trends seem to point in a more positive direction. The real source of instability lies in the beliefs and values held by regional actors. Contested sovereignty on the Korean peninsula and in the Taiwan straits makes military conflict seem a real possibility. Latent isolationism in the US and Japan may lead to a mishandling of a crisis were one to emerge. This Constructivist line of analysis suggests that more attention should be paid to these intangible potential sources of conflict and miscalculation.

A few years ago, Aaron Friedberg, a Professor of International Relations at Princeton, wrote an influential article for International Security entitled ‘Ripe for Rivalry in Asia’.1 As the title suggests, Friedberg took a decidedly pessimistic view of the future of regional stability in Asia. He argued that from the standpoint of International Relations theory virtually none of the conditions which promote peace and stability in Western Europe and North America obtain in the Asian context, whereas many of the factors which promote conflict and instability were present in abundance. Friedberg was hardly alone in his gloomy assessment of the situation in East Asia,2 and since then there have been a number of events that at first sight might appear to support Friedberg’s thesis—the 1994 crisis over the North Korean nuclear weapons programme, the 1995 Sino-American confrontation in the Taiwan straits, the social and economic turmoil unleashed in many parts of Asia by the recent regional economic downturn, and, most recently, renewed tensions over the North Korean Taepodong missile programme and the launching of the North Korean Taepodong missile over Japan.

This article will reexamine Friedberg’s thesis in the light of recent developments in the Asian context. Its chief contention is that most of the structural features that Friedman identified as promoting instability in East Asia actually point in the other direction, towards greater regional stability. The balance of power favours the maintenance of the status quo. Economic interdependence is on the rise. Moreover, in recent years there has been a steady growth in international institutions of all

sorts, including ones dealing specifically with security issues. Yet, despite these positive trends, most analysts insist that Asia remains a potentially dangerous and unstable place. The chief factors that make for instability in East Asia are ironically ones that Friedberg and others have paid the least attention to, primarily because they are the kind of variables that are typically ignored or downplayed by contemporary International Relations theory—namely the intentions and perceptions of the actors in the system.

To be more specific, the combination of an unpredictable regime in North Korea, and of fundamentally irreconcilable nationalist movements in China and in Taiwan, have created two highly combustible zones of perpetual crisis which could plunge the entire region into war and conflict. This already dangerous situation is further exacerbated by latent isolationist tendencies on the part of the two most powerful and technologically advanced powers in the region, the United States and Japan. In the event of a major military clash these tendencies could trigger a crisis in the Mutual Security Treaty system that ties the two nations together and lead to an unravelling of the entire regional security order.3

The positive side of this analysis is that there is nothing inevitable about conflict in East Asia. Both the North Korean and Taiwanese crises are manageable, the US–Japanese strategic relationship continues to grow and evolve, and the underlying geostrategic and geoeconomic structural forces favour a peaceable outcome, at least in the short-to-medium term. At the same time, however, cultural-ideological factors create a very real potential for violent military clashes in the region that could have far reaching implications for international relations both in Asia and beyond. Moreover, in the longer term the rise of China indicates that a fundamental shift in the balance of power is underway which, if not properly managed, could very well create the conditions that International Relations theory tells us are conducive to major wars. It is therefore incumbent on the leaders of the chief regional powers to reforge the existing set of bilateral and multilateral security arrangements so that they will be able to cope with both the long-term and short-term threats to regional peace and security that may emerge.

In the following pages this article will review the IR theoretical arguments concerning the causes of conflict and apply them to the current situation in East Asia. First it will briefly explicate the three main theoretical paradigms that dominate the contemporary IR literature and derive from them a few propositions regarding the factors that may lead to war and conflict. Next it will use first the Realist and then the Liberal paradigms to argue the case for continued, even growing stability in the East Asian region. Then, utilizing a Constructivist point of view, it will identify some of the chief sources of instability. The purpose of this analysis is not to engage in the fruitless academic exercise of attempting to prove the superiority of one of these theoretical approaches over the others. Rather, the aim here is to show how these theoretical paradigms can be employed together to illuminate different aspects of the international environment in East Asia and arrive

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3 To use the vernacular of international relations theory, cultural-ideological factors in East Asia simultaneously intensify the security dilemma while heightening the danger of buck-passing in mutually reinforcing and potentially catastrophic ways. On the concept of the security dilemma, see Robert Jervis's seminal work, 'Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,' World Politics, 30:2 (October 1978). On the notion of buck passing, see Barry R. Posen, The Sources of Military Doctrine (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1984).
at a more comprehensive and accurate assessment of the security situation in the region. In conclusion, some suggestions will be offered regarding the kinds of measures that can be taken to counter the threat of conflict.

**Theories of conflict and cooperation in International Relations**

There are three major schools of thought in contemporary International Relations concerning the causes of conflict—Realism, Liberalism and what has come to be called Constructivism. Each of these approaches offers a different perspective on the forces that drive state behaviour, the sources of conflict, and the conditions that make for peace and stability.4

The **Realist** approach sees the international system as being fundamentally driven by the issue of power. States find themselves in an anarchical environment in which there is no higher authority they can appeal to if they or their interests are threatened. As a result all states must be highly sensitive to the distribution of power, and in particular of military power, in the international system and act accordingly—increasing their own power if possible, and preserving the balance of power if necessary. Leaders, Realists contend, must never lose sight of this fundamental reality, and they must not fall prey to the illusion that international law, world public opinion, common ideological goals or the goodwill of other leaders can compensate for a lack of power or an unfavourable distribution of power in the international system.5

From the Realist perspective, conflict is endemic to the international system and can never be wholly ruled out. War can only be avoided when a stable distribution of power, one that upholds the existing status quo, obtains. Realists differ among themselves as to precisely when such a stable constellation of power relations is likely to emerge. However, it is possible to distil from the literature three general sets of conditions for stability that most Realists would agree with.

First, the distribution of capabilities in the international system needs to be congruent with the status of the different actors of the system. Major wars are likely to break out when a major power chooses to defy the existing order—as France did under Napoleon or Germany did under first Kaiser Wilhelm II and then Hitler. Why any given great power should choose to defy the international order is a matter of some debate, but in general a Realist would argue it is because the distribution of power resources has shifted—or is shifting—in such a way that leaders in that country feel either that they can, or must, attempt to improve their nation’s power positions.6

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4 For the purposes of the current discussion, stability is defined as the absence of a direct military conflict or the build-up of military forces in anticipation of such a conflict.


Second, conflict is more likely when major players in the international system miscalculate the actual relationships of power. Conversely, clear and accurate information on the intentions of actors and their capabilities enhances stability. The First World War is often held up as an example of where fatal miscalculations, especially on the part of the Germans, resulted in a general conflagration.7

Third and finally, wars are less likely when military technology and the geostrategic situation favours the defence over the offence. When the reverse is true, and the offence is favoured over the defence, leaders come under great pressure to strike first, especially in a crisis situation.8 In this connection, nuclear weapons are often seen by Realists as stabilizing the international system because they make the possible costs of any conflict between nuclear powers appear to far outweigh any possible gains from going to war.9

Liberals, in contrast, have a more benign view of the international system than do Realists.10 In general Liberals argue that states pursue a variety of different goals, among which security is only one, albeit an important one. Some of these interests may lead states to conflict with one another, yet others lead them to cooperate. The key issue is whether the benefits of cooperation outweigh the potential gains from conflict. At certain points in time the structure of the international system may favour cooperation, at other times it may favour conflict.11

From a Liberal perspective, conflict in the international system is thus not endemic to the system, pace Realism. The international system is capable of being transformed in ways that make war generally less likely than it has been in the past. Many liberals contend that such a transformation is underway today, driven by at least three fundamental trends.12 The first is the general increase in international trade and economic interdependence, which allows states to reap greater benefits from cooperating with one another and, concomitantly, makes the costs of conflict

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10 Liberalism in IR represents a far more diverse and less well integrated body of literature than does Realism, although there are certain common features—i.e. a belief in progress in the international system and a belief in the malleability and perfectibility of the international system—which clearly ties the different strands together. For a useful recent overview, see Andrew Moravcsik, 'A Liberal Theory of International Politics', International Organization, 51:4 (1997); Mark W. Zacher and Richard A. Matthew, 'Liberal International Theory: Common Threads, Divergent Strands', in Charles W. Kegley, Jr. (ed.), Controversies in International Relations Theory (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); and David Baldwin, 'Neoliberalism, Neorealism, and World Politics', in David Baldwin (ed.), Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). For an overview of the history lineage of Liberal international relations theory, with an emphasis on its relationship to political theory, see Michael W. Doyle, The Ways of War and Peace (New York: Norton, 1997).
greater. In the recent past states often had to resort to conquest or the threat of force to secure access to the technology and raw materials needed to achieve wealth and security. Today almost all nations can rely on the world market.

Second, one of the byproducts of growing economic interdependence is the emergence of a host of international norms, rules and institutions designed to regulate and coordinate cooperation between nations. While initially such institutions may have been the product of particular constellations of power—for instance Anglo-American hegemony in world markets after the end of the Second World War—they take on a life and dynamic of their own as states become increasingly dependent on them to achieve their national objectives. Over time these institutions may even remould the ways in which international actors define their interest. As various international organizations increasingly take over the functions of government they may even lead to a change in the identity of the actors in the international system, replacing rival nation states with a more cooperative and peaceful (if not conflict-free) transnational order. In the meantime, international institutions serve to reduce the chance of conflict by improving the flow of information between countries, creating rules and mechanisms which allow for collective monitoring and possible sanctioning of state behaviour, and providing leaders with regular forums where they can meet and coordinate policies.

Finally, many Liberal analysts of international relations stress not only the impact of international institutions on state behaviour, but also attach considerable importance to the role played by domestic institutions. Certain types of political systems are held to be more prone to use force than others, while other types are more inclined to try to resolve their differences peacefully. In particular, democratic regimes are widely viewed as being inclined to avoid military conflict with one another and a good deal of evidence has accumulated (and been disputed) in support of the proposition that democracies do not make war upon one another.

While each of the foregoing Liberal claims may be treated as a separate set of arguments, taken together they make a powerful and persuasive case for the view that a transformation of the international system is underway. Increased economic and technological development leads to a growth in trade and economic interdependence. Interdependence in turn fuels a rise in interstate political and social interaction and creates powerful incentives for political leaders to create international institutions to manage these interstate flows. Over time these international

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16 The European community is usually cited as the first possible exemplar of such a change. See for instance, Ernst Haas, *Beyond the Nation State: Functionalism and International Organization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964).
17 Keohane, *After Hegemony*.
systemic flows favour a reshaping of domestic norms and institutions in a common, more pacific direction—i.e. the spread of democracies.\textsuperscript{19}

The Constructivist approach to the study of international relations differs from both Realism and Liberalism in a number of respects. Constructivists hold a view of human behaviour, including state actions, as being fundamentally shaped by socially shared understandings of the world, both in terms of how the world is and in terms of the ways it should be.\textsuperscript{20} Central to such understandings are actor identity and actor interests. These understandings—which alternatively can be called cultures, mentalités or discourses—are not simply subjective reflections of an objective material reality, but rather emerge out of communicative and social processes—socialization, debate and sometimes coercion. The material-structural world, including such features as the balance of military power or opportunities for international cooperation, is thus mediated by the particular cognitive lenses with which actors are endowed. As Alexander Wendt put it, ‘anarchy is what states make of it.’\textsuperscript{21} In the interests of theoretical even-handedness one can make the same point regarding conditions of complex interdependence.

One implication of this point of view is that social scientists wishing to investigate the causes of state actions or to evaluate the prospects for conflict or cooperation in the international system cannot rely upon generalizations drawn from another cultural or particular temporal context. The same set of objective structural conditions that inclined Europeans in the late nineteenth century towards conflict may not do so in the early twenty-first century, precisely because European societies have been changed by the destructive ravages of two world wars and European leaders are eager to draw lessons from past mistakes.\textsuperscript{22} Likewise, the Western experience can serve as a guide to how East Asian societies may respond to a similar set of circumstances only to the extent that it can be shown that they share similar conceptions of the national interest and similar understandings of how the international system operates.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{19} See Deudney and Ikenberry, ‘Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order’, p. 186.


\textsuperscript{21} See Wendt, ‘Anarchy is What States Make of It’.

\textsuperscript{22} Although he does not call himself a ‘constructivist’, this kind of argument is very much at the core of Steven Van Evera’s influential article, ‘Primed for Peace: Europe after the Cold War’, \textit{International Security}, 15:3 (Winter 1990/91).

\textsuperscript{23} For an interesting example of Western Realist-type thinking in an Asian society where the structural constraints were very different from those in the West when Realism arose, see Ian Alasdar Johnston, \textit{Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).
Instead of relying on a few hard generalizations, therefore, it is incumbent upon the analyst of interstate relations working in the constructivist paradigm to investigate how the actors in the international system conceive of their interests and their environment, how these conceptions than translate into concrete defence and foreign policy choices, and how their actions interact to shape actual foreign policy outcomes. At times the particular constellation of actor identity and interests may favour peace and cooperation. At other times they may favour conflict.

Each of these three approaches—Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism—arguably captures a different aspect of the international system. At the same time, like all theories in the social sciences, each approach also leads the analysts to ignore other factors that may be important. Exclusive reliance on one or the other approach to analyse the real world leads to a myopic perception of the dynamics that are actually at play. A more comprehensive effort to analyse interstate affairs should view these approaches as complementary, as opposed to mutually exclusive.

Prospects for conflict and cooperation in contemporary East Asia—a Realist view

From a Realist point of view, the distribution of power in the region should be quite stable and the chances of a serious great power confrontation appear remote. The most important strategic reality in the region today is the overwhelming predominance of US military power. Although Friedberg argued that East Asia today is becoming a multipolar system, in terms of the distribution of actual capabilities it is decidedly unipolar.\(^{24}\) Since the end of the Cold War no other country comes close to the United States in strategic or conventional military capabilities.

Although Russia retains thousands of nuclear warheads—which theoretically could be used against the United States—its conventional forces are in complete disarray and its political influence at a low ebb. Moreover, the disintegration of the old Soviet empire has refocused Russia’s strategic interests on its former territories in the ‘near abroad’.\(^{25}\) While there are potential flash points between Russia and China on the inner Asian border, for the moment at least Russia has neither the energy nor the inclination to pursue its potential objectives in the Asian theatre.\(^{26}\)

Likewise, despite the much debated ‘China threat’,\(^{27}\) the PRC remains a long way off from being able to challenge the United States in a serious test of strength.

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\(^{24}\) This is not to say that the United States can impose its preferences on other regional actors, nor that it can act unilaterally without regard for other nations. Rather it means that in terms of actual capabilities, especially in the area of military capabilities, which Realist theorists tend to view as decisive, no other nation comes close to the United States in power.


\(^{27}\) For a particularly provocative example, see Richard Bernstein and Ross H Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).
Table 1. Size of active forces

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>1,447,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>2,840,000 (4 million with PAP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>1,240,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>235,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>672,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>1,055,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>376,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although its conventional forces appear formidable on paper, in reality the PRC’s ability to project power beyond the Chinese border is severely limited by deficiencies in equipment and training. For the most part the Chinese air and armoured forces still rely on outdated 1950s and 60s technology. So dated is much of its equipment that some experts have gone so far as to call the Chinese army the world’s largest military museum.28 China’s defence industries remain backward and (with a few significant exceptions) remain dependent on imports for advanced military technology.29 The readiness of its forces remains low and their ability to execute sophisticated, combined arms operations is limited.30 The gap between China and the United States is even greater in the area of strategic nuclear capabilities (see Table 2 below).31

Japan is the one power in the region which could readily put together a powerful and effective hi-tech military that could pose an effective challenge to the United States. Japan’s defence industrial base, while smaller than that of the United States, is quite substantial in size and technologically highly sophisticated.32 Japan has a small but highly professional military that could serve as the nucleus of a much larger force, and finally it has the technological resources needed to put together a large and survivable nuclear deterrent within a relatively short period of time.33

From a Realist point of view, however, Japan suffers from two decisive handicaps which prevent it from emerging as an effective regional power free of America’s

30 One Japanese military officer who has observed Chinese military exercises told me that in his estimation it will be 20 years at least before the PRC’s military forces can begin to approach Western or Japanese standards of training. Discussions in Tokyo, October 1996.
31 The United States is in all likelihood in the position to launch a successful disarming first strike against the PRC if it chose to do so Even were a few Chinese strategic weapons to survive an American attack, the United States would maintain overwhelming escalation dominance, allowing it to blackmail the PRC along the lines of the famous ‘Nitz scenario’ of the early 1980s. Chinese leaders, assuming they wish to avoid annihilation, and also assuming they retain control over their own forces, would have no choice but to forgo retaliation.
### Table 2. Strategic weapons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Launchers</th>
<th>Warheads</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Russia</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICBMs</td>
<td>928</td>
<td>5,034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLBMs</td>
<td>664</td>
<td>2,064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-range bombers</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium-range bombers</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>3,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total deliverable warheads:</td>
<td></td>
<td>10,918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>United States</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICBMs</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>2,091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLBMs</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3,072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-range bombers</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>3,492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total deliverable warheads</td>
<td></td>
<td>8,654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>People’s Republic of China</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICBMs</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLBMs</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRBMs</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total deliverable warheads</td>
<td></td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


strategic tutelage. First, as a resource-poor island Japan lacks the strategic depth needed to challenge the United States. Were it to remilitarize, Japan would be highly vulnerable to American military pressure on its vital sea lanes of communication. Thus, even assuming that the United States and other regional powers were willing to allow Japan to assemble a strategic nuclear deterrent, it would be unable to guarantee its own security. Second, were Japan to realize its military potential it could easily provoke its neighbours to reassemble the coalition that had defeated it in 1945—an encircling alliance including the United States, China and possibly Russia that Japan could never hope to match.

All the major powers in the region accept US military preponderance as a given, even if they may not be entirely happy with it. All realize that, for the time being at least, the *status quo* cannot be overturned through the use of force. As a result, in recent decades all the major powers in the region have chosen to focus their energies on other priorities. One reflection of this trend is the general decline in defence spending in the region, measured both in absolute terms and as a percentage of GNP.

North Korea would appear to be the only power in the region that might be tempted to challenge the United States. The steady decline of North Korean power

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Table 3. Defence spending (US $bn)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>% GDP</th>
<th>1994</th>
<th>% GDP</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>% GDP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>339.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>278.73</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>272.95</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>106.93</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan*</td>
<td>28.24</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>44.60</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>40.89</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China**</td>
<td>26.08</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>27.68</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>36.55</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>8.27</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>13.15</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>14.73</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *Does not include military pensions, as in NATO and other countries. **Estimate: four times the official Chinese defence budget figures.


relative to that of the South gives it a strong structural incentive to strike before the balance of power becomes even more unfavourable. Moreover, North Korean leaders may still cling to the hope that faced with sufficiently high casualties and a possible strategic threat to its interests beyond the Korean peninsula, the United States might acquiesce in a North Korean power grab. The conventional balance of power, however, is highly unfavourable to the North, leaving it open to question whether the North would be able to seize even Seoul, let alone take over the South in its entirety.35 In addition, the United States has good strategic reasons for honouring its commitment to the defence of the South quite apart from the intrinsic value of the Republic of Korea in the larger regional balance of power. Were the United States to tolerate a violent North Korean takeover it would risk undermining the credibility of virtually all of its overseas commitments, both in Asia and beyond. The carefully constructed network of alliances which the United States has built up and maintained for over half a century would begin to unravel, and potential regional powers such as Japan and Germany would begin to rearm.

Consequently, North Korea is reduced to using its military potential as a bargaining chip, engaging in limited, aggressive actions in order to extract aid and other concessions from the United States and its allies. As a result, a Realist might argue that there are good structural reasons why North Korea should remain a smouldering source of instability in the region. Nonetheless a direct military confrontation with the United States and its allies would appear suicidal, given the power imbalance, and consequently will be eschewed by a rational North Korean regime.36

From a Realist standpoint, the chances of war breaking out as a result of miscalculation are somewhat greater than are the odds of one of the region’s powers

35 For a recent, optimistic assessment, see Michael O’Hanlon, ‘Stopping a North Korean Invasion: Why Defending South Korea is Easier than the Pentagon Thinks’, International Security, 22:4 (1998). Even this relatively upbeat assessment, however, does not deny that the North could inflict massive military and civilian losses on the South and US forces stationed in Korea, losses which may be politically unacceptable for either government. Moreover it does not take into consideration the potential political impact of even relatively limited North Korean military operations.

seeking to deliberately provoke a confrontation. Although North Korea has repeatedly backed down when directly confronted with US military power, the possibility always remains that it may push its game of brinkmanship too far. In addition to Korea, the area where there is the greatest chance for miscalculation is Taiwan where the United States has deliberately kept its commitment vague in order to avoid encouraging an outright bid for secession by Taiwanese pro-independence forces.

However, assuming that decision-makers are behaving rationally from a Realist systemic point of view, the threat that a miscalculation may escalate to the point of a general regional war should not be exaggerated. Despite early apprehensions that the United States might withdraw from the region after the end of the Cold War, the United States has made considerable efforts to underline its continued commitment to the region. The US–Japanese strategic relationship has been strengthened through the adoption of the new Guidelines on US–Japanese Defense Cooperation, which commits Japan to providing at least logistical support in the event of a local crisis—including a hypothetical outbreak of hostilities on the Korean peninsula.38 The US has taken measures to find new bases to compensate for the loss of Subic bay in the Philippines.38 And the United States continues to maintain roughly the same level of forces in the region that it did before 1991. Even with respect to Taiwan, the US deployment of two carrier forces during the 1995 crisis underlined its unwillingness to countenance military coercion against even a relatively small regional ally.

The short term objectives and capabilities of the other actors are similarly well defined and well understood in the region. The United States appreciates China’s commitment to perserving its national unity and therefore seeks to avoid provoking a confrontation over Taiwan. Russia and China have improved their relations considerably, strengthening economic and political ties, while seeking to improve military transparency through the introduction of confidence-building measures and building a limited strategic partnership.39 And virtually all regional actors seem reasonably sure that Japan will not embark on a major rearmament programme or engage in military adventurism as long as it remains firmly anchored in its security relationship with the United States.40


38 Since 1990 the United States has negotiated access to high quality air and naval facilities throughout Southeast Asia to compensate for the loss of its bases in the Philippines. According to the former commander in chief of the US Pacific command, the new emphasis is on ‘places not bases’. See United States Department of Defense, East Asia Strategy Requirements’ (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, 1995), testimony of Admiral Charles R. Larson before the Senate Armed Forces Committee, March 2, 1994.


40 Periodically, concern is sounded that Japan may use its strategic relationship with the United States as a cover for engaging in a major military build-up. The breaking of the 1 per cent of GDP limit on defence spending in 1986, Japanese participation in multilateral peacekeeping operations after 1991 and the new Guidelines on US–Japanese Defense Cooperation—to mention only the most recent examples—have all been viewed as heralding a new era in Japanese security policy. The relative stability of Japan’s actual military capabilities, as well as its continued reluctance to use its existing forces over the past decade or so, seem to indicate that these pronouncements may be a bit exaggerated.
Finally, from a realist point of view, the presence of nuclear weapons in the region should serve as a powerful deterrent to adventurism on the part of regional actors, including the United States. The possibility that in the event of a military conflict the Chinese or Russians might lose control of the escalation process is a sobering thought for American decision-makers. Moreover, even without a direct military clash, the danger remains that either power might share their strategic technology with other, potentially more reckless powers—or even worse, with non-state terrorist groups who could not easily be deterred. As a result US policymakers feel impelled to seek long-term cooperation with its potential regional rivals rather than to try to assert its dominance for other, more short-term objectives.

In sum, from a Realist perspective there are a host of good reasons to expect a stable strategic environment in East Asia, at least in the short to medium term. The balance of power appears to strongly favour the status quo—i.e., de facto American hegemony. For the most part the major powers' national interests and military commitments are clearly defined and well understood by the other actors. Finally the existence of nuclear weapons creates strong incentives for all the major regional actors, including the United States, to avoid a military confrontation.

The prospects for conflict and cooperation in East Asia—a Liberal perspective

From a Liberal perspective as well there are strong grounds for optimism. First off, all the major actors in the region, including since 1978 the People's Republic, pursue externally-oriented economic development strategies. As a result, economic interdependence in the region has increased exponentially over the past three decades. It would be prohibitively expensive for Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan to cut themselves off from world markets, if for no other reason than that they rely on external sources for over 80 per cent of their energy needs.41 Although less dependent on outside resources for its survival, the People's Republic of China for its part needs to maintain its economic ties with the outside world in order to attract the foreign direct investment and technology purchases that it desperately needs to modernize its economy. After thirty years of pursuing a failed autarchic growth strategy, it is almost unthinkable that China's current crop of technocratic leaders would be willing to reverse their current policies.42 Today North Korea stands alone in its pursuit of autonomous economic development.

41 For an overview of the regions dependence on outside sources for energy, see Kent Calder, Asia's Deadly Triangle: How Arms, Energy and Growth Threaten to Destabilize Asia-Pacific, revised edn. (Sonoma, CA: Nicholas Brealey, 1997), ch. 3. Note that Calder sees energy dependency and the growing demand for energy as a cause of increased instability in the region. Other analysts are cautious.

42 See Wu Xinbo, 'China: Security Practice of a Modernizing and Ascending Power', in M. Alagappa (ed.), Asian Security Practices, pp. 122–7,143–5. This does not imply that China's current leadership is committed to an idealistic interpretation of China's national interests. On the contrary, the majority of analysts maintain that Chinese leaders continue to have a very realist conception of the world. See Yong Deng, 'Chinese Conceptions of National Interest in International Relations', China Quarterly, 154 (June 1998). However, a Liberal would point out that the trend is in the direction towards greater emphasis on economic growth, greater emphasis on technocratic governance, and increased cooperation with the international community.
Stability is further reinforced by the character of Asian trade, which is increasingly intra-regional in character. Whereas in 1985 intra-regional trade accounted for approximately 33 per cent of all trade conducted by Asian nations, by 1992 the figure was close to 45 per cent and has climbed to over 50 per cent since. Intra-regional foreign directment investment (FDI) flows have become a decisive element in fuelling economic growth, and the transfer of technology and management techniques, in particular from Japan, to other countries in the region has been crucial in the success of their export-led growth strategies. China is a good case in point. Between 1978 and 1994 China absorbed over $95.6 bn dollars in FDI from abroad, principally Hong Kong and Taiwan. As a result, from a starting point of near zero in 1978, by 1994 enterprises with at least some foreign investment employed over 12 million workers, accounted for 13.9 per cent of industrial output and conducted 37 per cent of China’s total foreign trade.

This growth in intra-regional interdependence has two immediate security consequences. First, growing reliance on world markets has pushed up considerably the costs of military conflict. If the economic costs of the economic crisis in Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea appeared severe, it is well to bear in mind that these costs would be dwarfed by the losses that would result in the wake of a major regional security crisis. Second, and perhaps more importantly, to the extent that these policies are viewed as successful they strengthen the political influence of those groups in East Asian societies who favour a cooperative approach to foreign relations, and a corresponding decline in the political influence of those sectors of Asian government which are the most concerned with security matters. It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that the new Standing Committee of the Politburo under Jiang Zemin for the first time includes no representatives of the People’s Liberation Army.

With growing interdependence has come increased participation by Asian countries in international institutions, precisely as predicted by Liberal international relations theory, and since the end of World War II Asian countries have joined a host of global multilateral institutions. For instance, in the late 1970s the PRC was the member of but a handful of organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental. By the late 1980s the PRC was a member of over 700 such institutions. Membership in international institutions has come to be viewed as a major goal of foreign policy in most Asian countries—witness for instance Japan’s eagerness to gain permanent representation on the United Nations Security Council or China’s quest to become a charter member of the World Trade Organization.

44 See Walter Hatch and Kozo Yamamura, Asia in Japan’s Embrace: Building a Regional Production Alliance (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
45 It should be noted that a considerable percentage of these investment flows are believed to have been actually generated in the mainland and disguised as Foreign Direct Investment in order to gain the tax exemptions which the Chinese government grants to foreign investors.
The general increased participation in multilateral international institutions by Asian countries has been paralleled by a growth of regional multilateral institutions. Initially largely economic in orientation, these institutions have spread to cover a wide range of other areas, including the environment, regulatory standards, cultural exchange and most recently arms control and security issues.\textsuperscript{49} In this context, the founding of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), in which all the major regional powers participate, is widely considered a milestone in this process. Although doubts remain whether China and some other members are genuinely committed to abiding by the international rules and norms that are embodied by these institutions, there is no question that there has been a considerable spurt in the development of regional institutions since the end of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{50} Naturally, Liberal analysts would view these trends as evidence that conditions of complex interdependence are having precisely the sort of pacifying effects on the international system that Liberal theory would predict.\textsuperscript{51}

Finally, although the majority of the region's population continues to live under harshly authoritarian regimes, the past decade has seen considerable movement towards more democratic forms of government in East Asia. Leading the way in this process are the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan, all of which underwent remarkable transformations in the late 1980s towards more open and liberal regimes. While in each country the problems of democratic consolidation have yet to be entirely overcome, a return to a non-democratic form of government appears highly unlikely. For the rest of the region the prospects for a speedy and smooth transition to democracy remain muted, although recent developments allow some grounds for optimism that the democratization trend continues. And there are signs of liberalization even in such harshly authoritarian systems as the People's Republic of China, which in the years since the Tiananmen massacre has seen the development of a considerable degree of local autonomy, an improved institutionalization of its political processes, and an opening up of the domestic political debate to a wider range of opinions than was previously possible. In many respects it would appear that the old modernization paradigm of the 1950s and 60s—which held that there existed a strong positive correlation between economic growth and democratization—would appear to have been, somewhat belatedly, vindicated by the Asian experience of the 1990s.\textsuperscript{52}


\textsuperscript{50} One of the more insightful and important debates concerns the degree to which the PRC is genuinely committed to arms control. Analysts remain divided on this issue, in part because the evidence remains ambiguous. For a relatively pessimistic point of view, see Banning N. Garret and Bonnie S. Galser, 'Chinese Perspectives on Nuclear Arms Control', \textit{International Security}, 20:3 (Winter 1995/1996). For a more optimistic assessment, see Ian Alasdair Johnston in Ikenberry and Mastanduno, \textit{International Relations in Asia Pacific}.


\textsuperscript{52} For a useful review of these developments, see Minxin Pei, 'The Fall and Rise of Democracy in East Asia', in Larry Diamond and Mark Plattner (eds), \textit{ Democracy in East Asia} (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
If the Liberal democratic peace hypothesis holds true, this suggests that security tensions between Asian democracies such as Japan and South Korea will diminish with time.\textsuperscript{53} Eventually, as democracy spreads through the rest of the Asia-Pacific region, it may even become possible to establish a stable zone of peace comparable to the one which exists among the Western democracies of Western Europe and North America.

The recent East Asian economic crisis at first might appear a reversal of these trends. The near-collapse of many East Asian and South East Asian economies in 1997–9 has fuelled a bitter backlash at both the elite and popular levels against the international economic order in general and against the Western dominated International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in particular. In Japan, a protracted recession that borders on a depression raises the potential of a similar political backlash emerging there as well, while the PRC, although relatively unscathed by its neighbours’ turmoils, shares many of the same weaknesses in its financial and banking system and potentially could suffer a similar shock.\textsuperscript{54} Some analysts warn that these adverse economic developments may lead to a dissolution of the current patterns of international cooperation and lead to greater regional military as well as economic conflict, much in the same way that the collapse of the Gold Standard and the development of regional trading blocs in the 1930s paved the way for the Second World War.\textsuperscript{55}

While certainly there are grounds for concern, it is important not to exaggerate the impact of the crisis. By mid-1999 economic production in the major economies outside of Japan showed signs of recovery, major liberal reform programmes have been undertaken in almost every country in the region that will increase their openness to international economic forces and foreign direct investment, and fears that the ‘Asian Contagion’ could develop into a global financial crisis now appear overblown. Such global economic institutions as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank wield more influence in the region than ever. Even the trend towards democratization appears to have been reinforced by the process, as reflected by the collapse of the authoritarian Suharto regime in Indonesia. Some commentators even express regret that the crisis was not even more severe so that it would have strengthened domestic political pressures for greater economic liberalization!\textsuperscript{56} A Liberal international relations theorist could persuasively argue that in fact the Asian economic crisis has actually strengthened rather than undermined the move towards greater interdependence and cooperation in the Asian Pacific region.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{53} See Victor Cha, \textit{Alignment despite Antagonism} (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), conclusions.

\textsuperscript{54} For a good overview of the development of the crisis, see Karl D. Jackson (ed.), \textit{Asian Contagion: The Causes and Consequences of a Financial Crisis} (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999). On the potential problems of the Chinese economy, see Nicholas Lardy. For a more left-wing perspective on the crisis, see Robert Wade, \textit{The New Left Review}.


\textsuperscript{57} As always, such pronostications should be taken with a grain of salt. While the crisis has not immediately resulted in a collapse of international order, in a number of respects the underlying roots of the crisis remain more or less intact. In particular the opaque personalistic business practices and close ties between the public and private sectors have not been swept away by the fresh winds of globalization that blew through Asian financial markets between 1997 and 1999. The possibility of a second round of crisis, possibly even more severe than the first, cannot be ignored.
To sum up, although conditions in Asia are still far removed from those obtaining in Western Europe, a Liberal IR analyst can point to encouraging signs that fundamental change in the politics of the region is underway. Economic development has led to increased trade and a growth in economic interdependence. These in turn have brought about a proliferation of international institutions upon which Asian nations increasingly rely for achieving their national objectives. Perhaps not coincidentally, these developments have been linked to a shift in at least some countries in the region towards increased openness and democracy—precisely as the Liberal theory would predict.

Prospects for conflict and cooperation in the Asia-Pacific—a Constructivist view

As the previous two sections suggest, Realist and Liberal international relations theorists might well agree that, structurally speaking, the Asian-Pacific region is set for stability, albeit each school would attribute that stability to very different structural causes. Paradoxically, few observers familiar with the actual situation in the region today would share the degree of optimism that a mechanical application of mainstream IR theory might produce. The primary grounds for concern have little to do with such ‘objective’ features of the international system as the balance of power or the patterns of international trade and cooperation. Rather the chief source of instability in the region today lies in the peculiar construction of national identity and interest on the part of the chief regional actors in the region. There are four areas of particular concern in this connection: the drive for national unity by the highly unstable regime in North Korea; the clash between increasingly divergent constructions of national identity on Taiwan and on Mainland China; the deeply rooted anti-militarism of contemporary Japan; and latent popular isolationism in the United States. Each of these factors by themselves could cause severe problems. Together they create the potential for the unravelling of the entire regional order.

If it were possible to conduct a straw poll among analysts of regional security affairs, it seems likely that North Korea would be voted the country ‘most likely to explode’. Despite virtual economic collapse and famine-like conditions in which as many as two million North Koreans are estimated to have died of hunger, the secretive Kim Il Jung regime continues to pour resources into its military machine. North Korea continues to engage in provocative military shows of aggression, such as the recent naval clash in fishing waters claimed by the North and the South, and it maintains a nuclear weapons and missile development programme.

From the perspective of structural IR theory there is no reason to assume that the North Korean regime should be tempted to risk an attack on the South. The balance of power overwhelming favours the United States and South Korea, especially given that there is little prospect that China or Russia would come to the aid of the North in the event of its making the first aggressive move. The chances of a military victory appear dim at best, whereas the risk of a military escalation that could destroy the regime in the North would seem large. While some limited economic and diplomatic benefits could be pointed to—in particular the 1994 Framework agreement which grants North Korea close to $US 5bn in aid from the United States and its regional allies—in the long run the North Koreans’ strategy appears to only weaken rather
than enhance its military security: North Korean belligerence has strengthened the alliance between the United States, Japan and South Korea; its hard-line diplomatic position has alienated the North’s traditional military patrons—China and Russia; and its military build-up has led to counter-moves on the part of the United States and South Korea, including the recent decision to deploy a theatre missile defence system (TMD) that may well negate North Korea’s rather primitive ballistic missile capabilities.58

From a Liberal point of view, North Korean actions appear even more puzzling. Long-term cooperation with South Korea and the West would provide the regime in the North with considerable economic rewards that could allow it to address its pressing domestic economic crisis. While there would be some political costs, with careful management of its external ties and a determined programme of economic reforms, the Communist regime in North Korea, like those in China and Vietnam, conceivably could manage to sustain itself for decades to come.

North Korea, however, does not appear to view its interests in the ways that Western international relations experts expect—hence its frequent portrayal as ‘erratic’ and ‘unpredictable’ in the literature. The regime’s rigid adherence to Marxist-Leninist ideology as interpreted by its founder Kim Il Sung59 allows no deviation from harsh, unremitting struggle with its capitalist rivals. Moreover, the North’s near-mystical attachment to complete economic, social and political autonomy (Juche) makes it unwilling to open its doors to the outside world.60 Even were the regime’s leaders willing to recognize the long-term futility of their nation’s current course (and it is thoroughly possible that they in fact do not), the threat to their domestic political legitimacy may be too great to allow them to risk compromise. As a result they appear willing to pursue their current, highly risky strategy in the desperate hope that the tides of history will change in their favour.61

In the case of Taiwan and China we are confronted with a case of two apparently irreconcilable nationalisms which, if anything, are growing in strength and virulence with each passing year. Although the Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) government of Taiwan maintains the fiction that Taiwan is part of the Mainland, for the majority of the Taiwanese population unification with the historic motherland is at best a long-term objective of relatively low priority, and at worst an immediate threat to the nation’s hard-earned liberty and prosperity.

Moreover, a substantial and growing minority in Taiwan goes even further and supports a complete break in the island’s historical ties with China in favour of


59 Kim Il Sungism is held to have superseded Marxism-Leninism since the 1992 revision of the North Korean constitution.


61 On the character of the North Korea regime, see Thomas H. Henriksen Jongryn Mo (eds.), North Korea After Kim Il Sung (see fn. 36 above); and Dae Sook Suh and Chae Jin Lee, North Korea after Kim Il Sung (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998). For a penetrating and relatively sympathetic portrayal, see Bruce Cummings, Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History (New York: Norton, 1997), ch. 8.
Taiwanese independence. Behind this attitude there is the peculiar history of democratization in the Taiwanese context. For over forty years the Taiwanese people were denied democracy and civil liberties because the KMT argued that it represented the Chinese people as a whole, of which Taiwan was but one province. Through a variety of institutional mechanisms the Taiwanese found themselves a political minority in their own country, dominated by an ethnically distinct Mainland elite that monopolized the levers of political power. As a result, the indigenous democratic movement in Taiwan emerged in opposition to the myth of national unity, and many Taiwanese, particularly of the younger generation, feel that democracy can only finally be consolidated on Taiwan through an outright declaration of independence.62

The political expression of these sentiments is the Democratic People's Party, which over the past decade has steadily increased its share of the vote and has won control of many important political institutions. In response the KMT, under the leadership of Taiwanese-born Lee Teng Hui, have tried to coopt this growing Taiwanese nationalism by trying to increase de facto Taiwanese sovereignty without declaring de jure independence. The recent election of Chen Shiu-Bian of the DPP as the President of Taiwan promises to further raise tensions between Beijing and Taipei. During the electoral campaign Chen toned down the DPP's traditional pro-independence stance in order to appeal to mainstream voters, and upon assuming office he has offered a number of conciliatory gestures towards the mainland, including a further intensification of economic ties. Given the conflicting pressures emanating from within his own party and the Mainland, however, it remains an open question as to whether or not Chen will succeed in charting a middle-of-the-road position over time.63

At the same time as pressures for independence grow in Taiwan, on the Mainland the forces of emotive nationalism would appear to be on the rise. After thirty years of mismanagement and two decades of compromising its socialist principles, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) domestic legitimacy rests on relatively thin ground. The regime's two chief accomplishments have been to maintain internal order and to achieve high rates of economic growth, and this latter achievement is beginning to look increasingly precarious. In order to find a new ideological glue to hold a vast and disparate nation together in recent years there has been an increased readiness on the part of Chinese leaders and intellectuals to make use of an emotive, nationalist message, one that focuses on China's past humiliations at the hands of external powers—its so-called 'century of humiliation'—and that makes the rectification of these past injustices a central national mission.64 Compounding these

62 For a review of these issues, see Alan Wachman, Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994); and Tu Weiming, 'Cultural Identity and the Politics of Recognition in Contemporary Taiwan', China Quarterly, 148 (December 1996). On the democratization process in Taiwan, and its close linkage to the issue of sovereignty, see Yun Han Chu, 'Taiwan's Unique Challenges', Journal of Democracy, 7:3 (July 1996), pp. 70–71, 78–81. Reflecting the historically contingent nature of the process of identity creation, in South Korea the trend has been in precisely the opposite direction, with the pro-democracy movement using nationalist themes of a unified Korea to attack the regime and calling for greater dialogue with the North.


sentiments are suspicions that outside forces may seek to weaken and divide China, peeling off its peripheral territories—beginning with Taiwan and Tibet—before closing in to dismember the rest, much as the European powers and Japan did in the nineteenth through to the first half of the twentieth centuries. These fears, rooted in collectively shared historical memories of China’s recent past and closely linked to the development of modern China’s national identity, threaten to make Taiwan more than ever a sensitive issue for China, and may well put China on a collision course with Taiwan, and the United States.

Domestic politics in both Korea and Taiwan thus represent very real potential for crisis in the region. How well would the existing alliance structures be able to cope with these crises were they to actually emerge? Again, in terms of actual capabilities, the United States together with its regional allies should be able to cope with any military contingency—albeit the costs could be high, especially if weapons of mass destruction were involved. Unfortunately there are political-ideological dynamics at play in the alliance, especially in Japan and the United States, which suggest that the response may not be entirely rational and the consequences far larger than the crises themselves might otherwise warrant.

The first set of problems lies in Japan, which since 1945 has managed to avoid assuming a larger regional military role and has constructed and institutionalized a new, anti-military identity that makes it very difficult for Japan to deal with military security issues. Whereas prewar Japan defined itself as the land of the warrior, postwar Japan has gone out of its way to become a ‘peace nation’, one dedicated to the peaceful pursuit of trade and economic development rather than building its military strength and geostrategic power. This transformation in self-image, which originally was at least partially motivated by the desire to appear less threatening to a hostile outside world, has since become deeply engrained in the national psyche and is intimately associated by many Japanese with Japan’s postwar democratic institutions.

To a remarkable degree, many Japanese, not only on the left, but also in the centre of the Japanese political spectrum, fear that in a crisis situation, the military might once again conspire with right-wing forces to undermine Japanese democracy and push the country into a military confrontation. This fear has periodically surfaced in post-1945 Japanese politics, first and most decisively during the 1960 Mutual Security Treaty riots, and, more recently, during the Gulf War and the 1994 crisis on the Korean peninsula. Japanese leaders, even ones with hawkish views like former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro or Hashimoto Ryutaro, have found themselves sharply constrained by these sentiments and unable to pursue more than the most minimal response to external security threats, relying instead almost entirely on their security relationship with the United States.65

As a result, in the event of a crisis on the Korean peninsula or in the Taiwan straits there is the very real possibility that the Japanese will not offer the level of support that their allies, and in particular the United States, may expect of them. To be sure, as in the Gulf War, the Japanese will offer substantial financial assistance, and this time around may even be able to provide some logistical and perhaps

65 I have developed these themes at greater length elsewhere. See Thomas Berger, Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
intelligence support. Unlike the Gulf war, however, such gestures, substantial as they may be, may not prove enough. Unlike Saddam Hussein’s demoralized and forsaken conscript army, abandoned to its fate in the sands of Kuwait, in North Korea and possibly the PRC the United States would face a much more determined and capable enemy who, though militarily inferior to the United States, would be in the position to inflict substantial casualties on American forces and possibly even civilian targets. Were Japan or other Asian allies perceived not to have done their fair share—to have failed to share the risk of fighting as well as the financial costs of war—the popular outcry in the United States could become overwhelming.\(^\text{66}\) In other words, even assuming that Japan has a strong structural incentive to enjoy a free ride on security at American expense, in the event of a serious Asian security crisis it would seem perfectly reasonable for them to make some at least token gesture to underline their willingness to share the costs in blood as well as the treasure of maintaining East Asian security. A failure to do so would endanger the free ride on which they depend. Yet, there is good reason, backed by recent historical experience, which suggests that they will fail to make such a rational response.

The new Guidelines on US–Japanese Defense Cooperation represent an important first step towards rectifying these difficulties, at least with regards to a military contingency on the Korean peninsula. At the very least, wounded American troops are now likely to receive medical treatment in Japanese hospitals and arms and munitions can be ferried to US forces fighting in Korea. Whether such steps will be viewed as adequate by US policymakers and the American public remains an open question. In the event of a conflict over Taiwan, the likelihood of a Japanese response appears murkier still.

In this connection the fourth set of Constructivist elements comes into play, namely America’s isolationist traditions. Throughout much of its history the United States has viewed itself as aloof from the power politics practised elsewhere. The quest for power and the machination of states to achieve supremacy was associated by Americans with the corrupt, illiberal regimes of the old world. In his famous farewell address to the American people, America’s first President, George Washington, warned the new Republic to avoid foreign entanglements precisely in order to avoid replicating these destructive behaviours. For nearly a century and a half thereafter the country was able to maintain the illusion that both its external and internal political practices differed from the rest of the world’s, even as it pursued its ‘manifest destiny’ along its ever widening frontiers.

At the beginning of the twentieth century America’s sheer size and power thrust it on to the world stage. The United States was only able to take on such a role by couching its involvement in world affairs in the highly moralistic language of President Woodrow Wilson, after rejecting the pragmatic Realism of Theodore Roosevelt.\(^\text{67}\) After the failure to realize its lofty vision of global peace and equality after World War I, the United States relapsed into its isolationist slumber, and it took the direct attack on Pearl Harbor to drag it back into global politics. In the immediate post-1945 period there emerged a powerful political consensus in favour

\(^{66}\) The Gulf War in fact came very close to realizing such a catastrophic scenario. See Thomas Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism*, pp. 171–7.

\(^{67}\) For a readable and fascinating analysis of the failure to base American foreign policy on realist principles and the reliance instead on Wilson’s idealism, see Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), ch. 1.
of an overseas commitment, but that consensus was made possible largely by the fear of an external threat, the Soviet Union, which had both military and ideological dimensions.\(^{68}\)

The end of the Cold War has seen the disappearance of that threat without its replacement by any equally compelling rationale for external involvement. Instead, the United States appears to remain locked in its Cold War overseas commitments by the forces of sheer inertia, plus the vague sense on the part of its foreign policy elites that were the United States to withdraw, regional instability would develop that would ultimately compel America to become involved again, this time at a much higher cost in terms of lives and treasure than merely maintaining the status quo would have done. Unfortunately, it is difficult to convey this insight to the American population, which shares with much of the rest of the prosperous advanced industrial world a strong aversion to casualties.\(^{69}\)

Even were the United States to suffer heavy military casualties as a result of conflicts over Korea or Taiwan, from an ‘objective’ Realist or Liberal point of view that would not provide a compelling reason to give up its present strategy of regional commitment. From a Realist perspective military casualties are simply part of the price that hegemons must occasionally pay for their dominant position in the international system—although obviously they want to use their power to spread the costs among other powers when possible. While one might want to debate whether hegemony is really beneficial from the point of view of the hegemon, at the very least most American strategic analysts share the view that America’s de facto control of the most advanced regions of the world represents a significant, and historically unique, advantage that it should not lightly squander. Likewise, from a Liberal point of view a military setback is not a sufficiently strong reason for the United States to stop striving for a more benign international order. The forces of progress are driving the world towards a new, more peaceful age, and the United States can play a historical role in bringing that process to fruition.

While such arguments might appeal to a small segment of the public, American domestic political realities would make it very difficult for policymakers to continue to justify America’s overseas commitments to their constituents if it appeared that the United States had been left to bear the brunt of the fighting and dying in a Asian conflict. The end result could well be a disintegration of the alliance and multilateral structures upon which Asian-Pacific regional security depends.

To be sure, a Constructivist might also point to other features of the regional system that are more promising for stability. Strategic pragmatism and a commitment to economic growth over military competition appear to be ideas that have spread throughout Asia since the late 1970s, spurred on by the tremendous advances made first by Japan and then by the so-called four little dragons (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore). Likewise the trend towards democracy can be viewed as fed, at least in part, by the transmission of democratic and liberal norms from the global environment to the regional level, a development that if it continues may have positive implications for international relations in the region.

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\(^{69}\) For an interesting analysis of the American aversion to casualties, see Thomas Langston, ‘Imagining Peace’, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 6 September, 1998)
Unfortunately, it is precisely these aspects of the broader structure of identity and interests in the Asian-Pacific region that may have been put to the test by the recent economic crisis. To be sure, as pointed out earlier, the region appears to be recovering from the immediate economic consequences of the crisis (although the danger of a relapse remains very real). However, the crisis has inflicted significant long term damage, damage that is not immediately evident on the level of temporarily stable economic production or in functioning international institutions at the formal level, nor in terms of the balance of power in the region. The real damage that has occurred has been on the ideological cultural level and thus is invisible from a Liberal or Realist international relations perspective. Having seen their national and own personal fortunes go on a downward spiral after striving for more than a generation to achieve independence, economic prosperity and political influence through a more cooperative approach towards interstate relations, many Asians have now begun to question their countries' policies and the goals and beliefs upon which they were founded. The crisis has reinforced and brought into the open latent anxieties regarding globalization and Western domination. This is why any future relapse would be doubly dangerous. A single occurrence can be viewed as an aberration, a one-time dip in an overall positive trend. A reoccurrence, even if it were less damaging in real economic terms, will call into question the entire developmentalist paradigm that has guided countries in the region for at least the past two decades. Under such conditions, much as in the 1930s in Europe, the door would be opened for more extreme ideologies to take hold.

Conclusions—the two track approach, Asian style

What are the implications of the foregoing analyses? First and foremost, it suggests that there is nothing inevitable about conflict in East Asia. In fact, if one were to restrict the analysis to a consideration of such structural features as the distribution of military capabilities and the opportunity structure for peaceful international cooperation, there are considerable grounds for optimism. Unfortunately, such structural elements cannot be considered independently of the subjective ways in which political actors relate to those structures. In the East Asian context these subjective elements, and in particular the ways that the different countries in the region understand their self-interests, greatly increase regional tensions and complicate the workings of the balance of power and the effects of international institutions, making it impossible to predict the future based on deductions of pristine structural theories alone.

In many ways this is unsurprising. In the past such factors as the rise of revolutionary nationalism in France, the emergence of an assertive German will to power, or of communist ideology in Russia have had a profound impact on inter-

70 See François Godemont.
71 The issue of cultural change is one of the central problem areas in the entire Constructivist and culturalist literature. For an interesting discussion of the issue in general, see Harry Eckstein, 'A Culturalist Theory of Political Change', in Eckstein, Regarding Politics: Essays on Political Theory, Stability and Change (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992). I have sought to deal with the issue of cultural change in my previous work, see Thomas Berger, Cultures of Antimilitarism, especially pp. 12–15.
national relations, leading to the disintegration of great empires and the reordering of international politics on a continental, even global scale. In Asia as well, structural factors alone would have difficulty accounting for such factors as Japan’s almost suicidal pursuit of empire during the Pacific War, or the PRC’s willingness to confront not just once, but twice—in 1950 and 1969—two vastly superior military, nuclear-armed superpowers. Unfortunately, all too often scholars and policymakers lose track of ideational-cultural variables, which are difficult to track and hard to predict, in favour of the illusory certitudes of purely structural-material analyses.

Thus, while a certain degree of guarded optimism regarding the future of regional security may be in order, it cannot be taken for granted, and political leaders—particularly in the democratic countries in the region—must take various measures to counter potential problems. In this connection, there are two principle sets of tasks, one dealing with medium to short-term problems and one for managing strategic issues in the region over the long term. First and foremost it will be necessary to devise an effective mechanism that can deal with the immediate threats to regional stability posed by the situations on the Korean peninsula and in the Taiwan straits. In this regard it will be necessary to strengthen and reforge the bilateral security arrangements that the United States created in the region during the Cold War—in particular the Mutual Defense Treaty between South Korea and the United States and the Mutual Security Treaty between Japan and the United States—so that they are better able to handle regional crises and not simply respond to more localized threats. The new Guidelines on US-Japanese Defense Cooperation are an important first step in this direction. More will be needed if the dangers associated with burden sharing and latent US isolationism are to be avoided.

In the medium term it would be desirable to create a broader multilateral security arrangement among democratic countries in the region based on the existing bilateral relationships, both in order to improve military coordination among the allies, but also more importantly to enhance the legitimacy of the current set of arrangements. One of the chief problems with the existing alliances is that in any dyadic relationship the power balance is so lopsidedly in America’s favour that the impression is created that decisions are made exclusively on the basis of US national interests without any consideration of the interests of the other country—be it Japan, South Korea, the Philippines. In a multilateral framework such fears could be greatly mitigated. In addition, such a multilateral arrangement could be further strengthened by explicitly defining it as the product of a shared community of values.71 In the past it was impossible to create such institutions, given the paucity of democracies in the region. The situation in Asia today is very different, with the emergence and consolidation of democratic regimes in South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines and Thailand.

The task of creating more effective institutions to deal with the short-term threats to regional stability is made all the more urgent because in the long run there is a

71 This is one of the chief differences between the situation in East Asia and Europe. In Europe NATO as well as the European Union have been strong multilateral organizations that are legitimated through reference to a community of common values rather than merely a community of common economic and security interests. This arguably has given these institutions greater domestic political legitimacy and staying power than is true of any of the existing institutional structures in Asia. For an argument along these lines with respect to Europe, see Thomas Risse-Kappen, Cooperation Among Democracies: The European Influence on US Foreign Policy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).
very real structural transformation taking place that could alter the relatively benign constellation of objective factors currently at play, namely the rise of China. With over 65 per cent of the total population of the region, and with its vast human and material resources, China would appear to play an even larger role in shaping Asian affairs than it has over the past one hundred and fifty years. While it will still take a few decades before China actually acquires economic power and technological capabilities comparable to those of the United States in the region, barring some unforeseen catastrophe it appears quite likely that at some point it will do so, at which time many of the structural elements identified in this article that are conducive to stability in the region may be called into question.

To prepare for that eventuality, and in order to create an international environment that will encourage the nascent Chinese colossus to develop in a benevolent direction, it is necessary that the other powers in the region help create a benign and stable international security environment that on the one hand does not threaten China, but on the other hand is able to deal effectively with the security threats that do exist. To avoid alarming China something akin to the Partnership for Peace that has been extended to Russia in the European context might be considered for the Asian context. Such an Asian version of the Partnership for Peace would go beyond the ARF in giving China and other nations which are not part of the new multilateral alliance of democracies greater access to the decision-making processes of the democratic states, and offer them greater assurances in the form of increased confidence-building measures. At the same time, it would not create the impression that the security interests of all the states in the region are identical or easily reconcilable with one another, an impression that relying on the ARF alone might have highly negative domestic political consequences in the democratic countries.\footnote{Imagine the strength of European peace movements in the 1980s if there had been a CSCE without NATO. Such an arrangement, much like the League of Nations in the 1930s, could easily encourage democratic regimes in the direction of irresponsible appeasement in the face of aggression.} If such a strategy, which must be made sensitive to the ways in which national security policies are legitimated both domestically and internationally, can in fact be implemented, there may be some hope yet that the Asia-Pacific region will be set for stability.