



WHO WILL DECIDE THE FUTURE OF THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL ORDER?

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What is often overlooked in the debate over the future shape of the international order in East Asia is the role of countries in the region other than U.S. or China in shaping that order. It is assumed that U.S. and China as the great powers will determine what the order will look like, while the other countries are relegated to a supporting role. It is also assumed that the outcome of the competition between U.S. as a status quo power and China as a rising power will depend on how they manage the inevitable tensions and conflicts arising from the power transition. The other countries relegated to the margins of the unfolding strategic competition between these two powers will not be able to determine the outcome one way or the other. While the argument sounds credible given the huge power differential between U.S.-China and the other countries, it is fundamentally flawed because it does not take into account how the rise of the latter will give them a greater role in shaping the regional order.

Just as weak and impoverished

China reduced its power gap with the U.S. through rapid, sustained economic growth, other East Asian countries propelled by their own economic development will narrow the power gap vis-à-vis the great powers. In Northeast Asia, South Korea and Taiwan pursuing a vigorous export oriented strategy and global integration have transformed themselves from poor agrarian economies to advanced industrial economies in less than half a century. No country better illustrates the ability of East Asian countries to reach their full development potential than South Korea. With GDP per capita comparable to the levels of poorer countries in Asia and Africa, Korea's economy not only goes from GDP per capita income of 105 dollars in 1965 to 27,513 dollars in 2015, but achieves an important milestone when it becomes the 7th country in the world (after the original G-6 countries) surpassing the threshold of US\$20,000 gross per capita income with a population of 50 million people in 2012.

The countries in Southeast Asia following a similar strategy and

inserting themselves in the global value chain have also seen explosive economic growth that have propelled Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia into newly industrializing economies with immense growth potential. ASEAN will become the fourth-largest economic region in the world by 2030, after the European Union, United States and China and Indonesia is expected to account for 40 percent of this growth.

While significant hurdles remain if these countries are to avoid the middle-income trap, they can make the transition to advanced economies as their counterparts did in Northeast Asia by having an effective political leadership capable of mobilizing public support for upgrading the economy in order to sustain growth. If they are successful, some of the Southeast Asian economies will eventually be larger than the Northeast Asian economies because their endowment of natural resources, territory, and population are greater. Indonesia, for example, is projected to surpass South Ko-

rea as the fourth largest economy in Asia by 2030. Based on future projections, East Asia will eventually become a home to advanced industrialized economies that are currently found in Europe with concomitant influence and power to shape the regional order.

Just as China has parlayed its growing economic and military power to reshape the Asian order to serve its interests and to give itself a bigger role in regional affairs, the other East Asian countries will use its growing clout to mobilize the necessary resources and political will to achieve their own strategic goals. But unlike the great powers, these countries are not interested in playing a supporting role either in favor of U.S. or China, but instead want to carve out an independent role to prevent any one power from dominating the region or intensification of the great power rivalry that could erupt into a regional conflict. Their desire to maintain regional balance of power in order to secure their interests stems from their bitter historical experience.

They have experienced first-hand the often disastrous and long-lasting effects of unequal power relations in which “the strong do what they will, and the weak suffer what they must.” In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Western countries and Japan with their vast economic resources and technological superiority invaded and subsequently colonized much of the region. They not only deprived the indigenous peoples of their autonomy, but subjected them to harsh controls, economic exploitation, racism, and cultural destruction. Their divide and rule policy and importation of foreign labor that changed the ethnic composition of some of these

societies, moreover, became a source of recurring social and political conflict in these countries. Then, while they were still under Western colonial occupation, Japan invaded and brutally occupied the peoples of the region from 1941-1945 in their war against the Western powers in the Pacific.

When East Asian countries emerged from end of WW II and gained their independence, the newly-formed nation-states became embroiled in a new global conflict—the Cold War—between the Western bloc led by U.S. and the Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union as they vied for power and influence in the region. This conflict took a terrible toll as countries were forced to choose sides against their will, suffered collateral damage even if they were not directly involved in the conflict, and were unable to prevent external intervention in their domestic politics that worsened the internal political conflicts in their own societies.

Having borne the full brunt of great power dominance and rivalry in the region, the lessons imparted from that painful period in their history have been forever etched in their consciousness. Their wariness of power inequity in the international system is rooted in the fact that power asymmetry gives the stronger states the ability to control or constrain the choices at the expense of small and weak states. Therefore, it is in the latter’s interest to create an international order in which great power dominance and rivalry will no longer drive the security dynamics in the region. As the East Asian countries continue their drive to become industrialized economies and enhance their economic and military power, they will emerge as a third pole in

a multipolar system with a self-interested agenda of their own. As a result, the future East Asian order will look different from the one that is currently envisioned by those who only take into account the role of China and U.S. in determining that order.



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