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American hegemony and East Asian order

G. JOHN IKENBERRY

Introduction

For half a century East Asian regional order has been built around the mutual strategic embrace of America and its Asian partners. The region has undergone dramatic transformation over the decades marked by war, political upheaval, democratisation, and economic boom and crisis. Yet the most basic reality of postwar East Asian order has stayed remarkably fixed and enduring—namely, the American-led system of bilateral security ties with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and countries to the South. This 'hub-and-spoke' security order today remains the single most important anchor for regional stability. Around it has grown a complex system of political and economic interdependencies. East Asian countries export goods to America and America exports security to the region. East Asian countries get protection, geopolitical predictability, and access to the American market and the United States gets front-line strategic partners, geopolitical presence in the region, and (in recent years) capital to finance its deficits. This liberal hegemonic order has survived the end of the Cold War. But will it last?

Increasingly scattered across the region are a patchwork of ad hoc security dialogues, multilateral forums, ministerial meetings, track-two encounters and other mechanisms of regional engagement. China is rising in importance and is itself embarked on a surprisingly systematic foreign policy of engagement and reassurance. Leaders in the region are looking for wider and more inclusive multilateral mechanisms to manage increasingly complex political and economic challenges. Japan has slowly diversified its security contacts and is involved in an array of annual and ad hoc regional talks. South Korea has expanded in trade and societal ties with China. The United State itself has encouraged a multilateral approach to North Korea. The region appears as 'ripe for multilateralism' as it appears 'ripe for rivalry.' Security, economics and politics all seem to point to a future regional order that goes well beyond the logic of 'hub and spoke'.

How will the American-East Asia embrace evolve under the weight of these new realities? What is the future of America's liberal hegemonic approach to leadership in the region? These questions require a closer look at the logic of the decades-old American-led order and the shifting economic and security

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forces at work today. What are the limits and possibilities for more formal and coherent multilateral security arrangements in the region? What incentives continue to exist in Washington—as well as in Tokyo and Seoul and elsewhere in the region—for holding onto the bilateral, hub-and-spoke security system?

In this article I argue that the old American hegemonic order will remain a critical component of East Asian order for decades to come. The bilateral pacts serve multiple and complex security and political purposes for both the United States and its East Asian partners—a security order that is not easily replaced. Even China has incentives to preserve and work within an American hub-and-spoke system in the short and medium term. The American-East Asian order is an intensely complex and symbiotic political system. Alternative regional orders might involve movement toward a balance of power system, a bipolar Sino-American standoff, or a more institutionalised multilateral political community. But none of these orders seems likely in the next decade or so.

The dangers to today's liberal hegemonic order are twofold. One is the growing duality and disjunction between where the region sees its economic and security futures. Economically, most East Asian countries increasingly expect their future economic relations to be tied to China. In terms of security, most of these countries continue to expect to rely on American alliance protection. Indeed the rise of China makes this American security tie valuable. The question is: can the region remain stable when its economic and security logics increasingly diverge? The other danger is American security choices. Will the United States continue to invest political capital in its own regional order? More fundamentally, is a unipolar American world order compatible with strong bilateral security ties with old partners who are less important in confronting new terrorist-oriented security threats?

I will look first at the basic logic of the postwar American-led East Asian liberal hegemonic order. After this I will explore the new challenges to this order. The challenge for both the United States and its partners in the region is to envisage a future regional order that involves more multilateral forms of security and political cooperation. But this needs to be done in a way that does not undermine the stabilising features of today's bilateral-based regional order.

Bilateral alliances and American hegemony

America's relationship with East Asia is built on hard bilateral security ties and soft multilateral economic relations. Embedded in this relationship is a set of grand political bargains between the United States and the countries in the region.[1] The US-Japan alliance is the cornerstone of the security order, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and the trans-Pacific trade and investment system are the cornerstone of the economic order. The hub-and-spoke alliance system has its roots in the early Cold War and in the

failure of multilateral security arrangements that were intended to mirror the Atlantic security pact. The US-Japan alliance was intended to deter the expansion of Soviet power and communism more generally in the Asia Pacific. This Cold War anti-Communist goal led the United States to use its occupation of Japan and military victory in the Pacific to actively shape the region—and it did so more successfully in Northeast Asia than in Southeast Asia. The United States offered Japan, and the region more generally, a postwar bargain: it would provide Japan and other countries with security protection and access to American markets, technology, and supplies within an open world economy; in return, Japan and other countries in the region would become stable partners that would provide diplomatic, economic, and logistical support for the United States as it led the wider, American-centred anti-Communist postwar order.

From the beginning, this bilateral security order has been intertwined with the evolution of regional economic relations. The United States facilitated Japanese economic reconstruction after the war and sought to create markets for Japanese exports, particularly after the closing of China in 1949. It promoted the import of Japanese goods into the US during the 1950s so as to encourage Japanese postwar economic growth and political stability. The American military guarantee to its partners in East Asia (and Western Europe) provided a national security rationale for Japan and the Western democracies to open their markets. Free trade helped cement the alliance, and in turn the alliance helped settle economic disputes. In Asia, the export-oriented development strategies of Japan and the smaller Asian 'tigers' depended on America's willingness to accept the imports of these countries and to live with huge trade deficits; alliances with Japan, South Korea, and other Southeast Asian countries made this politically tolerable.

The alliance system—and the US-Japan security pact in particular—has also played a wider stabilising role in the region. The American alliance with Japan has solved Japan's security problems, allowing it to forgo building up its military capability, thereby making it less threatening to its neighbours. This has served to solve or reduce the security dilemmas that would surface within the region if Japan were to rearm and become a more autonomous and unrestrained military power than it currently is. At the same time, the alliance makes American power more predicable than it would be if it were a free-standing superpower. This too reduces the instabilities and risk premiums that countries in the region would need to incur if they were to operate in a more traditional balance of power order. Even China has seen the virtues of the US-Japan alliance. During the Cold War the alliance was at least partially welcome as a tool to balance Soviet power—an objective that China shared with the United States. Even today, however, as long as the alliance does not impinge on China's other regional goals—most importantly, the reunification with Taiwan—it reduces the threat of a resurgent Japan.

The political bargain behind the East Asian regional hegemonic order was

also aimed at making American power more predictable and user-friendly. If the United States worried about finding partners to help wage the Cold War and build an American-centred world order, these partners worried about American power—both its domination and its abandonment. Thus the East Asian regional bargain was also about the restraint and commitment of American power (Ikenberry 2001). The United States agreed to operate within bilateral and multilateral frameworks and the junior partners agreed to operate within and support the American order. American hegemony became more open, predictable, reciprocal, and institutionalised— and therefore more benign and tolerable. But the United States was able to lock other countries into operating within a legitimate and US-centred order.

Overall, there are three aspects of this regional hegemonic order that need emphasis. The first is the striking way in which the alliance system has played a more general role as the basis of regional political architecture. Alliances are traditionally seen as mechanisms to aggregate power to counter external threats. But the American alliance system has arguably played a more important role in managing relations between allies than in shielding these countries from external threats. The alliances bind the United States to the other major democratic states providing both parties with reassurances about their future relations. The alliances serve both to extend American power and to make it more predictable and user-friendly. The alliances give the weaker states in the alliance 'voice opportunities'—that is, they provide channels for regular access to the United States— which makes these states more likely to work with the United States than resist or work against it. The United States gains an institutionalised political presence in Europe and Asia. The stable and mutually agreeable security relations that emerge also have spillover effects in other realms—paving the way for deeper economic integration and political cooperation.

Second, the hub-and-spoke American security order has been crucial for the emergence of an open regional (and global) world economy. One of the striking developments in world order over the last fifty years is the rise of a truly open global economy. This was not an automatic or inevitable outcome. The roots of it reside in the 1940s as the United States— along with Great Britain and a few other countries—made choices about the organisation of markets and proceeded to put their power at the service of these goals. It is indeed difficult to imagine the rise of an open world economy without the parallel construction of a linked global security system. The pieces fit together: the United States provided security protection for European and East Asia states and underneath this security umbrella governments were encouraged to lower tariffs and pursue trade-oriented economic development strategies (Gilpin 2000: Ch.2).

There are several aspects to this linkage between security and open markets. First, the ability of the United States to build postwar order around binding security ties—anchored in the occupation and reintegration of Japan and West

Germany—created an unprecedented 'great power peace' among the major non-communist great powers. These countries were tied together in a way that made a return to the balance of power and great power rivalry among them impossible. As a result, markets could develop. Governments did not need to pursue competitive 'relative gains' economic policies toward each other. The long-term interest that each of these parts of the American system had in free trade and open markets could be pursued without security risks. Even today, it is probably true that an open multilateral economic order still hinges on the indivisibility of security between Europe, the United States and Japan. If these three parts of the advanced industrial world broke into competitive security spheres, economic openness—and the joint gains this entails—would be put in jeopardy. If the alliances disappeared it is not inevitable that this world would break into regional blocks—but a dramatic fragmentation in the security structure would bias politics and economic policies in that direction.

The second way that the American security umbrella mattered is in East Asia political-economic development. It is difficult to imagine that the East Asian tigers—South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and others—would have been able to pursue an export-oriented development path without close security ties to the United States. Because these countries were allies, the United States was able to see the economic success of these countries as a security asset to America. The long-term balance of payments deficits that the United States ran as a result of this and other trade relationships was tolerable because economic growth and integration in this part of the world was linked to America's larger alliance-security system.

The classic discussion of trade and peace starts with the liberal premise that free trade and open markets have a pacifying effect on states (Mansfield *et al.* 2003). The argument made here turns this logic around. It is the security structure that provides political supports and reinforcements for the open world economy. When Washington makes decisions on its alliance relationships it is important that it also factor in the implications that follow for the organisation of the world economy.

Finally, the specific way in which American security relations were established in East Asia reflects the specific postwar power realities and array of countries in the region. The United States was less determined or successful in establishing a multilateral order in East Asia. Proposals were made for an East Asian version of NATO but security relations quickly took the shape of bilateral military pacts. Conditions did not favour Atlantic-style multilateralism: Europe had a set of roughly equal-sized states that could be brought together in a multilateral pact tied to the United States, while Japan largely stood alone.[2] But another factor mattered as well: the United States was both more dominant in East Asia and wanted less out of the region. This meant that the United States found it less necessary to give up policy autonomy in exchange for institutional cooperation in Asia. In Europe, the United States had an elaborate agenda of uniting European states, creating an institutional

bulwark against communism, and supporting centrist democratic governments. These ambitious goals could not be realised simply by exercising brute power. To get what it wanted it had to bargain with the Europeans and this meant agreeing to institutionally restrain and commit its power. In East Asia, the building of order around bilateral pacts with Japan, Korea and other states was a more desirable strategy because multilateralism would have entailed more restraints on policy autonomy. As Peter Katzenstein argues:

> [i]t was neither in the interest of the United States to create institutions that would have constrained independent decision making in Washington nor in the interest of subordinate states to enter into institutions in which they would have minimal control while forgoing opportunities for free-riding and dependence reduction. Extreme hegemony thus led to a system of bilateral relations between states rather than a multilateral system than emerged in the North Atlantic area around the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Community (Katzenstein 1997).

The logic of the hub-and-spoke security order is clear. A multilateral security system in East Asia—if it had been possible despite unfavourable circumstances within the region—would have entailed a more far-reaching reduction in America's freedom of action. In choosing to abide by the rules and commitments of a multilateral security order, the US would need to accept a reduction in its policy autonomy. But in exchange it expects other states to do the same. A multilateral bargain is attractive to a state if it concludes that the benefits that flow to it through the coordination of policies are greater than the costs of lost policy autonomy. In effect, the United States did not want as much from East Asia countries as it did from Western European countries. In Europe, the US wanted a unified Europe and a close partner in the Cold War. It needed to give more to European countries in the form of multilateral commitments than it needed to in East Asia. In the Pacific if was far more hegemonic and wanted less of other states. The bilateral option was an attractive tool around which to build political bargains and regional order.

Challenges to liberal hegemony

The end of the Cold War and the shifting economic and political environment in East Asia have altered the region and present challenges to this postwar American regional hegemonic order. The geopolitical landscape has changed. Russia is now a weakened regional power. A resolution of the Korean standoff could also alter the underlying regional political bargains. The end of the Cold War required the United States to ask anew why it is stationing troops and protecting allies in the region.

But the logic of regional order and the political bargains that stand behind it remain surprisingly relevant—and the hegemonic order remains largely intact. The United States is still the most powerful state in the region—indeed

it has become a global unipolar power with unprecedented military and geopolitical capacities. Japan has suffered a decade of economic malaise. In the late 1990s, the United States surpassed Japan as the largest trade partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). A large and perhaps growing array of regional vested interests—on both sides of the Pacific—is in favour of open trade and investment. Together, this creates incentives in the region to engage the United States and encourage it to establish restraints on and commitments to its power.

The United States during the 1990s did reassess its security involvement in the region and reaffirmed its postwar security leadership. The Nye Commission of the mid-1990s provided a critical intellectual and policy rationale for a continuation of the US security presence in the region (Nye 1995). The prevailing asymmetries of power and strategic interests thus make the basic bargain between the United States and its partners as much valued as during the Cold War.[3] But we can look more closely at several general developments that surely will alter the logic of American liberal hegemony in the region.

Unipolarity and the war on terrorism

The two most striking developments of the last few years have been the rise of American unipolar power and Washington's post-11 September war on terrorism. The United States began the 1990s as the world's only superpower but it continued to outpace the other major states throughout the decade. Japan has lagged behind and the European Union is turned inward. The United States also has expanded military spending while other countries have pursued reductions—and with recent budget increases, the United States is today spending as much as the rest of the world combined. Unlike any other period in the modern era, the world's leading state can operate today without the counter-balancing constraints of other great powers (Ikenberry 2002). Meanwhile, in the aftermath of 11/9, the Bush administration has dramatically redefined global security threats—and under the banner of the 'war on terrorism' it has invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. It has articulated new ideas about alliances, 'coalitions of the willing' and the preemptive use of force (White House 2002). How do these transformations alter the American hegemonic relationship with East Asia?

First, unipolarity appears to reinforce America's preference for a hub-and-spoke approach to East Asia. Security bilateralism provides certain attractions for a powerful, security-providing state.[4] First, it allows the United States to pursue a divide and rule strategy among other states in the region. If Washington has a better relationship with each country than these countries have with each other, this enhances the ability of the United States to maintain

a leadership position. To encourage a multilateral system of states is to open up the possibility for a common front among weaker client states. Second, a multilateral security order would entangle the United States in more formal and demanding institutional relationships that would reduce its policy autonomy. To work bilaterally with individual countries—in which it holds the upper hand—gives the United States greater freedom of action. Third, the bilateral, hub-and-spoke arrangement provides opportunities for the United States to use its commanding power directly to shape the policies of its junior partners. It can more directly reward and punish these countries than it could in a multilateral security pact. It can deploy patronage politics, allowing it to translate its unipolar power into tangible regional outcomes. In other words, unipolarity entails expanded power disparities, and this situation serves to reinforce the bilateral logic that was present at the early moments of postwar order formation in the region.

But unipolarity would seem to have more mixed implications for America's junior partners in the region. On the one hand, the alliance relationship with the United States will be as important as before. It is the security tie that allows weaker partners to have direct access to Washington and to rescue some measure of predictability in its global and regional actions. Under conditions of unipolarity, it is less clear what restrains and disciplines the exercise of American power than it was in a Cold War world of bipolarity. So any institutionalised relationship with the US is desirable. But weaker states will also have incentives to find collective ways to jointly engage the United States. There is power in numbers, manifest in a sort of 'trade union' of American client states. So one would expect more regional cooperation—political and economic if not in security affairs—in response to rising American power. East Asian countries will want to supplement the hub-and-spoke system with greater regional multilateralism.[5]

The Bush administration's 'war on terrorism' approach to national security has another implication for the region. The new vision of national security devalues old security threats and alliance partnerships in favour of coalitions of the willing aimed at rogue states and terrorist networks. Fixed alliance arrangements are less necessary for Washington in this new security environment.[6] This puts America's East Asian security partners in a difficult position. They are confronted with problems of commitment and entrapment. On the one hand, they must seek to keep Washington interested in the bilateral security commitment—and so they need to reaffirm and adapt their own capacities and commitments to accord with the changing American security vision. For example, both Seoul and Tokyo have made efforts to show themselves as able partners in American military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. On the other hand, they also must worry about entrapment where they are led into military involvements that their own people will not support. These developments will surely continue to put stress on the basic security bargain that underlies the hub-and-spoke order.

The rise of China

Over the Cold War era, China has been outside the American-centred East Asian security order. Indeed the emergence of communist China in the 1950s was a catalyst for security cooperation across the Pacific region, and it remained so even in the 1970s when Sino-American relations warmed. Today, the rise of China is an epochal development that will inevitably reshape the region over the long term. Its power is steadily growing across economic, political, and military domains. Its diplomatic influence has expanded in recent years with its decision to engage the region through involvement in groupings such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN plus 3, and the six-party talks over North Korean. The Chinese economy is increasingly becoming the workshop of the world. How the East Asian regional order accommodates a rising China will be one of the great dramas of the new century.

There are at least two ways that a rising China could transform the region. One is by turning the region into a bipolar order organised around Chinese and American rivalry (Ikenberry and Mastanduno 2003). Countries in the region will increasingly find themselves facing strategic choices as to which regional coalition to join. Bipolarity will emerge in a process of Sino-American action and reaction leading to conflict and geopolitical balancing. A premise behind this possibility is that China's economic and military growth will increasingly thrust China into a role as regional rival, challenging American's hegemonic position in the region. An increasingly powerful China might be tempted to 'test the waters,' that is, probe the willingness of the United States to engage as Chinese officials spread their influence across the region. Tests could occur over Taiwan, the South China Sea, political instability in Indonesia, or perhaps the use of nuclear weapons by one party or the other. As China sought to challenge the legitimacy of a US-dominated regional system and propose its own alternative, it would seek the support of other states in the region.

In turn, the United States would likely respond by shifting from engagement of China to more active confrontation and containment. Any combination of China's questionable human rights practices, its nuclear espionage, its transfer of chemical and nuclear technology to other states hostile to the United States, its refusal to recognise US-supported investment and intellectual property rights, and its old-style anti-American rhetoric could provide the impetus for a hard-line American response. In this scenario, the United States would seek to strengthen its bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea and direct them far more explicitly at the Chinese target. China would counter by soliciting its own regional allies—perhaps even Russia and India.

Although the Soviet-American bipolar struggle lasted forty years, it is not clear that this sort of Sino-American bipolar standoff would be as stable. China is far more dependent on the outside world for markets and resources. It does not have a rival ideology or a natural set of geopolitical allies. The

United States also would need to overcome likely fierce allied opposition and domestic economic resistance to regional order built on ongoing Sino-American confrontation. Japan and South Korea—and the American business community—would surely resist a sustained policy of containment.

A second possibility is that China would rise in power and gradually replace the United States as regional hegemon. East Asian political order would increasingly be organised around Beijing and its own bilateral ties to countries in the region.[7] This process might unfold in several phases. The first phase is the incremental reorientation of national economies in the region toward the booming Chinese market.[8] Businesses would increasingly make choices to invest and trade with China and loosen economic ties with the US. This new pattern of commercial activity would bring with it growing inter-governmental connections with Beijing. Solving problems and engaging in political dialogues to smooth business conflicts would help drive the process forward. In the meantime, social and cultural ties to China would also increase. The political and social identity of Japan, South Korea, and the ASEAN countries would evolve to accommodate a Sino-centred East Asia. Because Chinese economic and political rise would cause disruptions and insecurities in the region, various regional institutional mechanisms would be developed to ensure Chinese restraint and commitment. ASEAN plus 3 might be an encompassing political vehicle for the gradual rise of a Chinese-dominated region.

In this scenario, the region will experience—and willingly accept—a gradual replacement of American with Chinese hegemony. There are some doubts that this will happen. It is not at all clear that China will be able to establish sufficient restraints on its power to make its leadership palatable to its neighbours. Can an illiberal China fashion a liberal hegemonic order in East Asia? This vision of future regional order also depends on China remaining political stable and open as it continues the modernise. Chinese growth could flatten out and political turmoil within China could thwart the construction of a Sino-centred order. Also the United States itself would need to gradually remove itself from the region, which is not likely. American global strategic interests are likely to remain global—and a military presence in the region will be essential for decades to come. Other countries, such as Japan and India, are also likely to want an American security presence in East Asia if for no other reason than simply to provide a hedge against Chinese dominance.

What is interesting today is that China has seemingly chosen to accommodate itself to American hegemony, at least for the moment. The rhetoric of anti-American 'hegemonism' has ended. There are some indications that Beijing finds the hub-and-spoke security system in East Asia to be a useful vehicle for its own diplomacy. After all, the touchstone of this system is the array of bilateral 'special relationships' that the United States has with its partners in the region. Beijing, in effect, seems to be seeking to establish its own special bilateral relationship with Washington. If East Asia had a multilateral security order such as exists in Europe, its geopolitical integration

into the region would be much more difficult, fraught with formal institutional obstacles. But it is relatively easy to establish an informal Chinese 'spoke' in the East Asian system. China itself is pursuing bilateral and multilateral diplomacy in the region to reassure its neighbours (Goldstein 2003). These developments suggest that the future will entail more of an incremental adaptation of the existing order than its wholesale replacement with something new.

Six-party talks and security multilateralism

A final development that challenges the US-led order in East Asia is the glimmerings of security multilateralism. In particular, the current six-party talks directed at a resolution of the nuclear crisis in North Korea offer one pathway forward toward a more cooperative security system in the region. One could imagine that these talks—which include South Korea, Japan, China, and the United States, along with North Korea and Russia—could evolve into a permanent security grouping. The ASEAN Regional Forum is also a vehicle that could evolve into a more general multilateral security organisation to manage regional stability. Such an East Asian multilateral order would be built on the logic of cooperative security rather than an a threat-based alliance and balance of power logic. The security organisation would promote strategic reassurance and cooperation, reducing the risks that security dilemma-driven conflict will reemerge (Ikenberry and Tsuchiyama 2002).

Multilateral security cooperation can come in a variety of forms. One minimalist version would simply involve greater cooperation among America's current security partners in the region. If cooperation became more formal and treaty-based, it could come to look more like the Atlantic security pact where the United States still leads the alliance but treaty partners are multilaterally bound to each other through military command, joint planning and operations, and collective security obligations. It took a massive postwar Soviet threat to trigger the formation of NATO's security multilateralism. It is not clear what would prompt such a security system in East Asia short of the total breakdown of relations with China. Some observers have proposed a more inclusive order that would bring China directly into regional security management. Retired Admiral Dennis Blair proposed the formation of an East Asia 'security community' that would tie the United States, Australia, Japan, South Korea, China and the smaller East Asian countries together in a security grouping (Blair and Hanley 2001).

Region-wide multilateral security dialogues and informal regional groupings are likely to grow in importance. China's current diplomacy of engagement and reassurance provides an opportunity for the six-party talks and other regional mechanisms to play a role that supplements the hub-and-spoke alliance system. Whether the region can make a more radical jump to a fully

functional regional multilateral security system is more doubtful—at least in the next few decades. Such a transformation would require, in effect, the 'Europeanisation' of the Asia-Pacific—a coherent and self-conscious political community organised around shared values, interconnected societies, and effective regional institutions. Political community would become the core organising principle of regional order, offering to states within it the value of joint membership and a sense of identity beyond their borders. The community would possess institutions and mechanisms to foster integration and resolve political conflict (Ikenberry and Mastanduno 2003: conclusion).

The circumstances that will allow such a political community to emerge in the region are difficult to imagine. Europe took centuries to get to the stage where it was willing and able to take steps to move beyond regional order built around the nation-state. Nationalism and the nation-state system remain the dominant and most widely accepted features of political order in Asia. History and geography in East Asia are less congenial to shared political identity. Would the identity be trans-Pacific or East Asian? What are its core values, and on what common cultural, religious, or other type of foundation does it rest? The political integration of Europe only began after all the countries in the region became mature democracies. In contrast, one of the striking features East Asia is the wide diversity of regime types, and many of those that are democracies are still in the early phases of political development. China in particular remains the great political uncertainty in the region. For all these reasons, the presence of a political community in East Asia not likely to emerge any time soon.

Conclusion

The American-led security system in East Asia is built on a more complex logic than is often assumed. East Asia as a region is typically compared unfavourably to Western Europe. In Europe, the major powers have fashioned a peaceful regional system around economic integration and an ambitious agenda for political union. By contrast, East Asia appears to be a decidedly more dangerous region governed by brute-power political realities. But over the last fifty years, the hub-and-spoke system of alliances has provided for remarkable region-wide stability despite the bloody wars inside Korea and Vietnam. The bilateral system has also supported a monumental economic transformation of the region. There is more complex architecture—disguised as Cold War-era alliances—than meets the eye.

In many ways, the most compelling reason that the American-led order may last for several more decades is that the alternatives are either not desirable or not attainable. Certainly, a hegemonic order is more desirable to most of the countries in the region than a bipolar Cold War standoff between the US and China. Hegemonic orders can be liberal and benign or coercive and exploitative. For most of the last half century, the American-led hegemonic order in

the region has been relatively 'user friendly' to allied states. It has given Japan and Korea security protection from and political access to the world's leading military power. Bilateral alliance partnership has also been associated with the unprecedented economic growth and transformation in the region. One can understand why China is not actively seeking to overturn the bilateral security architecture, particularly when this hub-and-spoke system allows Beijing to so easily fit into and operate within it. Open markets and a 'special relationship' with Washington is not a bad arrangement.

There are two ways that this long-standing order could come apart. One is the growing disjunction between where countries in the region see their security and their economic futures. Most countries in the region—including Japan and South Korea—increasingly see expansion in trade and investment coming from China not the US. Finding ways to take advantage of and protect against the Chinese boom is at the top of every government's foreign economic agenda. The slow expansion and redirection of commercial and financial ties will eventually also lead to changes in the politics and diplomacy of the region. At the same time, Japan and most of the other East Asian countries arrayed around China continue to see the United States as their indispensable security ally and protector. The question for the future is: can the region remain stable and coherent as the economic and security anchors of the region increasingly divide between Beijing and Washington? The underlying tensions and contradictions that are entailed in this situation will surely work to reshape the region over the long run.

The other possibility is a sudden retraction in America's commitment to the region. The United States might simply decide that it did not want to underwrite security in East Asia and this decision to 'abandon' its old allies would lead to a dramatic and far-reaching reshuffling of relations and the character of order. A massive terrorist attack on the US could radicalise domestic politics and trigger a wave of isolationism. Alternatively, it might happen in the wake of an economic crisis and fall in the American economy. Or the burdens of fighting wars in the Middle East—'imperial overstretch'—could trigger strategic rethinking in Washington about its military presence in East Asia. Out of economic weakness and political exhaustion in the wake of World War II, Britain withdrew its security support of Greece and Turkey, and this fundamentally altered postwar world order—leading to the transfer of security leadership to the US. In any of the possible scenarios, the US would be forced to fundamentally reassess the political bargain it has offered the region since the 1950s.

But scholars of international relations need to probe not only the sources of change in relations among states but also sources of continuity. East Asia has been remarkably durable as a political order for many decades. No doubt change is coming. But if it happens more slowly than observers think or if it is less radically different than anticipated, there is a logical explanation: the US-led regional order may be a historical accident but it seems to work.

Notes

1 I sketch this American hegemonic bargain in Ikenberry and Jitsuo Tsuchiyama (2002) and Ikenberry (2003).
2 For discussions of America's divergent postwar institutional strategies in Europe and East Asia, see Grieco (1997).
3 President George W. Bush reaffirmed America's role as a Pacific power in his speech before the Japanese Diet in February 2002. See Bumiller (2002).
4 For discussions of 'hub-and-spoke' strategies of great power diplomacy, see Joffe (1995) and Ikenberry (2004).
5 ASEAN plus 3 can be seen as precisely this sort of regional reaction to American preeminence.
6 For descriptions of the new foreign policy thinking in the Bush administration, see Daalder and Lindsey (2003); and Hirsh (2003).
7 For a discussion of Chinese regional hierarchy, see Kang (2003)
8 Japan and South Korean trade with China is growing steadily. See Ward (2004).

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