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➤ Indispensable Nation? The United States in East Asia

Michael Cox

At the end of World War II the United States faced three historic tasks: to recreate the conditions that would over time lead to the reconstitution of an open world economic system; to limit, and where possible, defeat the ambitions of those who after 1945 were pressing to push the world in a radically different direction to that favoured by America and its market allies; and finally, to incorporate old enemy states like Germany and Japan into an American-led international order.

In order to achieve these goals the United States possessed at least two assets: a confident world view born out of success in a war that left it with massive global reach and a vast amount of power. That said, the challenges it confronted were enormous – nowhere more so than in Asia. Here a brutal war had not only devastated most countries in the region; only four years after Japan's humiliating exit from the war, an authentic revolution actually occurred in arguably the most critical of all Asian countries: namely China. Whether or not the causes of communist success in China were the result of brilliant organisation, peasant discontent, the successful manipulation of nationalist sentiment or the backing of communist USSR (or a combination of all four) has long been debated by different generations of historians. Few though would dispute the hugely disturbing impact that the communist revolution in China was to have upon the wider Asian region. Nor could there be any doubt either about the implications of the Chinese communist revolution for the conduct of US foreign policy over the next three decades. Indeed, Mao Tse-Tung's particular brand of revolutionary communism not only brought the Cold War to Asia and guaranteed a permanent American presence in the region that endures to this day; it was also the root of the United States' decisions to intervene militarily on at least two occasions: first in Korea between 1950 and 1953, and then later in Vietnam, in an extended conflict that finally ended in America's most humiliating defeat. If the Cold War remained cold in other parts of the world it was anything but in Asia.

This essay traces what in global terms must be seen as one of the great transformations of the modern era: that which turned one of the most devastated and disturbed regions in the world after mid-century into one of the more stable and prosperous by century's end. The process of transition did not occur overnight. Nor did it occur without a mighty struggle between competing ideologies and rival states. But in the end, Asia – a most fiercely contested region for well over fifty years – underwent a massive change and did so, in part, because of the role played by the United States. Of course this came at a very high price in terms of lives lost, blood expended and democratic possibilities abandoned. Still, if the measure of success for any great power is the creation of an order in which its interests are guaranteed and its main rivals neutralised, then US policy in East Asia must be judged to have been successful. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Japan.

JAPAN, THE UNITED STATES AND THE NEW ASIAN ORDER

As an emerging world power in the nineteenth century it was almost inevitable that the United States would quickly come to view the Pacific Ocean as an American lake. Indeed, at a very early date in its history, the United States was to pursue an expansionist westward policy that brought it into conflict with Japan by the middle of the nineteenth century and imperial China by the end. Certain in the knowledge that its own brand of muscular Christianity and robust enterprise were superior to anything on offer in Asia, Americans, like most 'normal' imperialists, viewed the nations with whom they came into contact with a mixture of contempt – the Chinese, according to one American observer were 'cold, snaky, slow, cowardly, treacherous, suspicious, deceitful people' – laced with a large dose of nineteenth century racism. The peoples of Asia offered little by way of inspiration, it seemed; thus the best one could do was either convert them to the Christian faith or teach them western ways and hope that one day, after years of careful tutelage, they would become as civilised as Americans themselves.

Ironically, the one country Americans seemed to admire most before being drawn into war with it was Japan, the only nation along the Pacific Rim that for a time, at least, looked to some in Washington as almost Anglo-Saxon in its desire to modernise its economy and state by imitating western methods. Initially a bulwark against imperial Russia (whose powerful navy Japan had defeated in 1904), later a counter to the USSR (after the revolution of 1917), and in possession of an altogether more developed material civilisation than that of decadent (and after 1911) disintegrating, China, until the early 1930s Japan seemed to be a natural partner for the United States in the Pacific.

All this was to change, though very slowly, as Japan began its conquest of Asia, beginning with its annexation of Korea in 1910 (about which the United States hardly protested at all), continuing with its invasion of Manchuria in 1931 (which again did not provoke much by way of a US response), going on with its attack on China six years later, and concluding with its devastating conquest of much of the rest of Asia in 1941, followed shortly thereafter by its attack

on the US Pacific fleet at anchor in Pearl Harbour. This 'day of infamy', as President Roosevelt was to call it, not only drew the United States into a Pacific War it had hitherto sought to avoid, but over time turned the United States into a permanent part of the Asia-Pacific strategic landscape, and later a major actor in Japan itself. Indeed, for at least seven years after the Second World War, the United State effectively governed Japan alone, and did so with a degree of cultural sensitivity and political acumen (made all the more necessary by the onset of the Cold War) that left an indelible and generally positive impression on the vast majority of Japanese.

Critical to the success of the new post-war relationship was a recognition by Japan and its ruling elite – since 1945 organised into the dominant Liberal Democratic Party – that Japan would accept its subordinate position to the United States in exchange for an American guarantee of its security. This in turn presupposed another bargain: between a United States willing – and indeed, enthusiastic – for Japan to concentrate most of its efforts on rebuilding and developing its not inconsiderable economic assets – critically dependent on ready access to the US market – in exchange for Japanese support for the United States in the larger international arena. Finally, underpinning the relationship was the understanding that while Japan might pursue certain external policies of its own, these would never be at the expense of regional order or US leadership. Japan, in effect, would be a semi-sovereign country.

No relationship remains entirely unchanged, and at times this very special relationship was to come under some strain, most notably in the 1980s, when high Japanese exports to the US began to create genuine economic disquiet in the United States. There were also a few on the Japanese right who continued to resent Japan's semi-sovereign status, and during the 1990s argued that Japan should now begin to say 'no' to its powerful patron across the Pacific. However, greater assertiveness towards the United States was not something that generally tended to recommend itself. In part, this had to do with domestic politics and the fact that the Liberal Democratic coalition that had run Japan since 1947 had no interest in

challenging an America. It also had a good deal to do with economics: the relationship had brought Japan nearly forty years of sustained growth (albeit with a blip in the 1990s), and most Japanese had no desire to upset something upon which their future prosperity continued to depend. Finally, it had more than a little to do with the region within which Japan happened to find itself. Here there remained unresolved tensions on the Korean peninsula. Post-communist Russia continued to hold on to territory that Japan regarded as its own. And as one century gave way to another, Japan faced its first serious regional challenge in the shape of China. Indeed, even with the decline of the Liberal Democratic political stranglehold on Japanese politics – and stirrings of anti-Americanism in some quarters – the rise of China and the fears this generated in Tokyo guaranteed a close relationship with the United States.

CHINA COMES IN FROM THE COLD

If the foundational building block of America's post-war position in East Asia was its relationship with a one-time enemy, its greatest challenge was a nation with whom it had been closely allied until the late 1940s. However, having 'lost' China the United States came to view Mao's form of Marxism-Leninism as being especially threatening. Even as late as 1969, most Americans viewed China through a particularly hostile Cold War lens, a perspective reinforced at the time by the sheer turmoil through which China itself was then passing – the so-called Cultural Revolution – and by an increasingly desperate struggle America was waging in Vietnam against a communist enemy supported and armed by the Chinese (amongst others). To make matters worse, American conservatives, in particular, remained closely allied with the Republic of China (better known as Taiwan), whose leaders had every interest in continuing to foster distrust between policymakers in Washington and political leaders in mainland China.

The great strategic shift that initially broke the diplomatic deadlock and subsequently saw the United States opening up formal relations with Beijing has been described in great detail by both historians and students of international politics, including some of

those who were involved in this most remarkable – almost revolutionary – of diplomatic reversals. It has also given rise to a lively debate as to why it happened. Thus, according to one school of thought, the new arrangement was the product of Chinese and American recognition that their greatest enemy was less each other and more the USSR. Others have stressed America's effort to decamp as quickly as possible from Vietnam using China's diplomatic clout as at least one instrument by which to limit the damage to its own position in the region. Some have even suggested a longer term American goal of opening up China, and by so doing enticing it back into the western fold. No doubt all these factors played a role, though what now seems to have been a near inevitable and irreversible process at the time looked anything but. For instance, if Mao himself had not died in 1976, if the Chinese economy had not been so weakened by his earlier policies, or if the USSR had not acted with such ineptitude in the late 1970s with its invasion of Afghanistan, then it is just possible that the rapprochement that followed may have taken much longer or may not have happened at all. But in the end it did, transforming the international system and drawing China away from the deep diplomatic freeze into it which it had been consigned since the revolution of 1949.

The US rapprochement with China, followed in turn by Beijing's adoption of far-reaching economic reforms and ready acceptance that its own modernisation required an ever closer association with the global economy, set China on a new course that over the next twenty five years would have a major impact on both China and the world. Most obviously, by abandoning the path of revolution, China helped reinforce America's temporarily weakened international position following its defeat in Vietnam in 1975. There is also a good deal of evidence to suggest that by working closely with the United States and placing more pressure on the USSR, China may have played a significant role, too, in bringing the Cold War to an end. Finally, its new alliance with the United States made possible the final defeat of Marxism as a serious political challenge to capitalism in the Third World. As the well-known American theorist Francis Fukuyama noted in 1989, the death of Marxism in the 1980s occurred for several important reasons, including its

own failure to produce efficient economies that could compete under world market conditions. However, it was the effective (if not formal) abandonment of Marxist-inspired planning in China that did as much as Gorbachev's policies in the former USSR to make the case for liberal economics.

In spite of these critical changes, the relationship between the United States and post-Maoist China was never without its problems. Most obviously, the Chinese leadership were determined to ensure that economic change was not accompanied by political reform or a loss of control by the communist party – a development that in their view had had disastrous consequences for a once formidable USSR. China was clearly prepared to walk along the capitalist road previously feared by Mao; but it was not prepared to permit Chinese citizens the luxury of human rights or the freedom to choose their own political leaders. Secondly, there remained the outstanding issue of Taiwan, once the United States' key ally in the early Cold War, and now a democracy whose very existence posed a very real problem for a Chinese leadership committed to a 'one China' policy. Finally, there was the very real long-term problem of the impact of China's speedy rise on America's position within the wider international system. Optimists could claim, and of course did, that a buoyant and dynamic Chinese economy was good for the American consumer (cheap imports), good for the American economy (as China bought up the US debt) and good for regional economic growth (critically important following the Asian financial crisis of 1998). Yet there were more than a few in the United States who remained concerned about where this new dynamism might one day lead. As one observer put it, the real issue was not whether China was rising peacefully or not, but rather what would happen after it had finally achieved its ascent? As the first decade of the twenty first century drew to an end, few Americans seemed to have a clear answer.

THE UNITED STATES, KOREA AND THE LEGACY OF THE COLD WAR

If the Chinese leadership revealed a shrewd appreciation of how effectively a formally communist state could take advantage of the global economy without conceding any of its power at home, its neighbour – and formal ally – North Korea demonstrated an equally shrewd understanding of how to survive under conditions where the tide of history was moving against it following the collapse of communism in Europe. Indeed, like South Korea, the North drew some very important lessons from the collapse of one very special communist state in particular: namely East Germany. But whereas the leaders in the South drew the not unreasonable conclusion that the regime in the North was destined to change – and that the main policy goal should be to ensure that its evolution did not happen too rapidly – those in the North concluded that everything short of war had to be done to ensure that the communist state they had built at such cost since 1945 did not change at all.

The method adopted by the North was a crude but simple one: using nuclear brinkmanship as a way of extracting concessions from its various opponents – most obviously South Korea – while forcing the wider international community (including the United States) to come to terms with the North. Fearful that its own survival was now in doubt, Pyongyang – whose nuclear programme had been raising some very real concerns in Washington since the late 1980s – began to push hard, and in 1993 even threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Not surprisingly, this sounded a series of very loud alarm bells ringing in Washington, forcing policymakers to look at their very limited options – including the appalling (and impossible) one of conventional war. Out of this process finally emerged the decision to cut what to many at the time looked like the only deal possible: the so-called 'Framework Agreement' of 1994, a compromise solution that made a series of concessions to the North Korean regime – including delivery of large amounts of oil and aid – in exchange for a promise that they would remain party to the NPT.

Few believed the agreement was perfect. But hardly anybody could see any serious alternative, including a highly nervous South Korea, whose leaders by now were desperately keen to maintain some kind of relationship with a regime whose rhetoric they seemed to fear a good deal less than its collapse.

The adoption of what many in the United States regarded as a flawed policy forced upon them by North Korean intransigence on the one hand, and a South Korean desire to maintain some kind of relationship with the North on the other, soon came under attack within Washington. The 1994 deal, critics on the right argued, was little more than a modern day form of appeasement whose only consequence would be to preserve a regime already doomed by history. It would also allow the communists in Pyongyang to play a game of divide and diplomatic rule between the United States and its once steadfast South Korean ally. Equally serious, in the opinion of critics, it did very little to slow the North's nuclear programme down in any meaningful way. Thus the Agreement was a failure in nearly every conceivable way. Naturally, no serious policymaker wanted confrontation for its own sake, but there was a desire to find a more robust approach to the North Korean problem, one that weakened this hideous regime rather than strengthening it, and punished it for its various transgressions – only one of which was having a nuclear programme – rather than rewarding it.

The incoming George W. Bush administration did not at first seek a major review of US policy towards North Korea. This though proved almost irresistible following the attack of 9/11 and President Bush's announcement of an altogether tougher policy towards all 'rogue' regimes. Indeed, by early 2002, he was already counting North Korea as part of a wider 'axis of evil', and insisting that the policy of the United States towards it could be nothing less than regime change. Inevitably this provoked a response from the North Koreans, who once more threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (which they did in 2003), while pushing ahead again with its stalled nuclear programme. Thus began what looked to many observers like a rather dangerous diplomatic game conducted between all the interested parties (not just the United States and North Korea); one, however, which failed to prevent the North from acting in an increasingly aggressive fashion – as exemplified in 2006, when it conducted its own missile tests and confirmed that it had, at last, exploded a small nuclear device. This deliberately planned provocation nonetheless had the intended effect of forcing its enemies back to the negotiating table, and in 2007 nuclear inspectors were once again admitted into North Korea, while Pyongyang committed itself – yet again – to the NPT. Finally, in November 2007, North and South Korea's prime ministers met for the first time in fifteen years.

North Korea thus posed many significant challenges for US foreign policy in the years following the collapse of communism in other parts of the world. If nothing else, it revealed that the end of the Cold War, whatever its wider promise, threw up as many problems as it did opportunities. What North Korea also illustrated was that critical issues such as nuclear weapons would not necessarily wither away once the Cold War came to an end. If anything, the end of the Cold War era made these problems even more difficult to solve. Finally, in attempting to deal with the policies of a failing regime on a divided Asian peninsula, the United States discovered something that many Americans seemed to have ignored in the unipolar age: that however much power one happened to possess, this alone did not solve some very real problems. Furthermore, since there was no problem more difficult to solve than North Korea, it required the United States to 'get serious' about multilateralism and recognise that one had a much greater chance of solving these problems by acting with others, rather than acting by oneself.¹

1 James Clay Moltz and C. Kenneth Quinones, 'Getting Serious about a Multilateral Approach to North Korea', *The Nonproliferation Review*, Spring 2004

EAST ASIA: PRIMED FOR RIVALRY?

The continued division of Korea and the many challenges it posed for the United States pointed to something more general about East Asia even after the end of the Cold War: that the region continued to contain within it many serious fault lines that were not easily amenable to simple diplomatic solution. Here the contrast with Europe could not have been more pronounced. Indeed, scholars of International Relations have been much taken with the comparison, pointing out that, whereas Europe – both during and after the Cold War – managed to create some form of a ‘liberal security community’, East Asia had not. Indeed, according to at least one influential school of American thought, East Asia, far from being primed for peace after the Cold War, was instead ‘ripe’ for new rivalries. In fact, according to Aaron Friedberg, writing in an influential and much quoted article published in 1993, Europe’s very bloody past between 1914 and 1945 could easily turn into Asia’s future.² Uncertainty about the future of North Korea, unresolved tensions between China and Taiwan, Japanese suspicion of China, China’s historical dislike of Japan, the persistence of authoritarianism, and last but not least, the legacy of a very bloody history stretching back many centuries, when taken together mean that the world in general – and the United States in particular – should remain deeply concerned about East Asia’s highly uncertain future.

This pessimism (inspired as much by philosophical realism as by a deep knowledge of the region itself) has over the past few years given way to an altogether less bleak assessment by American analysts and policymakers. Few believe that East Asia will be without its fair share of difficulties going into the twenty first century. That said, there is probably more to look forward to than dread.

First, the region has turned into one of the most economically dynamic in the world. Indeed, in global terms, the region now accounts for nearly 30 percent of world economic production. Nor does there seem much likelihood that it will slip backwards any time soon. On the contrary, the region overall appears to be economically ‘blessed’, not so much in terms of raw materials but in other, more intangible, but important assets including a culture of hard work – sometimes referred to as ‘Asian values’ – a plentiful supply of labour, a huge reservoir of capital, and a set of political and economic structures that allows the state to play a critical role in engineering successful economic outcomes. Nor in this lengthy list should one ignore the part played by the United States itself. Indeed, by opening its market to East Asian goods while providing the region with security on the cheap, the US has played what some would see as a very important part in generating stable growth throughout the region.

Second, though many states in the region continue to have powerful and emotionally charged memories of past conflicts, in and of themselves these are not enough to generate new conflicts in the present, especially in circumstances where regional trade and investment are rising rapidly. East Asia certainly carries more than its fair share of historical baggage (much of this deliberately exploited by political elites in search of legitimacy). The fact remains that economic pressures and material self-interest are increasingly driving countries in the region together, rather than apart. The process of East Asian economic integration may have been slow to develop (ASEAN was only formed in 1967). Nor has integration been accompanied by the formation of anything like the European Union. However, once regionalism began to take off during the 1990s, it has showed no signs of slowing down.

² Aaron L. Friedberg, ‘Ripe for rivalry: prospects for peace in a multipolar Asia’, *International Security* (1993).

A third reason for greater optimism is Japan itself, which in spite of an apparent inability to unambiguously apologise for past misdeeds, plays a most pacific role in the region. Indeed, having adopted its famous peace constitution while renouncing force as a means of achieving its goals abroad (Japan also remains one the strongest upholders of the original Non Proliferation Treaty), it has demonstrated no interest at all in upsetting its suspicious neighbours by acting in anything other than a benign manner. Furthermore, by spreading its not inconsiderable economic power in the form of aid and large-scale investment, it has gone a very long way in fostering better international relations in the region. Even its old ideological rival – China – has been a significant beneficiary, becoming home by 2003 to over 5000 Japanese companies.

This leads us finally to the role of China itself. As we have already indicated, there are still some unanswered questions concerning China's long term position in the world. A great deal of American ink has already been spilt worrying about 'rising China' and the threat this is likely to pose to its neighbours and to the United States. Yet here again there may be more cause for optimism than pessimism, in part because China itself has openly adopted a strategy (referred to as the 'peaceful rise') that has been specifically designed to reassure other states that its economic ascent will not necessarily lead to new political or strategic problems. At the same time, China until very recently appears to have been more interested in building up its economic base at home rather than engaging in adventures abroad.

Yet the great unanswered question remains: can China continue to rise in its own region without causing fear amongst its neighbours and concern across the Pacific in Washington? Until the economic crisis of 2008 the answer to this would have almost certainly been a 'yes'. However, the last few years have seen the rise of new tensions in the region – in the South China Sea in particular – that have caused many states in East Asia to rethink their relationship with Beijing; and, in turn, look once more to strengthen their security partnership with the United States.

THE UNITED STATES: STILL INDISPENSABLE?

Regional demands for a greater US presence point to America's still significant role in East Asia. Indeed, even in an era when it has become fashionable to talk of a diminished US role in the wider world, one continues to be struck by how central the United States remains in the thinking of all actors in the region. Thus China, for all its bluster, still sees the US as a vital partner. South Korea remains dependent on the US for its protection. And a host of other states in South East Asia – from Japan to Taiwan – maintain important ties with Washington that they show little inclination of wanting to give up. Nor do any other states appear willing to play the wider role that the United States plays.

At the end of the day, the position of the United States in East Asia is likely to endure for the very simple reason that many in the region have fewer doubts about its intentions than they do about many of their more immediate neighbours. East Asia may be in the process of shedding part of its bloody history, but the legacy of the past lives on to shape attitudes and beliefs in the region. More concretely, there are still a number of outstanding issues that remain unresolved and thus require an American presence to ensure they do not disturb the peace. So long as Taiwan worries about China, China resents Japan, and South Korea fears the North, there are few in the region willing to contemplate a future without the United States. If the US can be characterised as an Empire, then in East Asia it is one that remains a welcome guest at the high table of international politics. ■