**The Return of the United States to East Asia?**

**A Theoretical Review of the Realist Paradigm**

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Over the two decades since the end of the Cold War, international policies in East Asia has experienced paradigm changes more than twice. The first big threshold in history for most East Asian states was the abrupt breakdown of the bipolar system that had overshadowed the region with a half-century confrontation between two superpowers. Not just small and middle-sized countries such as the two Koreas and Taiwan, great powers such as China and Japan had to adjust themselves to the dramatic changes of surrounding political configurations. The change must have been an opportunity as well as a challenge for East Asia. In a sense, the end of the long Cold War might have been a blessing for the region as it allowed a more open and diversified options available for them to get out of the previous ideological trap imposed by superpowers. Although East Asia had to deal with some pressure from the only superpower in this era, most countries in the region might have expected a new breakthrough toward a multipolar, more peaceful, and more cooperative space among themselves.

The second paradigmatic change was impinging on East Asia in a more silent way, while it was a clamorous event at the global level, particularly to the United States. The 9/11 terror targeted at the heart of the unipolar world overturned the existing power configurations so much that the United States, as the only superpower, had stepped up its plan to overhaul grand strategies and foreign policy as well as domestic institutions against any further terrorist attacks. The repercussions from America had left long tails in East Asia, a region which is far away from the American Continent. Military operations by the United States in the Middle East have had noticeable impacts on its security commitments to East Asian allies such as Japan and South Korea. The United States Forces deployed in these allied countries have also been realigned along with the new foreign policy initiative by the Bush Administration. While East Asian counties had to watch, or involuntarily support, the American fight against the new enemy group and felt misgivings about any possible “abandonment” by this old patron, the first decade of the 21st century have not generated any other revolutionary changes in the relationship between the United States and East Asian allies.[[1]](#footnote-1) Anyhow, the United States seemed to have distanced itself from East Asia for almost a decade.

As a decade-long mission has been dragged on without any definite victory in the Middle East, however it was evaluated for its effectiveness and efficiency, the new Obama Administration decided to wrap up his national missions over there soon. He ordered his army to retreat from Iraq in the end of 2011 and was planning to finalize the bloodshed in Afghanistan by 2016. Then East Asia had to face another paradigmatic change in its power dynamics again, this time with the re-entry of the United States in a more active way. The lost decade for the United States in East Asia, due to its War on Terror, has embraced China as a challenger to the traditional role of America in the region. China, while self-constraining itself for economic development and national redeployment against adversarial environments, has project itself in a more confident and assertive way toward neighbors. Although economic interdependence and cooperation between China and Asian countries have doubled every year, the rise of China and its military threats have caused the United States and its allies in East Asia more uncomfortable. This is the political background for the Obama Administration to return to East Asia with its emphasis on the catchphrase “pivot” and “rebalancing.”

Now is the time for East Asian countries to think about this return of America to the region, whether it has been welcomed or not. Many scholars in international relations have started to discuss about the implications of the American “pivot” in East Asia and any probable scenarios around many issues such as hegemonic confrontations, balance of power, realignment of allies, territorial disputes, and cooperative and competitive regionalism in the region. This paper joins in the discourse of American foreign policy in East Asia in a critical perspective. The return of America in the region has been dominated by many conventional theories and concepts, mostly developed within the realist paradigm. I would like to review these realist-induced explanations of the return of the United States in East Asia in order to show their biases and loopholes. In the next section, I will review the paradigmatic change of American foreign policy in the Obama Administration in East Asia. The third section is devoted to the explication of the bias of great power politics by the realist paradigm applied to East Asian international politics. In the fourth section, upon the critical review of the realist paradigm in the previous section, I am going to illuminate three realist myths that have been frequently used in the discourse of East Asian international politics. Theoretical add-ons will be discussed in order to supplement the gaps within the realist paradigm for each myth.

**Pivot or Trap? American Return Back to East Asia**

The new approach to East Asia by the Obama Administration was to overcome the limits of the previous Bush Administration and his diplomacy of transformation. The result was President Obama’s “Pivot to Asia” that declared American attention turned back to East Asia as the most vital area for its interest. The Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review(QDDR), which was published in 2010, has focused on reforming the predecessor’s foreign policy framework and change the priority of the United States’ from the Middle East or Europe to East Asia. The QDDR has proposed the triple axis of American foreign policy that was composed of defense, diplomacy and development.[[2]](#footnote-2) The United States would have to take a smart approach in order to adapt to the 21st-century environment and increase the participation of civil populations and their functional capabilities in crisis management and the resolution of conflicts. A full spectrum of public diplomacy throughout the strategy of engagement towards other countries was declared in the QDDR as the primary target of the first term of the Obama Administration.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Europe seems to have been estranged from America’s concern these days, while the Civil War in Ukraine and consequent energy problems have redrawn attention over the continent. The NATO might be the marginal threshold for which America is determined to be militarily involved in Europe when its member is attacked from outside. However, the problem for the United States is not so much a security commitment for Europe as the internal division within the NATO on burden-sharing among member countries. As the continent has lost its motive for a strong security alliance after the Cold War, more countries have taken the “free-riding” strategy in providing collective goods.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the Middle East region, the American public have become more skeptical of its performance in its war against terrorism. So the Obama Administration decided to retreat from Iraq and Afghanistan, despite disadvantageous situations in the region. Even after the United States’ army withdrew from Iraq, political and military struggles in the country have been exacerbated and President Obama recently decided to intervene in the region against the Islamic State (IS) via aerial bombing. Whereas it may be too early to evaluate the American policy in the Middle East as a failure, the status of the United States in the region seems to have been weakened eventually during the Obama Administration.

In the region of East Asia, the change of foreign policy by the Obama Administration was triggered by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton with her initiative of the “forward-deployed” diplomacy in 2011. It was intended to materialize an active engagement and cooperation mechanisms in East Asia upon the full-scale support of American diplomatic assets. Key six missions for this change were: bilateral security alliances, working relationships with emerging powers, regional multilateral institutions, increase of trade and investment, broad-based military deployment, and democracy and human rights.[[5]](#footnote-5) America has shown its interests in several regional arrangements in Asia, such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asian Summit (EAS), ASEAN+3, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Trilateral Security Dialogue (TSD).[[6]](#footnote-6) The Six-Party Talks for the North Korean nuclear issue and the idea of “minilateralism” have been another type of American involvements in the region. As such, the United States has started to show its own big stakes in the region and regional movements.[[7]](#footnote-7)

America has preferred a “divide-and-rule” strategy for maintaining its predominant role in East Asia during the Cold War era. It was obvious in its “hub-and-spoke” type in alliance architecture, unlike that of the multilateral NATO (Dittmer 2002, 40-41). Its legacy started to bounce back to America as it seems to be involved in serious challenges that were not expected before. The most serious among them include the rise of China as the contender for hegemony in the region, and the consequent territorial disputes among East Asian countries. The strategy of “Pivot to Asia” by the Obama Administration is dependent upon its attitude toward the traditional allies in the region, such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan versus the assertive China claiming the regional hegemony in East Asia. Not just the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands but also China’s unilateral claims over the Spratly Islands in South China Sea might become no less serious flashpoints than those of old ones such as the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula. Under the condition that the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 still effective, nobody can say whether and how much America provide security commitments to Taiwan if China tries to integrate the Island.

As the military alliance between the United States and South Korea has frequently been shaken due to domestic regime changes, it seems that Japan remains as the only secured geographic stronghold for America presence. The problem is that Japan, regardless of American preference, wants to normalize its global and regional status, but in a way that’s not compatible to its neighbors’ expectations. China, Taiwan, two Koreas and a couple of Southeastern countries have still claimed against the Japanese movement toward a regional power with rearmaments and nuclearization. As such, the United States may have to choose which side to support when any serious conflicts happen between China and Japan, or between any regional powers. Then East Asia may not be so much a “pivot” as a “trap” again like those of Vietnam and Afghanistan. The final decision should be upon the grand strategy of the United States, which seems not have been so clearly declared by the Obama Doctrine.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This situation of America returning to East Asia has caused fierce debates over the goals and grand strategies, especially those against the rising China. One group who advocates the “engagement” strategy have argued that the United States should maintain the global leadership role by creating and sustaining a liberal order to guarantee economic prosperity. They prefer to establish a rule-based system for global politics that is favorable to American vital interests. The United States should, according to them, extend its security commitments over the world. On the other hand, scholars who are suspicious of the benefits of American leadership, have supported to retreat from abroad as existing grand strategy is counterproductive and unnecessary. Because the geographic environments of the United States keeps the country safe from foreign threats, it needs not to spend resources abroad too much to undermine its relative power position. So the scholars have argued that the United States should pass the bucks to foreign allies as much as possible rather than rush to aid them (Montgomery 2014, 118-121).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Therefore, the strategy of “Pivot to Asia” by the Obama Administration has been obfuscated and thus criticized like the Middle East strategy of the Bush Administration. Nothing is clear about America’s goal in the region: Some are arguing that America intends to contain the rising China in order to keep it challenging American hegemony; others are proposing the thesis of the balance of power that it is natural for America to balance the threatening power of China in the region; still others see, in the perspective of rational strategy, America is deterring China not to do what it does not want. We are not yet sure the nature of American presence and strategic posture in the region without full theoretical discourses about it. Unfortunately, existing discussion over the American Strategy in East Asia has been dominated by the realist paradigm. Many concepts, as the tools for theoretical discourses, include such terms as power, interests, strategy, hegemony, balance of power, bandwagoning, deterrence. Also the existing dialogue over the issue has been focusing on the role and function of great powers such as the United States and China. While admitting the role of the realist paradigm in its explanatory refinement, I would like to add more to it. Three myths of the realist paradigm in understanding American strategy in East Asia will be expounded in this paper. However, before discussing the myths, I would like to discuss how the realist paradigm has relied too much on the “great power bias” and how it led to a misunderstanding of the rise of China as a hegemonic challenger in the next section.

**The Bias of Great Power Politics in East Asia**

One of the features of the realist paradigm is its focus on great powers as the major actor in world politics. According to Kenneth Waltz, great powers “writes” the history of international politics. The “structure” of world system has been generated by those great powers, so the “theory” of international politics should also be concentrated on them (Waltz 1979, 72-73). The 1990s also have witnessed the relevance of great power politics as there have been no big changes in the behavior of great powers and the structural patterns of international anarchy still remains intact. However, the brief history of the post-Cold War seems not presenting itself as a sign for the future that holds for American involvement in East Asia. Many realists, in this context, have offered the existence of a “competitor” as a good indicator for the United States to engage abroad. Since the 1990s, when the United States became the only global superpower, the candidates for “great powers” have been China, Japan and Russia in East Asia. However, none of them has been regarded as a potential hegemon or a global challenger to America (Mearsheimer 2001, 396).

As such, the power configuration in East Asia since the 1990s has been composed by one offshore hegemony and a couple of great powers. The most important factor that change this structure has been the rise of China, in its economic and military capabilities relative to America as well as its neighbors. Two scenarios were suggested by realists: (1) If China’s economic growth is slowed down, then the United States would retreat from East Asia, (2) If China’s growth continues and it becomes a challenger to American hegemony, then the United States would balance or contain China in the region. This is because the relative rise of China will break the power constellation in the region (Mearsheimer 2001, 400). However, the history shows a rather crooked and mixed result: while America has taken the second path, it has been committed to engagement in rather than containment of China. The strategy was embedded in the neoliberal self-esteem over democracy and market economy: the primary goal of America over the rise of China was to change it into a “responsible stakeholder” in the global community (Etzioni 2011, 541).[[10]](#footnote-10)

As such, the framework of great power in explaining power configurations seems quite relevant in East Asia, too. However, in many aspects, East Asia is quite peculiar in applying the power politics framework without any revision. First of all, we have to see the historical backgrounds of the great power bias of the realist paradigm. In its literal meaning, great power is a state with extraordinarily large capabilities in economy and military forces, with global interests projected and its will to protect and those interests (Neack 2008, 140). Thus, great powers are defined as the “organizations for power as the last resort for war” (Taylor 1954, xxiv). In Europe, a club of five to six great powers have been established since the Napoleonic War, which has been working as the moderator of European world politics. The great power club had worked not so much out of global motivations as out of their own self-interests. Britain, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Prussia, Russia and France were members of this great power club. They had sometimes used force to promote common goals beyond national defense, so that great powers were regarded as those strong enough to effectively wage war without calling on other countries or allies. In the 20th century, the notion of “great powers” has covered the type of states which are ready to use force whenever it wants and be ready to bear costs. Any country, beyond preconditions such as population and economic capability, is a great power if it would use force “undeterred” by the prospect of predictable casualties and material costs within limits (Luttwak 1994, 23).

Throughout the 19th century, great powers in Europe had claimed for themselves special privileges and responsibilities which they would not share with other countries. They assumed their role as the protectors of the Peace of Europe, and they were willing to take the responsibility for maintaining order in their neighbors Vienna. The history of this “exclusive club” of great powers in the 19th-century Europe urges us to rethink about the status and role of great powers in contemporary world politics. What I would like to emphasize in this re-telling of the great power history of Europe is that the relative size of population, economic and military capabilities is not the only indicator of great power. At that time, the notion of “great power” assumes an “exclusive” property of the club or a kind of common identity and role recognition for the system even though it was not something like hegemony. That’s why small states of Europe accepted the preeminence of those great powers and placed themselves under the patronage. As great powers had kept special responsibilities for small partners’ safety and well-being, the client states expected special commitments from those powers against external threats, domestic instability and financial troubles (Bridge and Bullen 2005, 2).

What about East Asia in our understanding of it with the notion of great powers? As many scholars have accustomed themselves to explaining the power dynamics of the region among the United States, China, Japan and Russia, the notion of “great powers” in the region seems to have also dominated any discourse about international politics of East Asia.[[11]](#footnote-11) At the least, East Asia is the place for these great powers have co-existed and competed among themselves for more than a century. The emergence of Japan and China in the 20th century increased the number of great powers in the region. However, the features of the 19th century Europe cannot be found in East Asia, which had made a kind of common identity in the club of great powers. For example, the United States vs. the Soviet Union and China had not been so compromising among themselves during the Cold War era like the case of Europe. What I would like to stress in this comparison is that the pure application of the “great power” framework in East Asia may not be a good strategy in explicating political changes in the region. Let’s come back to this point in the next section.

As I have urged to be more explicate in the definition of “great powers,” I would rethink whether it is relevant to understand the rise of China with that notion. By now, China has been described by the West as ambitious over disputed territories, claiming to reassert itself with glorious history, and determined not to be bothered by other countries in seeking its own interests (Economist, August 23, 2014). However, scholarly discourses and media coverage over China as well as politicians’ opinions have been dominated by the “great power bias” that I discussed. However, those discourses have never distinguished various notions of similar phenomena such as hegemony and great powers. For example, China has been described as a “challenger to hegemony” or a “great power” without clear definitions. Theoretically, hegemony should assume both capabilities and willingness to maintain the order of the whole system. It assumes a leadership role at the global level. Therefore, I would like to ask not to use the term “hegemony” to tell the threats and impacts of the rising China. China has never been solely provided global common goods. It has never been global in its ambition for a greater influence; it was only regional.

Right now, it is more appropriate to call China a “great power” only at a regional level. Even the term “great power” should not be used in its original meaning in the traditional European system. It should allow only the indicator of the size of tangible factors like populations, economy and military capabilities. Regional powers are unlikely to seek allies out of fear that any global hegemon poses threats. In this sense, politicians and scholars should not have confused between regional and global threats of China if they have read them in a right way. In a case when China may seek an alliance, it should be targeted to any regional, not global, threats from its neighbors or enemy alliances. Regional powers cannot affect global power dynamics so much that their interests are placed only at a regional level (Walt 1987, 163-164).[[12]](#footnote-12) As such, the existing discussions over the rise of China have been confused over the terms like great powers and indiscriminately applied it to East Asia. No historical underpinnings and characteristics of the notion were considered in applying the concept in the region. East Asia, in the framework of the realist paradigm, has been just one of many region like Europe which should be understood as unique in its experience of the 19th-century power politics. This is obviously the “great power bias” in which any concerns of common identity among great powers and the existence of small powers and their functions. Now, in the next section, let’s get deeper into the details of the great power bias by discussing the three “myths” of the realist paradigm in understanding the American return to East Asia.

**Myths of the American Return to East Asia**

*Myth 1: The Struggle for Hegemony in East Asia?*

The rise of China and the American strategy toward China have often been explained in the framework of hegemonic competition. While both superpowers hold enough power to compete for hegemonic struggle, I would like to tell that both of rising China and declining America may not fit into the notion of conventional hegemony. Charles Kindleberger, the father of the Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST), has distinguished “leadership” and “dominance” as the latter meaning a country dominating another when the latter has to take account of what the former does while the former ignores the latter. On the other hand, the leadership implies a country that persuades others to follow a given course of rules and institutions which would be beneficial to their interests if followed. This is the way many organizations and communities provide public goods for collective action. The world economy needs the leadership for its stability who provides an open market for trade, a steady flow of capital, and a mechanism for international liquidity. In this way, the world leadership, the so-called hegemony, maintains the structure of economic systems and coordinates economic interactions (Kindleberger 1981, 243-247).

This framework of the realist approach has been frequently applied to East Asia. The most famous analysis was the offensive realist theory by John Mearsheimer. His theory explains that the strongest power aims to become a hegemon and maximizes its relative power to rule over the whole system. In his analysis, the behavior of Japan in the 1930s and that of the United States in the 1940s are to be understood as the same in their properties. Those would tell the same story for rising China even in the 1990s as China is likely to dominate East Asia and challenge American hegemony in the region. Mearsheimer’s realist prediction that China would claim an Asian-type “Monroe Doctrine” was hailed by many scholars as well as political decision-makers (Mearsheimer 2001, 401). Therefore, according to him, the best strategy against China should be containment or active engagement. Mearsheimer’s discussion of offensive nature of great powers have resounded among many scholars, but the real world situations have not been so simple as China has never been more challenging to America like that of Japan or Germany in the 1940s. China seems not have intended to establish any hegemonic structure in the region, let alone at the global level. Then, what is wrong in the theory of HST? Haven’t China and America competed for hegemony in East Asia?

When we discuss hegemonic competitions, we have to consider the disproportionality in the contributions among individual states. In any collective action such as alliances, small or weak partners tend to ride free on the system. This means that small countries do not contribute proportional to their capabilities and larger partners have to spend more resources relative to their powers. In any collective system composed of states with different power rations, no individual states has an incentive voluntarily to contribute enough goods for maintaining the system. This free-riding tendency is particularly severe in case of smaller states as their contribution may not have any impact on the system. So there will be a consequent tendency for stronger powers to bear a disproportionate share of the costs for system maintenance. In many cases of international collaborations and security alliances, small partners would be attracted to “neutral” or “passive” foreign policies (Olson and Zeckhauser 1966, 271-272). Thus the problems of suboptimality and disproportionality in collective action have become perennial issues for security alliances.

According to the theory of collective action, therefore, bigger countries tend to bear more burdens and responsibilities for the system. In East Asia, we may expect neither rising China nor declining America willing to take these obligations. So the term “hegemonic” competition may not be applied to the Sino-American relations in the region. If we consider the trend of globalization and its impacts on domestic society, then the problem of non-hegemonic struggle between these superpowers is more unequivocal. As the process of globalization has accelerated, the scale of goods and assets have also expanded, which made differentiated public and private goods from each other. Large countries tend to be more influenced by the trend, which will lead to the emergence of the “residual state” that cannot work like the centralized nation-state anymore. The costs of large countries with more open, more globalized, more democratic procedures cannot be motivated to work like small states in responding to outside pressures (Cerny 1995, 618-619). Considering this point, China and the United States cannot be regarded as “residual states” but as still centralized “strong powers” without hegemonic motivations in East Asia.

In a sense, the competition between China and America in East Asia may be understood in a less strict form of hegemony. This tells a more persuasive story over the behavioral patterns of both countries in the region as they have advanced their interests through non-coercive means under the strategy of “cooperative hegemony” which implies an active role in institutionalization at the regional level with many types of incentives. Many regions in the world have achieved through the active initiative of great powers which have asymmetric level of resources but more willingness to keep regional peace and stability. This is different from the conventional notion of hegemony which was applied to the leadership at the global level.[[13]](#footnote-13) In this way, a cooperative hegemon seeks advantages from the strategy of institutionalization at the regional level such as the scale through power aggregation, economic and security stability, inclusion and access to resources, and diffusion of ideas (Pedersen 2002, 684-685). This is a probable alternative explanatory framework for the Sino-American confrontation in East Asia beyond the conventional theory of hegemonic stability.

Another revision of the conventional HST is to be done by considering the role of non-great-powers in collective actions. Whereas the conventional HST has not put so much emphasis on the status of middle-to-small powers, scholars have added more on its theoretical applicability. These middle and small powers have taken more part in supporting the declining hegemony by sharing burdens and cooperating to keep systemic stability. The world after the American hegemony in the 1970s was a compelling case for this frame. In the original version of the HST, based upon Mancur Olson’s public goods theory, takes for granted the role of providing public goods assigned only to one leader. That is, the number of states (*k*) which takes responsibility was just one (Snidal 1985, 588-589). However, the emergence of cooperation through institutions “after hegemony” has pushed the number *k* to increase beyond one. The case of G7 and OECD may be good examples of successful cases of cooperation when *k* > 1 (Keohane 1984, 46).

This point is important as Japan and South Korea, as taking part in sharing burdens for alliances, have contributed to the maintenance of American cooperative hegemony in East Asia. A hegemon needs more partners for any sustainable systemic order either at the global or at the regional level. As such, the existence of middle and small states may have impacts on the power configuration of a region with the role of “swing states.” Countries which share not only a common commitment of global values such as democracy and human rights but also maintain large size of emerging economies while taking geo-strategic positions are called the “swing state.” Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Turkey are classified as “global swing states” (Fontaine and Kliman 2013, 93). In the same context, South Korea and Japan can take similar roles in their impacts on great power politics in East Asia, while it is still disputable whether we can call these countries “swing states.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Rising China and declining America cannot go solely without considering the weights of these “*k*-group” or “swing states” in their ambitions over the supremacy of East Asia.

The pattern of “buck-passing” has been well known in studying foreign policy as the structure of world system becomes multipolar in the post-Cold War era. In the multipolar system, the number of membership is important in achieving cooperation worldwide. Great powers are also trying to maximize their own interests, they had better pass the buck to allies as well as adversaries. This is a way of free-riding by great powers in collective action. More countries tend to pass the bucks in the complex system, unlike in the bipolar system when power asymmetry did not allow superpowers to evade their responsibilities (Posen1984, 63-64). As such, the trend of buck-passing by the United States in East Asia implies the paradigm change of the traditional hegemonic role in transforming the region or alliance from the “privileged group” in which only one member takes the responsibility in providing collective goods, to the “intermediate group” which allows more than one members to have incentives to share the burden (Olson 1965, 50). Thus we may loosen the strict conditions of the HST in explicating the East Asian power politics by considering ideas of cooperative hegemony, *k*-group, swing states, and buck-passing behavior by great powers and by revising the HST for a wider situations.

*Myth 2: Structural Balancing Only?*

The balance of power has been an organizing principle and pattern in international politics. For more than three hundred years this principle has been working automatically among great power politics, so that it has provided a way to predict major aspects of international politics (Sheehan 1996, 163). That’s why many realists have focused on analyzing the dynamic system of balancing behavior. They have theorized the system as working by calculation as pure as in the days before the French Revolution. They have regarded balance of power as the fundamental essence of international politics like the market system in economics. Its implication was like that of harmonious and autonomous system of equilibrium among countries; if every state follows its own interest, all would be guaranteed it in a peaceful and secured way.[[15]](#footnote-15) As such, the realist theory of international politics has relied so much on structural mechanism of balancing among great powers that it has left some loopholes to think when we apply it to the political situation of East Asia.

The biggest problem of the balancing model is that it may not exist in real-world situations. Scholars have investigated its history and found that the balance of power system has not been working so well as the theory proposed. Threatened countries have failed to recognize dangers for themselves and responded to them in an imprudent way. So the behavior of balancing seems not to have been working in a meticulous and secured way. The case of Munich humiliation in the last 1930s was only one of many examples of this type of “underbalancing” (Schweller 2006, 1-2).[[16]](#footnote-16) The anomalous case of America without any balancing in its unipolar moment was another counter-evidence against the balance of power theory (Levy 2004, 37). The abnormal patterns of buck-passing and chain-gaining behaviors by great powers are also reducing the relevance of the theory. These deviant cases are called “pathologies” of the balance of power model in a multipolar world system (Christensen and Snyder 1990, 140-141). In reality, we have observed so many cases when balancing did not happen so that we feel obliged to search a new theoretical paradigm.

One way to alternative paths out of the realist trap is to focus on micro-level factors. As the realist paradigm has been too much dependent on the structural approach of Waltz, it has lost its motivation for idiographic aspects of international politics. Now we may narrow down the level of analysis in order to overcome the structural biases. Then we may equip ourselves with analytic tools for non-great powers’ behavior. It compels us to think any event not so much the product of structure as that of individual choice.[[17]](#footnote-17) Political outcomes may be better explained, in this micro-level framework, as the combination of individual preferences and the influence of systemic institutions around those actors. Like any other political processes, international politics is also a “social choice” process (Morrow 1988, 95). In this social system of choices, political outcomes are determined by the interaction between preferences and structure, so that we observe the process of bargaining, diplomacy, and war in explaining international political relations. Those processes also show how domestic features of a country affect its foreign policy behaviors (Schweller 1994, 99).

The focus on individual choice will contribute to explaining the pattern of bandwagoning better than a structural theory. Whenever great powers are in conflict, small or weak states tend to become neutral or take bandwagoning strategies. This pattern is contrasted to the theoretical prediction of the balance of power theory. In most cases, weak states can have only marginal influence on world politics so that they are likely to take side with the winners rather than balancing rising powers (Sheehan 1996, 166). Sometimes weak states do nothing or take a non-alignment position for their own interests. They may join a balancing coalition only under the condition that there are enough number of great powers which would guarantee their survival against threats. Choice among different options such as nonalignment, bandwagoning, and balancing depend on the peculiar situations and preferences of each weak state (Labs 1992, 389-392).[[18]](#footnote-18) Thus, I would like to argue that balancing and bandwagoning are only parts of available choices for individual countries, particularly for weak states. In many cases fo real-world politics, both balancing and bandwagoning emerge in a mixed form against coming threats and chances.[[19]](#footnote-19) The picture taken by these ideas match the situation of East Asia very well as Japan, two Koreas, and Taiwan may have impacts on the two superpowers’ intention over the region even without considering any possibility of balancing them.

The theory of balance of power can also be complemented by considering the differentiation among states not just along capabilities but also along functions. Whereas Waltz assumed functional similarities among states with the notion of “like-units,” it was so restricted in its application to many other historical and regional situations. States may be positioned in the hierarchical structure according to their power, but they can be positioned in the horizontal structure according to their special functions at the same time. This is because states tend to become specialized in the path dependent international system that has been tailored and optimized for each of them. Therefore, the principle for individual states to take is not only that of “self-help” in anarchy but also that of “specialization” in a harmonious world (Schroeder 1994, 125). This idea of horizontal specialization in the role of diverse states helps us explain the competitive and cooperative relations between America, China, and other East Asian countries which play peculiar roles in a nuclear umbrella (America), a world factory (China), a regional financial axis (Japan), a buffer zone (South Korea) and so on. If we understand international politics in East Asia in this way, we will know the prediction of balance of power theory should be so simple.

At the same time, I would like to consider the idea of the Concert between great powers, rather than that of balance, as another scenario for understanding the role of the United States and China. The notion was originated from the European system among great powers in the 19th century. While the period was characterized both by the balance of power system and by the Concert system, the latter differs from the former in that there are highly self-conscious level of cooperation among great powers. Balancing between great powers may be cooperative or competitive according to power configurations, the Concert is famous for its effects even on strong states’ power as they have institutionalized mutual and self-restrained methods of managing their problems (Jervis 1986, 59). For example, after a war against potential hegemons, allied countries may cooperate in maintaining good relations for future. Then the system transforms itself from a balance of power to a Concert (Jervis 1986, 78). This is an appropriate prediction as no great powers may not want to risk their interests by initiating conflicts with others despite any available chances for cooperation such as the Concert.

Looking at the past history of Europe, it is clear that the world has not been like that pictured by the realist paradigm. Great powers in the old Europe restrained themselves despite territorial and material ambitions by the spirits of the Concert of Europe. So the leaders of those powers were ready to self-constrain in their policy-making toward neighbors and the outside world (Rendall 2006, 524). Great powers are not always ready for infinite expansion of power, unlike the realist thesis. The case of Russia in the early 19th century was a good example of it: Russia’s huge population and repressive domestic policies made it seem threatening, but the czar was so eager to support the European status quo. However, the Western partners misunderstood Russia by increasing their suspicions that led to the Crimean War.[[20]](#footnote-20) This gives a meaningful lesson over the status of China in the 21st century when the West as well as America have been so anxious about it. If the paradigm of East Asian international politics is still dominated by the simple balance of power model, then we may lose any chances for the old European-type Concert model to work in East Asia.[[21]](#footnote-21) We may have a more optimistic view over the possibility of the Concert model in East Asia as the region has accumulated enough experience in multilateral cooperation mechanisms across diverse areas. The Six-Party Talks has been one of successful cases, despite its current deadlock, because all great powers and concerned parties have joined like that of the old Concert of Europe.

*Myth 3: China Being Rationally Deterred?*

As the third myth of the realist paradigm in its application to East Asia, we have to ask whether China has been deterred by the returning America. Deterrence is a policy seeking to “persuade an adversary, through the threat of military retaliation, that the costs of using military force will outweigh the benefits” (Huth 1988, 15). So the fundamental problem of deterrence is about how to use threats to induce the opponent to behave in desirable ways. Underlying this problem of deterrence exists the assumption of rationality, which is logically compelling but seriously deficient in its application to the real-world situation. While the theory of rational deterrence has been well-established by the realist paradigm, it has been criticized for rigorous assumptions: Actors have exogenously given preferences and choice options; Actors seek to optimize their utilities; Differences between actors’ opportunities explain variations in outcomes; States work as a unitary rational actor (Achen and Snidal 1989, 150-151; Paul 2009, 5-8). Although these simple assumptions makes logical inferences consistent and coherent, they seem to have been so far away from the reality that we have felt more adjustments needed for those assumptions to be modified.

The original theory of deterrence, proposed by Thomas Schelling, was intended to explain the special relation between the United States and the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons as massively destructive threats. In its logical processing, the theory of deterrence allows the “I expect that you expect…” sequence to converge on a common single point of attention which Schelling emphasized in explaining the equilibrium of deterrence. The point was to be easily recognizable thresholds that emerges from ambiguous and complex interactions with combinations of capabilities and coercion between nuclear superpowers (Ayson 2004, 91-93). As such, the notion of deterrence was founded upon the perception of mutual interactions that engender the possibility of reaching a stable point where a country is satisfied with the response of another country. These complex processes have been explained by the analogy of “exchange of hostages” that implies massive destructive power on both sides; then the balance of terror amounts to a tacit consensus supported by a total exchange of all conceivable hostages (Schelling 1980, 239-240). In this context, indiscriminate disarmaments of all types of weapons would produce instability rather than stability.

The logic of rational deterrence, therefore, seems more complex than its appearance. Schelling discussed about this point well when he put his focus on the dimensions of “bargaining” and “conventional stopping places” like geographical demarcation lines between the deterring country and the deterred one. Here were involved more psychology and customs than the mathematics of warfare. Threats and demands, proposals and counter-proposals, reassurances and concessions, signals and tolerances, reputations and lessons are being communicated and bargained between both parties of deterrence (Schelling 1966, 135-136). In this complex situation, deterrence is achieved when a potential enemy, fearing unacceptable retaliation, decides to forgo a planned offensive. The state, as a rational actor, calculate costs and benefits of probable consequences, which is a type of instrumental rationality (Paul, 2009, 2-3). Whereas realist theorists have provided the deterrence framework in an articulate way, their assumptions are not so simple to manipulate because of their sensitivity to dynamic changes, unpredictable consequences among those assumptions, and the processes of adaptation and evolution over time (Paul 2009, 7-8).[[22]](#footnote-22)

Another point I would like to stress in evaluating the theory of deterrence in East Asia is that we have to take more attention to the working mechanism of deterrence in a non-rational way. It does not mean that we need an “irrational” framework but that we have to investigate the role of “non-rational” factors such as passion and emotions. Then the understanding of deterrence between great powers may be so different from the conventional approach of rational deterrence. In reality, the world of the 21st century has been changed so much from that of nuclear confrontation between very rational superpowers. Now is not the time when great powers can restrain themselves even with uncompromising nuclear weapons. More attention was given to the way of asymmetric competitions, non-traditional warfare such as terrorism, and people’s propensity toward emotional reactions. These factors have been prevent in the fields of international politics and foreign policy while we are deficient of any formal theories to explain their impacts.

Let’s compare the situations of the old notion of deterrence with the new one at this complex era. In the 1960s, Schelling thought that the United States should not fight a war with China as a secondary state under the patronage of the Soviet Union. His main idea was not to extend the logic of nuclear war to a “general war” with China. No preemptive thermonuclear exchanges were necessary with China unless China is equipped with a retaliatory capability. The best and the most effective strategy against China, in his view, was to send a message to the country not to contend with the United States of which violation might lead to much worse consequences and threats to its regime (Schelling 1966, 186-187). This idea was based upon the logic of optimization that the major adversary of the United States is less China than the Soviet Union in the time, even though China has posed threats to the interests of America in East Asia. As such, decision makers in Washington, D. C. should have reduced the size of deterrent threats and coercion to China as much as possible. Schelling’s notion of the “optimal response” to China represents the rational way to the problem of strategic competition. Neither ideological rages in those communist countries nor emotional misgivings over nuclear confrontation were seriously considered in his discussion.

The political situations have changed so much since Schelling’s discussion of China policy. China in the 21st century holds retaliatory nuclear power as well as threatening level of conventional weapons in East Asia. Moreover, the voice of China has transformed from the purely material level to the emotional one as it has eventually achieved enough power to challenge America’s position in East Asia. This change has impacts on the nature of balance of power between China and America because the element of “fear” has caused the game of “balance of terror” between them (Sheehan 1996, 177). The two cases of military confrontation between China and America show the point well: the American bombing of Chinese Embassy in Belgrade of 1999 and the spy plane collision of 2001. In these similar cases of conflict between two countries, the actions and reactions by them were different. In the first case, China did not accept American apology for wrong targeting in bombing. It represented the Chinese public resentment over America, which was caused by emotional injury on their identity. Nothing could be done by the Chinese leadership within the rationality framework except waiting for Chinese people to restore their own self-esteem. On the other hand, the 2001 case was interpreted by both sides as beneficial to themselves. This time, both countries interpreted the sign of apologies from the other as a “victory,” which reflected the cultural differences in responsibility assessment. Chinese people claimed that Americans admitted responsibility for the incident, while Americans claimed that the apologies by both sides were mere gestures of condolence (Gries 2005, 253-255).

These brief cases show how much emotional factors work in foreign relations, even between great powers such as America and China. Anger, which was prevalent among Chinese when conflicts happened, had guided the direction of diplomatic posture of China. In this sense, emotions became both symbolic and instrumental tool for diplomatic relations. As the surge of nationalism in China and other East Asian countries goes higher, the trend toward emotional, rather than rational, responses to foreign affairs seem to be accelerated in the coming future. Chinese people have equipped themselves with a sense of their “past greatness, recent humiliation, present achievement and future supremacy” (Economist 2010). Nationalism may frame every issue of foreign relations of China even before their leaders get to deal with it. Political manipulation of national sentiments have created a context that the leaders cannot feel safe with any compromise with foreign countries as it is likely to be viewed as “capitulation” or “humiliation.”

As China’s modern historical consciousness has been identified by the “one hundred years of humiliation” in the 19th and the early 20th century, the emotional sentiments in China should not be ignored in understanding China.[[23]](#footnote-23) The same can be applied to the relationship between East Asian countries which had experienced bad memories and trauma for the last decades without any formal recuperations. Even those historical memories have been reinforced by the current regime’s educational socialization through the national “patriotic education campaign” in the 1990s (Wang 2008, 785). In this way, emotional factors such as anger, shame and humiliation became an integral part of Chinese nationalism not just in a xenophobic way but also in a self-critical manner (Callahan 2004, 200-201). What we need to supplement the conventional theory of rational deterrence, in this sense, is the factor of non-rational interactions such as emotions. While these are under-theorized in international politics, people in East Asia have been quite familiar with the emotions and feelings about nationalities and historical humiliations. The United States’ strategy toward China should not ignore emotional patterns that are reproduced throughout everyday lives and educational projects (Saurette 2006, 521-522).

**Conclusion**

America’s interests in East Asia have been diversified at the global level in the 21st century. One of those implemented in East Asia, the policy toward rising China, might be explained by several conceptual tools of the realist paradigm. However, as I discussed in previous sections, the realist theory has been contaminated so many biases. The biggest of them is the bias of great power politics. This seems understandable if we consider the Cold War history in the region. The emergence of China, as a potential challenger against the United States as an offshore hegemon in East Asia, has dramatically changed the picture of international politics not just between China and the United States but also among all countries in the region. What I would like to emphasize in this paper is that the conventional paradigm of realism seems not relevant in accounting recent changes due to the rise of China. I would like to check whether and how the traditional notions of the realist paradigm can be applied with limitations to East Asian international politics.

I suggested three myths to be investigated as a test of the realist approach to East Asia. Special focus was put on the nature of American strategy in the Obama Administration in the region and its foreign policy toward rising China. While American strategy can be explained in a certain way, such as the hegemonic competition, balance of power, and rational deterrence, I have mentioned that each has its own problems in pure forms. The first myth about hegemony was compensated by the idea of cooperative hegemony which is closer to the benevolent version of hegemony but with more focus on regional institutionalization. Also I tried to show another way to add more on the HST with the theory of k-group, the concept of swing state, and the pattern of buck-passing. The second myth was clarified by comparing its theoretical logic and empirical evidence. But more emphasis was put on the alternative paradigm of individual choice beyond the structural bias of the realist paradigm. Bandwagoning behaviors and horizontal functional differentiations may be better explained by this shift of focus. The introduction of the model of Concert may add more on existing models for future agenda. The third myth on the rational deterrence was also revealed by scrutinizing the simple assumptions of rationality. While acknowledging the theoretical merits of the rational choice approach, I asserted that we have to overcome its limitations. More stress on the role of emotional factors was suggested as an alternative framework for understanding not just the Sino-American relationship and but also the regional international politics in East Asia.

International politics in East Asia has been dominated by the realist thinking and practices due to its own path dependence for more than a century. While acknowledging the merits of the realist paradigm in explaining the power dynamics of East Asia, I intended to suggest more ways to supplement its limitations. As the second decade in the 21st century has witnessed the return of the United States to East Asia after a long excursion to the Middle East, we may need to reframe to understand the power politics in the region. The realist paradigm, with its main concepts such as hegemony, balance of power, and rational deterrence, has contributed to the development of explanatory frameworks for East Asia. On the other hand, deficiencies of the paradigm must be analyzed and complemented by new ideas and concepts that reflect new phenomena that are specific to this region. The variant of hegemonic system, the role of middle and weak powers as well as that of the *k*-group, the mixed strategy of balancing and bandwagoning, and the factor of emotion may increase the explanatory power of the existing framework, as discussed in this paper. More works on theoretical integration among these new tools and empirical tests on them should follow this introductory discussion.

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1. Even the conventional way of ideological confrontations between the United States and enemies in the region, China and North Korea, has not changed too much during this period, except some fluctuations due to the nuclear issue of North Korea and the consequent Six-Party Talks for its resolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Foreign aid of the United States has expanded since the 9/11 incident, which was intended to match not only humanitarian demands but also security concerns. The Bush Administration has emphasized the significance of the strategic approach in implementing foreign aid programs, and added the mission of foreign development as one element of the triple axis for national security (Lugar 2008, 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Remarks at the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) Launch (April 22, 2014). The Secretary of State John Kerry proposed that the QDDR 2.0, which would be published in autumn 2014, will present a new blueprint for American foreign policy on the basis of the previous one. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Britain was the only European member of the NATO has kept the guideline that any member country should spend more than two-percent of GDP (*Economist*, May 3, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For these missions, Hillary Clinton suggested the following three objectives: political agreements over core goals of alliance, supports for allies’ rapid adaptation to new challenges, and capacity-building for allies in deterring various states and non-state actors (Clinton 2011, 58). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a detailed discussion on the institutions of regional cooperation in Asia, see Wesley (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Scholars have proposed that American decision-makers should consider the “minilateral” approach which intends to narrow down the range of cooperation only among friendly allies. This is to overcome the problem of “free-riding” so that the United States may have to find out a small “magic” number for cooperation in resolving the problem of global commons (Naim 2009, 134-135; Brummer 2014, 2-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The foreign policy doctrine of the Obama Administration has been heavily criticized partly because it was ambiguous in its contents, and partly because it was just following the Bush Administration’s approach. Despite some disputable points, the Obama Doctrine may be defined as holding the following elements: American political and economic, rather than military, supremacy; Retrenchment and realignment of American military responsibility rather than their expansion; Rebalancing Asia rather than the Euro-centric strategy; Containment and offshore-balancing rather than global American primacy (Stepak and Whitlark 2012, 52). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Stephen Brooks, John Ikenberry, and William Wohlforth are representing the first group of the strategy of engagement, while Christopher Layne, Barry R. Posen, and Robert A. Pape for the second group favoring for retrenchment. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This policy was “misguided,” according to Mearsheimer, because a wealthy China would not become a “status quo” power but an aggressive one who is determined to aim regional hegemony (Mearsheimer 2001, 402). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Scholars have focused on the “strategic quadrangle” among the four-power relationship in East Asia, while some of them see it as the “greatest threat” to regional stability and economic interdependence (Shirk 1997, 246). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Stephen Walt proposed the theory of balance of threat in order to revise the conventional theory of balance of power. According to him, states respond not so much to powers as threats of other counties, so the intention of a country is more important than power in estimating the dynamics of international politics (Walt 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A “cooperative hegemony” implies a soft rule within cooperative arrangements so that concept is based upon a hybrid approach between idealism and realism (Pedersen 2002, 683). As such, the concept of cooperative hegemony was intended to revise and narrow down the traditional notion of hegemony. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Scholars compared the position of Mexico, South Korea and South Africa with that of swing states. The difference between these two groups can be found in the role of pivotal partners played in the first group. Many European states, Japan and Australia are classified as included in this group as far as they have stayed with the American hegemony well over decades (Fontaine and Kliman 2013, 98). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. According to scholars, the balance of power system was broken by World War I. The self-operating law of balancing had failed to operate in world politics for peace and stability. So the law of balance of power was discredited both by socialists such as Vladimir Lenin and idealists such as Woodrow Wilson as the guideline for a new world system in the early 20th century (Taylor 1954, xx-xxi). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. To explain this phenomenon of underbalancing, Randall Schweller suggests a new approach of international politics focusing of domestic politics. He assumes that there are so many domestic constraints for balance of power at the international level (Schweller 2006, 6-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For example, the Iraq war can be understood less as a product of systemic imperatives than a war of choice. We may introduce so many factors such as domestic interests, transnational networks, and emotional fear that had made the United States initiate the war (Hinnebusch 2006, 461). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Among many options against outside threats, the most frequent one selected by weak states has been nonalignment, and the next one “balancing with great powers” for a free-rise or fight. As long as the patrons of great powers are available, the option of “balancing with great powers” has been the first priority for many weak states (Labs 1992, 393-394). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. According to historians, Japan and China in World War I, and small countries in Southeastern Europe in World War II chose their strategies in a mixed way between balancing and bandwagoning (Schroeder 1994, 119-120). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The Concert model was originated from the collective security system in the early 19th century called the “Concert of Europe” joined by Britain, Prussia, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and France after the victory over the Napoleonic War in 1815. The Concert system was regarded as a global regulatory mechanism among great powers. It mitigated security dilemmas among great powers by generating behavioral codes of cooperation and collaboration in a conservative way. In this sense, the Concert of Europe was an informal institution for cooperation that increased flexibility and effectiveness in management of global affairs (Shirk 1997, 266). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The Concert model works under the condition that is a fairly well-established rules for state behavior. In this context, the Concert assumes a practicable and realistic system to comply with, collective responsibilities shared among great powers, and great powers’ consensus regardless of their ideologies (Elrod 1976, 170-172) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. As such, some scholars have developed a new framework for the “complex deterrence” to be applied to ambiguous deterrence relationship, which is caused by fluid structural elements of the international system (Paul 2009, 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The “Century of National Humiliation” has been the official symbol of modern Chinese history education and the standard perspective of Chinese historiography during the communist regime. It emphasizes, as a part of Chinese nationalism, specific narratives that would build modern states out of long troubles and external threats. What Chinese people wanted in this nationalistic framework as not just the “others” like Japan and the West, but also the reflexive itself upon self-criticism (Callahan 2004, 206-207). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)