

What the Asian Debate about U.S. Hegemony Tells Us

by Evelyn Goh

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Recent Asian debates about the US role in global and regional security stem from two decades of strategic transition from Cold War bipolarity to uncertain US unipolarity challenged by unilateralism and rising powers. These debates span the region, and are driven as much by domestic political transitions and nationalist imperatives as they are by longer-term strategic planning.

The Asian discourse intersects with a set of international debates about the future of global order, which we may summarize as three narratives. First is the popular ‘Asian century’ narrative that diagnoses what Kishore Mahbubani calls an “irresistible shift of global power to the East.” Scholars like David Kang further argue that, driven by the massive redistribution of world industry toward the newer industrialized economies in East Asia, this shift is accompanied by strategic realignment, especially toward China. The second, ‘liberal hegemony’ narrative, however, asserts that US hegemony is built on more than economic and military might alone. US world leadership will be sustained in spite of other rising powers because of the unique liberal values and institutions that underpin it. John Ikenberry, the most prominent proponent of this view, also suggests that Washington can share power with rising powers that buy into the liberal orthodoxy. Finally, the third narrative is that of a coming, probably violent, power transition fueled by the inevitable conflict between the rising powers and the US. This stark realist view, rather surprisingly, is increasingly hard to find in Asia.

The current Asian debates appear to congregate around the first two narratives. Singaporean policy-makers and analysts have tended to stand out for their greater willingness to articulate deliberate viewpoints – often because they wish to provoke debate and reconsideration amongst their neighbors and partners. Against the broader context of debating US hegemony, the Singapore discourses usefully summarized by Paul Evans in *Pacnet* #39 (Aug. 31) are important for several reasons.

To begin with, the heart of the matter is not the differences in regional predictions about shifts in US capabilities and the balance of power. Rather, the widespread regional ambivalence about US values and uncertainty about US leadership are the critical elements. The real debate is not about whether the US will remain unipolar or preponderant in Asia, or even about whether Washington’s will to engage with the region is waning. *The real debate is about whether, how much, and for how long Asians should remain complicit in*

facilitating, legitimizing, and essentially sustaining US hegemony.

The mistake in so much strategic analysis is in focusing on the wielders of power at the expense of ignoring the subjects of power. If the post-Cold War regional activism in East Asia teaches us anything, it is that smaller players have an impact on the efficiency and efficacy of great powers. What the US exercises in Asia is hegemony – not just preponderance of power or primacy – because of the critical element of regional support for its strategic leadership. Within the scholarly literature, the most interesting recent work has focused on the agency and choices of East Asian states in this period of transition. The Singapore debates exactly encapsulate some of these crucial processes of deliberation in the region.

The most significant commonality in the more clearly developed Singaporean views is, in fact, an agreement about the desirability of the US-led liberal order, whether for political, strategic, or ideological reasons. Tommy Koh is predisposed to highlight the positive elements of US-Asian relations and to stress the proven advantages of its benign offshore power. Simon Tay asserts the decline in both US power and interest in Asia, but he is actually most concerned that Asian states should avoid triumphalism and work harder to engage the US in “new and more sustainable ways” (*Pacnet* #15, March 30). Even Mahbubani, in his controversial book, argues that Asian states are rising successfully precisely because they have assimilated what he calls the “seven pillars of Western wisdom” – free markets, science and technology, meritocracy, education, adaptability, and a pacific culture.

All this suggests that these thinkers do not fundamentally contest the US-led international order. It is not just that they concede the benefits of this order, but rather that they acknowledge the necessity for its continuing hegemony (which, incidentally, can outlast the waning material power of the US itself). Yet, while Singapore has important ideational brokers, this small nation ultimately cannot singlehandedly prop up US hegemony in the region. Therefore, their aim is to stimulate debate in Asia about the extent to which the region wants to reform or replace this order.

Obviously, debates about US hegemony do not occur in a vacuum. The implicit parallel question is whether Asians are willing – to put it bluntly – either to shift into a Chinese sphere of influence, or to facilitate a highly complex negotiated power sharing arrangement between the US, China, and Japan in the region. On the possibility of China’s challenge to US dominance in the region, there is a significant amount of grandstanding (though less from the Asian policy elite than from policy hacks). And yet, the empirical evidence suggests that the region remains in a state of episodic cogitation about this critical question. Two illustrations:

First, in spite of much reactionary sentiment, there is still insufficient agreement about the putative definite exclusion of the US from regional institutions. In a backlash against a decade of 'exclusive regionalism' in the form of ASEAN Plus Three, a number of key East Asian states are now unwilling to continue to exclude Washington even from regional fora that may or may not generate significant security dialogue and processes (witness the East Asian Summit disputes and now the 'properly' inclusive ASEAN+8). The problem is not with having multiple institutions with different membership profiles per se; it is that creating rival institutions with overlapping remits suggests attempts to mask strategic indecision behind the practice of diversification.

Second, and in a related vein, it is unclear how seriously we ought to take exclusive regionalism. In functional terms, for instance, in spite of the unquestionable progress made in establishing an Asian Bond Market and the Chiang Mai Initiative system of bilateral and multilateral currency swaps, these were constructed as supplementary mechanisms. In the recent global financial crisis, key East Asian countries did not use these mechanisms but turned instead to the US and Japan for bilateral measures to insure their currencies. In normative terms, the East Asian states have not managed to mediate and channel China-Japan rivalry for regional institutional initiative in fundamentally transformative ways that would facilitate peaceful cooperation and power-sharing between them. (Negotiating equal contributions to regional funds represents only a very small step.)

In the meantime, therefore, Asia runs the risk of trumpeting an 'Asian century' while not paying sufficient attention to managing the crucial adjustments in strategic leadership necessary within the region. This then feeds into some measure of taking for granted US hegemony as a sort of 'fallback' position. Clearly, this is a potentially dangerous state of mind, and the Singapore debates remind us that we need to engage in much more careful and sustained reconsiderations of how to negotiate hegemony and hegemonic change in Asia.