Assessment of the East Asian Security Order

In East Asia, the bipolarity of the Cold War is evolving into a multipolar security system. After the static and stable order of bipolarity, the fluidity of shifting alliances and power accompanying the development of a multipolar Asia has given rise to questions about the stability of the region. The belief that, at present, the balance of power in Asia is unstable has led to efforts to identify the challenges to the security order and to examine the future political and military role of the United States. Lessons from history and current trends indicate the necessity of a strong American presence and the development of unifying institutions to stabilize the politics of the region.

According to the realist school of thought, multipolar systems, when compared to bipolar, are intrinsically less stable for, as the distribution of power among states shifts, conflicts tend to erupt. The European state system of the early twentieth-century is a prime example of multipolarity leading to devastating and system-shattering war. The existence of potential alliance partners and coalitions did not deter aggressive states. In addition, the complexity of having multiple centers of power, instead of leading to caution on behalf of bureaucrats, contributed to miscalculation on the strength and intentions of rivals, which, in turn, led to the World Wars.

Offsetting the realists’ argument of inherent instability, liberalism suggests that the development of multipolarity can be harmonious. Ironically, the prime example of a peaceful multipolar system is the Western Europe of the second half of the twentieth-century. Following the Second World War, the spread of democracy, greater equality in the distribution of wealth, interdependence of economies and institutions, and a common culture led to an integrated security system between whose members war would be unthinkable due its high, destructive cost.¹

However, the optimism promoted by the current European stability may be misplaced when considering the multipolarity of Asia, for the fact remains that Asia is not Europe, and mitigating

factors that succeeded in building peace between European nations are either underdeveloped or absent between Asian countries. Instead of a unity of governmental and societal forms, Asian states are diverse, ranging from democracies to totalitarian regimes. The region is marked by wide variations in wealth, where economies are still relatively independent and inclined to view each other as bitter competitors for the consumers of the world market.\(^2\) Ethnic and racial differences have contributed to nationalism at the price of a collective identity, which proved crucial in the development of the military and political institutions essential to peaceful Europe.

Nationalism of Asian states fosters territorial disputes over natural resources and land symbolic to national pride. The gravity of these disputes is increased by the threat of nuclear capabilities, which are unevenly distributed across the region. As a result, small nuclear forces are vulnerable to preemptive strikes as shifting alliances drive concerns among large nuclear powers, such as India and China, about long-term shifts and reductions in influence.\(^3\)

Compounding the issue is the absence of a strong regional institution to serve as a deterrent to territorial aggression. Without integrated Asian organizations and other unifying factors, such as a common identity, the cost of war in Asia, when motivated by territory of symbolic or strategic value, has yet to definitely outweigh the benefits. For example, the continued confrontation between the nuclear powers India and Pakistan over the rights of Kashmir is rationalized by the symbolic importance of the region.

In addition to the Indian-Pakistani debate over Kashmir, other challenges exist to the development of a peaceful multipolar system in Asia, including the dispute over Taiwan and the unification of the Korean peninsula. The tense situation across the Taiwan Strait has the potential of catalyzing contention between the major powers of the region, the United States and China. The possibility of conflict is further enhanced by the ascendancy of the Chinese state. Growing militarily and economically, China is a rising power, whose progress has been constrained by the desire of the United States to maintain its hegemonic, status quo security position in Asia. A critic of American

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\(^2\) Ibid., 18.
\(^3\) Ibid., 23.
forward troop deployment and bilateral security ties, Chinese officials voice the view that the region is not large enough for the two powers. For peace to prevail, China must come to belief that it has a stake in Asia equal to that of the U.S.

Historically, the United States has developed a hub-and-spoke security arrangement in Asia. A framework of bilateral treaties and security partnerships supported by the forward deployment of troops has worked to deter aggression and promote peace in the region. Working as a stabilizing force, the strong American military presence provides time for Asian economic and social integration, which, in turn, builds a foundation for political and military cooperation. The importance of forward-deployed American armed forces lies in this ability to simultaneously stabilize and develop coordination among nations.

To guarantee the development of a stable Asia, the United States needs to reinvigorate bilateral ties with its strongest Asian allies, Japan and South Korea, and establish security communities, with members cooperating in areas of shared interest and negotiating to resolve disagreements. By encouraging dialogue, the United States will be advancing the cooperation of Asian nations in matters of regional security. A continued American military presence is essential to guarantee that aggression does not deter the movement towards integration and to reassure allies of the continuing U.S. commitment to peace in Asia.

Difficulties remain in convincing Asian nations, especially the public, that American troops should continue their engagement as armed forces are decreased elsewhere in the world. In addition, the United States must overcome zero-sum mindsets and ambiguous intentions, which are rooted in the regional history of ethnic and national conflict. To achieve this, the U.S. armed forces must promote cooperation through programs, such as officer training schools and joint security missions. The American military must also diversify its presence, branching out from Japan and South Korea to forward bases in other Asians nations and, thereby, fostering stronger ties throughout the region.

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The future of Asia holds the potential for both conflict and peace as the bipolarity of the Cold War evolves into a multipolar security system. Due to the strong, stabilizing force of its military, the United States has the ability to encourage cooperation between Asian nations, which, in time, can lead to economic and political coordination. American forward troop deployment is essential to integration and, as a result, the present development of a peaceful, stable Asia.