

Is the USA Still the Indispensable Power in East Asia?

Written by Alex Ward

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ALEX WARD, MAR 23 2012

In November 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the US was “more committed than ever” to a forward presence in East Asia (Clinton, 2011: npn), illustrating the centrality of the region in post-Bush foreign policy interests. Indeed, since WW2, the US has maintained a certain degree of preponderance in the region that has ensured some degree of regional stability, namely through its role as an extraregional balancer and through the stabilizing effect of its hub-and-spoke system of bilateral military alliances (Goh, 2005). The notion of US indispensability can be further interrogated by hegemonic stability theory, which outlines the need for a regional hegemon in promoting stability and emphasises its role in preventing the neorealist assumption of an unstable multipolarity (Snidal, 1985: 614). Accordingly, it is useful to frame the debate through the lens of polarity, as different polar systems have different implications for the contours of the regional system.

According to Kupchan (1998: 40) “America’s preponderance [...] will not last indefinitely”. A potential decline in US pre-eminence in East Asia has established the conditions of possibility for “a different regional order centered on Chinese rather than American power” (Beeson, 2006: 552), largely due to, amongst other things, the increased ideational purchase that China enjoys through its regional development of smart power.

A greater challenge to US primacy in the region however, lies in “glimmerings of security multilateralism” (Ikenberry, 2004: 363) that serve to recalibrate not only the role of the US in Asia but its entire regional security architecture altogether. This shift embodies the notion of peaceful multipolarity, underpinned by mutuality, engagement and interdependence that has largely excluded the participation of outsiders, particularly the US. The formation of such organizations as ASEAN+3 under the rubric of a departure from the American ‘Asia Pacific’ toward an exclusive ‘East Asia’ is symptomatic of a wider decline in US primacy, hinting towards a more multipolar, less asymmetrical strategic order.

Perhaps the principal underpinning of the argument for the US indispensability stems from hegemonic stability theory, which primarily privileges unipolarity as an inherently stabilizing configuration of power. First off, it is of critical importance to define the features of hegemony. Put simply, hegemony ties into the notion of unipolarity, whereby one state holds an unassailable position of pre-eminence in which its dominance over military, material and ideational resources bestows upon it the “capacity to write the rules for a particular world order” (Beeson, 2006: 543). Crucially, the notion of hegemony hinges upon the conjuncture of the hegemon’s material power projection and its ideational purchase, with the latter “expressed in universal norms, institutions and mechanisms which lay down general rules of behaviour for states” (Cox, 1996:137). Here, the exercise of hegemonic power operates through the mechanisms of persuasion, cajolement or coercion and principally not through consistent military expansion (Agnew, 2005).

Central to hegemonic stability theory is the assumption that “unipolarity is a structure in which one state’s capabilities are too great to be counterbalanced” (Wohlforth, 1999: 9). Here, the neorealist balance of power theory is inverted; as the leading state entrenches its power primacy, it passes a threshold whereby the likelihood of smaller states counterbalancing is significantly reduced as the costs imposed by resisting the hegemony mount (Tammen & Kugler, 2004), producing a more stable system. Furthermore, according to Liu & Ming-Te (2011) this stability is further consolidated by the hegemon’s provision of public goods, namely regional security, which dissuades potential challengers from disputing the status quo, as they directly benefit from the hegemonic system.

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With regards to US hegemony in East Asia, Ikenberry (2004: 354) maintains that the an American hegemonic order “will remain a critical component of East Asian order for decades to come” as it reduces the region’s inclination toward balance-of-power politics through inhibiting security competition (Chan, 2008).

The foundations upon which hegemonic stability theory are build are underpinned by a neorealist weariness of multipolarity. With multiple competing powers, alliance and enmity structures are more fluid, producing an unstable security landscape (Waltz, 1981: npn), which, in turn, can lead to regional arms races due to the security dilemma (Goh, 2005). Thus, a decline in US hegemony is bound to “trigger sources of competition that well override others sources of peace” (Kupchan, 1998: 42) culminating in arms races (Nye, 1995), especially in view of the volatile mix of social and economic disparities between Asian states due to the rapid political and economic change therein. In particular, US withdrawal could give way to an unstable power vacuum in which Sino-Japanese tensions could develop into a profound political impasse between the two states (Beeson, 2003), heightening security concerns. Overall then, America’s role as an extraregional balancer “keeps in check the competitive jockeying that might otherwise trigger war in East Asia” (Kupchan, 1998: 62) and holds an inherently stabilizing effect upon the contours of the regional strategic order (Christensen, 1999).

Another powerful medium through which US presence contributes to regional order is through its hub-and-spoke system of bilateral military alliances (Twining, 2007). It is not solely the presence of the US military in the region that promotes stability; rather it’s development of a coherent alliance structure wherein participants are ostensibly able to mutually set the agenda for regional security. Largely based around its key relationships with South Korea and the ‘linchpin’ of the alliance, Japan, the US hub-and-spoke system constitutes the basis for regional stability in mediating the security dilemma (Nye, 1995). The alliance system further consolidates US primacy in the region through encouraging the bandwagoning of key regional players as they are induced to “rely on American alliance protection” (Ikenberry, 2004: 354).

One major avenue for regional stability has been the incorporation and centrality of Japan in the security network. This has the multifaceted advantage of both suppressing the spectre of a remilitarized Japan and, through its inclusion, reducing the potential for the arms races that could arise if it were to rearm (Ikenberry, 2004).

The hub-and-spoke alliance system is further strengthened through the mutual adoption of democratic political systems that bestows upon it a degree of coherence. Key members of the alliance such as Japan, ROK, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines are all either republics or have already democratized to some extent (Goh, 2005). The centrality of democracy as the backbone of the alliance system is based in democratic peace theory under the rubric that “the spread of democracy makes more likely the benign exercise of powers” (Kupchan, 1998: 52), which further serves to consolidate the alliance network.

In particular, the importance of the US’s bilateral alliance system is exhibited in its role as a “counterweight to Chinese power” (Goh, 2005: 1). Concern over Beijing’s long-term strategic policy and a shift in the balance of power have effectively rendered the US’s role as a regional balancer far more salient, both militarily and politically. Firstly, US military presence in the Taiwan Straits and South China Sea inhibits the chance of conflict therein through both diplomatic mediation and military deterrence (Storey, 2002). More fundamentally, US curtailment of a rising China prevents the instability inherent to transitional international systems. Here, the application of AFK Organski’s (1958) Power Transition theory is starkly relevant, as it is based on the zero-sum premise that the decline of a unipolar order gives way to a distinctly unstable balance of power. As bipolarization occurs and economic, political and military capabilities are more evenly distributed, “the system becomes increasingly unstable” (Gilpin, 1985: 595), culminating in cyclical conflict as a status-quo challenger’s disproportionate growth comes into conflict with the declining hegemon (Organski & Kugler, 1980). In this light, the benefits accrued to smaller states deriving from US preponderance would be lost if it gave way to a bipolar standoff between Beijing and Washington, throwing the entire regional security order into chaotic flux (Ikenberry, 2004).

Washington’s vital role as the centrepiece of the hub-and-spoke alliance system notwithstanding, many have espoused the notion that “the post-Cold War era of American pre-eminence is winding down” (Layne, 2009: 147) due to certain factors that have undermined the necessity of American unipolarity in the East Asian strategic order.

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One failing that has served to corrode US indispensability is its continual impeding of regional cooperation. According to Kupchan (1998: 65) US hegemony “does not repair political and ideological cleavages – a task only regional states themselves can perform”. Instead, its exclusionary hub-and-spoke alliance system inhibits the capacity for intraregional integration, which is vital for enduring stability (Ikenberry, 2004). The long-term effect of the alliance system is closely tied to its origins in the ideological divisions of the Cold War, insofar as it has entrenched fundamental cultural and historical fissures throughout the region (Beeson, 2003). As such, the contemporary security landscape is characterised by these cleavages, as “individual countries have bilateral security alliance with the United States, but not with each other” (Kupchan, 1998: 63).

Perhaps the most significant failing of Washington’s strategic policy has been its contradictory position towards nascent multilateralism. As stated by Kupchan (1998: 63) “Washington has generally discouraged regional forums that do not include the United States” and in relation to the ones that do, US involvement has been driven by self-help. Particularly, Washington’s self serving agenda can be illustrated by its unbending focus on marshalling support for its counterterrorism efforts at regional forums, which has led to “alienation between the United States and ASEAN” (Pempel, 2008: 571).

This tendency towards unilateralism, particularly during the Bush years, has constrained its capacity to exert hegemonic influence. Here, the “militarization of American foreign policy” (Pempel, 2008: 556) and its monolithic ‘war on terror’ have served only to corrode its normative and ideational purchase, encouraging “the development of alternative, regionally based modes of organization” (Beeson, 2006: 554). In response to this, the US has more inflexibly imposed its ‘universal values’, particularly democracy, upon the region. This American exceptionalism has only served to raise suspicions of its regional ambitions and to leave Asian states “increasingly dissatisfied” (Wenzaho, 1999: 430).

Nowhere has this been more apparent than with Bush’s ‘Axis-of-Evil’ policy regarding North Korea. The Bush administration was initially concerned solely with ensuring regime change, not with engaging in constructive dialogue with Pyongyang. Bush’s unilateral approach directly undermined Seoul’s ‘sunshine’ policy of Korean reconciliation, triggering “a generational revolt among younger South Koreans” (Pempel, 2008: 563). The net outcome has been a nuclear Pyongyang, and deterioration in US relations with both states (Shaplen & Laney, 2007).

Ultimately, the Republican’s inflexible, unilateral regional policy and the Cold War alliance system has not only hindered regional coherence, but has significantly undercut Washington’s centrality in the region and has “encourag[ed] further opposition to its policies” (Beeson, 2006: 553).

The failings of recent US unilateralism under Bush have been met with a “dynamic Asian order featuring new centres of power” (Twining, 2007: 79). Despite US military power maintaining its predominance, there is a shifting balance of influence through the “steady development of China’s multilayered relationships with the region” (Goh, 2005: 44). Indeed, China’s power is growing steadily “across economic, political and military domains” (Ikenberry, 2004: 361). Much of China’s rising influence has to do with embedded, historical relationships of dependency that characterise states such as Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia’s relationships with Beijing. However, it largely hinges upon smaller states’ engagement or hedging with China as a form of socializing it into a peaceful rise as opposed to balancing against it (Kang, 2003). Even US allies such as South Korea have expanded its “trade and societal ties” (Ikenberry, 2004: 353) with Beijing, highlighting China’s potential as a “centre of regional stability and growth, rather than [a] destabilizing insecurity” (Beeson, 2006: 552).

Perhaps the linchpin of China’s growing influence is Beijing’s ‘Soft Power’, defined as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion” (Nye, 2004: x). Indeed, China’s strategic policy has, according to Medeiros & Taylor-Fravel (2003: 23) “become far more nimble and engaging than at any other time in the history of the People’s Republic” and has become characterised by Beijing’s transformation into an adroit participant of the diplomatic game, and its conformity to international norms.

Having orientated its 21st century policy around the notions of cooperation, responsibility and ultimately, a peaceful rise, Beijing has become an attractive partner to some, which gains considerable salience as Washington becomes

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increasingly perceived as “an overbearing hegemon” (Zakaria, 2008: 127). This has considerable implications for US indispensability, as China’s soft power threatens to undercut Washington’s ideational purchase, threatening its hegemony through the articulation of Chinese perspectives upon the region’s collective norms and values. According to Desker (2008: 57), the emergence of the ‘Beijing Consensus’ as a riposte to the Washington Consensus embodies a confident Chinese stride towards regional prominence. This alternative *modus operandi* hinges, amongst other things, upon the re-assertion of sovereignty, technocratic governance and the salience of multilateral institutions, three features that the Washington Consensus and modern US policy conflict with.

A fundamental branch of Chinese soft power and a cornerstone of the Beijing Consensus is the multilateralism that characterises China’s shifting diplomacy. Indeed, China’s progressively active role within regional institutions such as ASEAN+3 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has, according to Desker (2008: 70) “enmeshed Asia in an interlocking chain of political and economic links” that are becoming increasingly shaped by the values of the Beijing Consensus. Naturally, much of this is driven by China’s economic largesse, but Beijing’s ambitions for multilateralism are similarly underpinned by ensuring stability and security in East Asia through its revitalised diplomatic influence. This can be illustrated by China’s involvement in the Six Party Talks over North Korea, wherein China exercised “quiet but effective diplomacy and not a small bit of subtle coercion” (Pempel, 2008: 574), which eventually culminated in the 2007-2008 breakthroughs.

The discursive effects of both Beijing’s involvement in multilateralism and its adept diplomacy have been to construct itself as “a good neighbour, a constructive partner [and] a non-threatening regional power” (Shambaugh, 2005: 90). The culmination of such exploits has been to invert the notion of China as a revisionist state within the regional discourse. With regards to a major ASEAN worry of China, its participation in multilateral diplomacy about the South China Sea has “indicated its desire to seek peaceful solutions to territorial disputes” (Goh, 2005: 11). At the eight ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, 2002, Beijing signed a memorandum that restricts the use of force to settle territorial disputes in the Spratley Islands, signalling its readiness to conform to regional agendas (Kang, 2003).

In relation to America, a key foundation upon which US indispensability rests upon is its capacity to curtail the rise of a revisionist China. However, due to Beijing’s revitalised regional image, Kang (2005: 552) contends that if Washington were to withdraw from East Asia, the region would “not become as dangerous or unstable as the balance-of-power perspective expects, because other nations will accommodate China’s central position”, as uncertainties about Beijing’s long-term ambitions have begun to dissipate.

As a response to the spectre of a Chinese regional order, Washington has reiterated its ambitions to “secure [US] interests and advance [US] values” (Clinton, 2011: npn). In November 2011, America attended the East Asia Summit for the first time, perhaps signifying a revitalized pursuit of multilateral integration. This notwithstanding, Washington’s primary regional agenda has been to facilitate “the ascent of friendly Asian centres of power that will constrain any Chinese bid for hegemony” (Twining, 2007: 80). Washington has developed new bilateral partnerships with Indonesia, Vietnam and most notably India, which according to Clinton (2011: npn) “will be one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century”. In particular, the fostering of India as a regional counterweight to China could serve to retain Washington’s role as the region’s decisive strategic player, in an “asymmetrically multipolar Asian security order” (Twining, 2007: 91).

Contrary to the argument made above, US indispensability may not give way to Chinese pre-eminence, but instead to a recalibration of the multi-layered intra-state political architecture that pushes towards greater multilateralism (Desker, 2008). According to Ikenberry (2004: 353) regional decision-makers are looking towards Asia’s nascent multilateralism as an avenue to manage “increasingly complex political and economic challenges”, particularly in the context of American ineffectiveness in the wake of the Asian financial crisis and US unilateralism during the Bush years. Naturally, moving toward a more multipolar political system has its dangers, but the liberal principals of mutuality, transparency, entanglement and interdependence may serve to nullify the effects of multipolarity upon the security dilemma, especially through enmeshing key regional players within a coherent security architecture (Christensen, 1999).

There are, however, considerable obstacles to the trumping of US hegemony by multilateralism, chiefly tying into “the

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strategic bilateralism that characterised the Cold War era” (Beeson, 2003: 265). Indeed, the US hub-and-spoke alliance system was “expressly designed to keep East Asia divided” (Beeson, 2006: 551), primarily across ideological lines, as to provide a central security role for Washington. As a consequence, “suspicion and political cleavage still characterise relations among the area’s major power” (Kupchan, 1998: 62) owing to Asia’s inherently fractured cultural and political complexion. Contemporary, Washington’s attempt to strengthen its alliance network with the inclusion of India as a response to China’s soft power could perpetuate divisions, as could the possibility of Washington hindering key ASEAN+3 members Japan and South Korea from fully participating.

In order to gauge how multilateralism has moved beyond these impediments, it is necessary to appreciate the “significance of shared knowledge, understanding and identity” (Terada, 2010: 252) in the embedding of a “nascent social character” (Kupchan, 1998: 47) in East Asia. According to Cronin (1999: 33) “group identities develop out of common experiences” and hence, mutual experience of the Asian financial crisis has been key in crystallising the development of multilateral institutions in East Asia. Drawing upon constructivist theory, Stubbs (2002: 448) notes the impact of the crisis upon “the sense of common history that has emerged in the region”, entrenching the sense of collective regional identity that is fundamentally necessary for effective multilateralism. As such, the crisis galvanized regional political elites in response to their vulnerability to exogenous, systemic forces and made them acutely aware of the glaring absence of the effective formal institutions necessary to respond to such events (Beeson, 2003). Since then, the salience attached to distinctly ‘*East Asian*’ intra-regional ties has reached an unprecedented level due to their functional necessity in a globalized political system, rendering them a “normatively preferable part of regional practice and identity, in a way the ‘Asia-Pacific’ never has or could” (Beeson, 2007: 556).

Furthermore, the rise of East Asian multilateralism in the wake of the Asian financial crisis and the formation of new regional bodies, such as ASEAN+3, has been a direct response to the failures of APEC and the IMF. Washington’s emphasis upon the utilization of the IMF in lieu of APEC highlighted the US’s indifferent disposition towards unified, cooperative management of the crisis, rendering APEC redundant. Indeed, the unilateral nature of Washington’s response to the crisis exhibited APEC’s fundamental “inability to accommodate and represent the very different Asian and Western impulses contained within it” (Beeson, 2003: 262). In relation to the IMF, Beeson & Broome (2010: 515) note how “the management of the crisis by the IMF in close coordination with the US received nearly universal criticism”, with numerous regional political elites castigating, in particular, the social and economic imbalances caused by their economies’ forcible trajectory into the global capitalist economy. This, in turn, led to what Higgot (1998) terms a ‘politics of resentment’, whereby the perceived US disregard for collective needs has led to a severe discrediting of both US regional prestige and one of the primary pillars of US ideational power: neoliberal, free-market capitalism (Layne, 2009).

The erosion of US ideational power and the realization of the need for unified, collective multilateral process established the conditions of possibility for a more narrowly conceived multilateralism that “intentionally excludes outsiders” (Beeson, 2006: 548). Here, the use of common ‘others’ helped to consolidate the consciousness of a collective ‘East Asian’ identity (Terada, 2010) in the absence of US ideational power.

As such, this shift in regional identity from the increasingly redundant ‘Asia Pacific’ to ‘East Asian’ is symptomatic of the fact that the non-material factors of US hegemony have been severely discredited, with the regional modus operandi beginning to gravitate toward inherently indigenous institutions “with diminished American involvement” (Pempel, 2008: 575).

Perhaps the principal harbinger of this recalibration has been the development of ASEAN+3, which provides a cooperative forum for ASEAN states and China, Japan & South Korea. The shared experience of the Asian crisis has magnified the level of interdependence between the states and has provided the impetus to enmesh key regional players into the ASEAN framework bestowing onto them a “stake in a stable regional order” (Goh, 2005: viii). Indeed, the involvement of the three larger powers has significantly energized developments and in the case of ROK and Japan, illustrated a potential shift away from the outdated hub-and-spoke alliance system. Also, that Beijing offered assistance to damaged economies during the crisis has further solidified their place at the helm of multilateral developments. One event in particular, the Chiang Mai Initiative, a set of currency swap arrangements worth £120bn agreed up in late 2009, has had symbolic importance that helps to “consolidate underlying regional relations”

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(Beeson, 2003: 263), marking a new era of fiscal union and concretizing the mutual entanglement necessary for effective multilateralism.

In terms of security, the ASEAN+3 forum, according to Stubbs (2002: 454) has facilitated effective diplomatic interaction of members states upon key regional security issues, such as conflict over the Spratley Islands and the South China Sea, something that US-involved multilateralism, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum failed to do. However, a unified, coherent security forum has failed to materialize, highlighting the legacy of Cold War divisions and Washington's powerful military influence in the region (Desker, 2008). The Beijing-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could provide the blueprint for future security multilateralism but ultimately fall short due to its Eurasian orientation and its relatively few members. Nonetheless, the annual joint military exercises, border demilitarization and annual defense meetings between SCO states has provided an exemplary avenue through which to mitigate the security dilemma and move towards further regional stability (Desker, 2008).

Ultimately, It would be wrong to completely deny the indispensability of the United States as it is nonetheless an "entrenched power" in Asia (Goh, 2005: 46); its bilateral-hub-and-spoke alliance system, its role as an extraregional balancer and the stability that accompanies unipolarity have solidified its place within the East Asian strategic order. Nonetheless, US self-help unilateralism (particularly in the case of North Korea) and its resistance to the utilization of indigenous, multilateral channels in the wake of the Asian financial crisis have severely undermined the non-material aspects of its hegemonic power. Furthermore, through Washington's shortcomings, Beijing has acquired, mainly through the development of its soft power, considerable ideational purchase that has to some degree nullified regional suspicions of a revisionist China. However, the main challenge to US indispensability has been the burgeoning development of multilateral frameworks in East Asia, with ASEAN+3 spearheading this revitalised regionalism through capitalizing upon the constructivist notion of a mutual "sense of identity and common purpose" stemming from the crisis (Beeson, 2006: 545).

With Washington only recently attending the East Asia Summit for the first time this year, its historical preference for bilateral or unilateral diplomacy has indirectly fostered the creation of institutions that directly exclude the US and its diplomatic modus operandi (Pempel, 2008). Whilst forums like ASEAN+3 or the SCO are "still at an incipient stage" (Paal, 2011: 3), they nonetheless provide considerable institutional ballast to East Asia's shifting strategic order. All in all, despite neorealist fears of an increasingly unstable multipolar structure, the harmonious engagement of regional actors in multilateral frameworks has significant capacity to contribute to regional stability, rendering Washington's role as an extraregional balancer redundant (Desker, 2008). The rise of a unified East Asia will undoubtedly recalibrate regional security arrangements through the lens of an exclusively 'East Asian' community, fundamentally re-moulding the contours of a decreasingly unipolar strategic order.

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