As the Cold War came to an end in the late twentieth century, the emergence of a multi-polar system in East Asia began. East Asian states like China and Japan are becoming more powerful, while others are trying to strengthen their economies. The emergence of a multi-polar system in East Asia causes many realists to be pessimistic about the future of East Asian security. According to Aaron Friedberg in his essay, “Ripe for Rivalry,” realists believe that multi-polar systems lead to instability because of an unequal distribution of power. Using the example of a multi-polar Europe before 1945, he shows how an unequal distribution of power in Europe resulted in several wars (Friedburg 1996:3-6). As multi-polarity emerges in Asia, the chances for instability increase. However, the American military presence and regional and international organizations provide counterweights which enhance stability in the region.

Currently, East Asian security is precarious. William Perry, former U.S. Secretary of Defense, notes several potential problems that could lead to instability in the region. First, Asian economic prosperity, which previously ensured stability, has slowed. The 1997 East Asian financial crisis caused domestic unrest and made Asian economies realize that their neighbor’s economic practices can negatively affect their economies. In addition, Japan, which is highly involved in the region’s trade, is still facing an economic crisis. Second, Perry claims that China’s unstable relationship with Taiwan could cause instability in the region. For example, China’s efforts to secure its “one China policy” have led to missile firings in 1996 and verbal threats of military retaliation toward Taiwan during Taiwan’s 2000 presidential elections. Third, the potential for an arms race in Asia has arose. Perry mentions that China is deploying more missiles aimed at Taiwan. In response, Taiwan has asked the United States for missile deterrent systems. If Taiwan and other countries in the region feel threatened by China, it may result in an arms race (Perry 2000).

The United States and Asian countries like Japan are also concerned about North Korea. North Korean leaders wanted to open a nuclear facility in Yongbyon and have been producing ballistic missiles that can reach Japan and possibly the United States. To control the situation, the United States has held several talks and established agreements, such as the Agreed Framework in 1994 in which the United States and North Korea agreed to promote peace and
stability by nuclear-free policies. The agreement stopped the North Koreans from producing nuclear weapons and later dismantled their nuclear facilities (Perry 2000).

Although the realist’s pessimistic view of East Asian security is popular, some scholars argue that realism alone cannot be used to predict East Asia’s future. Denny Roy, in his article “Realism and East Asia,” explains the limitations of realism. Firstly, realists believe states put national security ahead of regime security, but North Korean leaders put their regime ahead of national security. Secondly, realists maintain that ideational factors do not pertain to a country’s national interests, but China’s unstable relationship with Taiwan demonstrates how its history and culture affect its national interests. Thirdly, realists believe that countries would never give up their autonomy, but Japan and South Korea give up some autonomy by relying on U.S. military protection (Roy 2000:158-178). Since realism has limitations, its pessimistic predictions are debatable.

In search of a possible system to ensure peace in a multi-polar Asia, scholars have made comparisons between the 19th century Concert of Europe and present-day Asia. “The Congress of Vienna established three preconditions for concert in Europe: containment, reconciliation, and agreement on common values” (Stuart 1997:230). These three preconditions can be applied to Asia as well. For example, the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the use of military force for political purposes need to be contained, rather than containing a specific country. In regards to reconciliation, Chinese involvement in the international community and international organizations will hopefully ameliorate its conduct toward other countries (Stuart 1997:237). Furthermore, recent North Korean actions and attitudes toward South Korea hold hope for better relations or “reconciliation” between those countries. East Asians also have the common value or mutual interest in avoiding war and emphasize economic prosperity. Although some differences exist between 19th century Europe and modern day Asia, their commonalties may provide a basis for peace and stability.

High ranking military officials such as Admiral Dennis Blair, Commander of the U.S. forces in the Pacific, acknowledges the importance of building a security community in the region in order to establish peace. He notes how Perry’s talks with North and South Korea, China, and
Japan have emphasized the desire for peace in the region. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) have provided its members with a platform on which to discuss peace and stability and establish a sense of community (Blair 2000).

Admiral Blair also recognizes the importance of America’s military presence in East Asia to encourage a security community and promote stability via combining military personnel for peacekeeping operations. The United States has enhanced communication among military forces in the region, trained and educated foreign military officers, given aid to humanitarian and peacekeeping operations in East Asia, and encouraged regional participation in previously bilateral exercises (Blair 2000). Through these cooperative practices, the U.S. military has helped build a security community in Asia, which justifies its military presence. U.S. military presence also protects the economic sea lifeline between Asia and the U.S. Since U.S. military presence is beneficial, American troops should stay in the region for as long as possible, with the permission of the host countries.

The U.S. military serves other important roles in maintaining stability in Asia. Currently, the United States is the world’s only superpower and its military, with troops stationed in Korea and Japan, also acts as a deterrence. In addition, the U.S. military’s presence in East Asia allows Japan and South Korea to focus on economic growth and stability. Therefore, America’s military presence is still necessary. Larry Wortzel, Director of Asian Studies at the Heritage Foundation, agrees with this statement, saying “the absence of the United States in this region would create a major void in the strategic architecture of the Asia-Pacific that would lead to a serious arms race” (Wortzel 2000).

Although there is the possibility of an unstable future in East Asia due to the emerging multi-polarity in the region, the United States and regional organizations play a key role in ameliorating these tendencies and promoting peace and stability.


