

Synopsis of the Five-University Collaboration on East Asian Security Conflict & Cooperation, Sixth Annual Conference, Dec. 11-13, 2014, Princeton University

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In mid-December faculty and graduate students at five universities in five countries met again to exchange views on the state of security in East Asia. Prior conferences have produced thoughtful, constructive exchanges, but no reports have circulated on what they covered and how they served to stimulate ideas for new research. As the gathering concluded with calls for producing such a report for future exchanges, I volunteered to draft one based on my personal notes in the hope it would add to the value of the discussions and, once distributed in *The Asan Forum*, acquaint the broader community interested in East Asian security with the ideas being debated. This is one person's interpretation with no claim to be a well-rounded account, but I have circulated it to participants to provide for feedback as well as clarifications.

This synopsis is not a summary of remarks at the five successive panels or the two keynote addresses, as noted on the agenda above. It is not a statement of who said what but an attempt to grasp the essence of the exchanges between speakers and participants while drawing attention to core concerns. Given the ongoing nature of these annual gatherings and the shared goal of clarifying differences of opinion and pointing the way to further academic research, a synopsis oriented to narrowing differences on the basis of an exchange of divergent views may be of greatest utility.

We start with the big picture. One panel was devoted to it. The two guest speakers in their keynote addresses offered versions of it, and various speakers made comments to shape the group's thinking about it. The organizers asked panelists to identify the most compelling narratives about order and change in East Asia. Sifting through the responses, we seek to specify how many distinct narratives emerged, what were the main points of dispute among them, and what developments we should be watching most closely to determine which narratives are most useful for identifying problems worthy of further analysis. As we compare distinct narratives, we must be alert to the impact of national narratives—China, the United States, Japan, South Korea with Singapore and Russia the viewpoints that at times could be discerned—and variant thinking reflecting independent academic and alternative policy-centered analysis.

The US Narrative

The two national narratives of the United States (most heavily represented as the host country) and China (most on people's minds as the rising power) had a large role in shaping the overall discussion. Despite the diversity of US participants (of administrations served and international relations theories championed) there was a high degree of commonality in their narrative. Many were responding to a Chinese narrative that they had encountered in other settings, while attentively listening to the ways it was interpreted, defended, or reshaped by the Chinese participants.

The US mainstream narrative holds that despite the preoccupation of senior leaders with intractable diversions elsewhere in the world and domestic divisions that have undermined the consensus on foreign affairs, a core group of both Democrats and Republicans remains internationalist, ready to support TPP and a quick end to the defense sequester. The US image has been damaged in various ways, and insecurity subverts the underpinnings of domestic support for foreign policy, but recognition is still quite strong that for prosperity and jobs increased exports to Asia's rapidly rising middle classes are essential. Despite various types of neglect of Asia to date, the level of engagement is more likely to grow than recede. Rather than the Chinese view that the US rebalance has already thrust it too deeply into the region's affairs, there was talk of the United States having done too little in the region in the 1990s-2000s while still falling short in engaging as actively as is required by the situation and by the appeals of the majority of China's neighbors for deeper involvement.

On the whole, the US participants saw a bleaker picture than the Chinese ones. Their view of China's vision was more zero-sum, more conflictual, more sinocentric. They put more weight on Chinese sources—published and oral—that consider the United States to be an existential threat. At the same time, they largely viewed US policy as seeking to maintain stability, while integrating China into the existing international order with room for a rising China to make changes in it. Welcoming the Obama-Xi summit in November, they see it as more a lull before competition intensifies again than a turning point. Thus, they emphasize the need to prepare to deter coercion. Yet, they called for continuing to strive to improve relations, working to overcome

the misguided thinking in China that sees US policy as containment. This should be done, however, with awareness that China tends to interpret compromises offered to it not as a sign of respect but as weakness, warned one of the US presenters.

The Obama-Xi summit was perceived not so much as reversing a downward spiral after their Sunnylands summit, but as providing a new starting point for managing the rivalry. There was little doubt that in 2015 relations would be tested anew. Of all possible challenges, the one considered to matter most was North Korea. A week before the US government blamed it for the cyber-attack on Sony Pictures, it was at the forefront in the exchange of views on prospects for Sino-US relations in 2015.

Recognizing that two groups have coexisted for four decades in US policymaking to Asia, the discussion highlighted the Kissinger tradition of concentrating on China, operating secretly with little sharing of information within the US government, and bypassing allies in order to reach agreements with Beijing of far-reaching regional and global significance. Obama continues the tradition, although on the critical issue of North Korea, he has coordinated closely, especially with South Korea. The second group, centered in the security community, prioritizes strengthening US alliances. It puts Japan in the forefront on maritime matters, which have recently acquired more urgency, while also favoring a trilateral alliance with South Korea. While divergence between the two groups is customary, China's complex presence as the main target for managing the North Korean challenge and the main threat to regional maritime stability requires a more complicated balancing act, which US speakers recognized.

Another complexity highlighted in the US regional perspective was the rise of more nationalist leaders, who infuse discussions of security with national identity themes. While the United States sees itself as striving to set these themes aside (some other states do not think so), the rise of Putin, Xi, Abe, Park, Abbott, and Modi makes these efforts difficult. This means that the most sensitive problems related to territory and history rise to the top and expose pragmatic diplomats to charges of betraying the nation's sovereignty or honor. Even the outcomes of World War II have reemerged as sources of emotional division, much to the consternation of US officials. The US vision calls for accepting the results of the war and of the end of the Cold War and concentrating on solving today's problems, above all North Korea's nuclear threat.

US presenters viewed the 1990s as a kind of golden age with *taoguang yanghui* as Deng's legacy, Murayama leading in apologies to boost bilateral relations, Kim Dae-jung's readiness to concentrate on the future, and Yeltsin's rejection of the identity legacy of the Soviet Union. It seemed as if history was being set aside in favor of a joint quest for globalization with room for open, inclusive regionalism. While the appeals to emotional identity issues in the 2010s are seen as a serious setback, the main source of division is seen as China's rejection of Northeast Asian multilateral security cooperation (6-1) in the face of North Korea's rejection of the frameworks reached in 2005 and 2007, rejection of ASEAN-led regionalism including collective pursuit of security in the South China Sea, and rejection of inclusive regionalism in

favor of Asia for the Asians. Obama's rebalance is perceived as a response to these challenges, aimed primarily at restoring stability and reassuring China's neighbors.

To the extent there were differences in the US speakers' overviews of US thinking, they centered on reviews of Obama's record and agendas for what should be done in the coming year. One point of view was that in 2009 Obama had been naive and too hopeful about winning China's trust and cooperation, which also has been a problem in 2013-14 with his acceptance of Xi Jinping's framework of a "new type of major power relations." He tilted toward China without adequately reassuring allies. The alternative viewpoint was that Obama was right to take time to test China's leaders on both occasions, even as he proceeded in parallel to strengthen alliances, finding that divisions between allies demanded such testing and made reassurances quite complicated. Regardless of differences on these points, there was a clear consensus that 2010 was disastrous for China's foreign policy toward its neighbors, destroying more than a decade of positive diplomacy, and that in 2014 the situation is similar with no sign of a strategic turnaround, as China has made its strategic goals clearer. As for 2015, many feared that regional instability would intensify and China would not take steps to lower tensions and reassure its neighbors and the United States. Obama's engagement of Xi Jinping seems excessive to some at the expense of close coordination with allies and appropriate to others, making cooperation more likely. The latter called for more clarity, more reassurances to allies, and more insistence that China assist in maintaining stability, especially in managing North Korea.

While the US narrative was generally consistent, views of China differed somewhat. One view was that Xi's consolidation of power and coordination within China offers opportunities even if there is more potential danger. There is still room to change China, Obama should try harder, and North Korea's next provocation will provide a key test. The gains from Chinese cooperation are too great to do anything else. Yet, others detect in the Chinese narrative little reason for hope and lean to more actions that would impress on China the costs of prioritizing competition. One concern is that China's leaders are not pursuing the national interest but narrower interests of the Chinese Communist Party, which benefits from more contentious relations and construction of a national identity focused on the values gap with the United States, rather than on finding common ground and managing differences. While blaming the United States and its allies for ideological blinders and Cold War thinking, China is itself ideological and unwilling to credit US engagement for its constructive goals. Instead, it distorts US efforts and intentions as if they are focused on containment. The US speakers calling for more active engagement shared many of these concerns.

The Chinese Narrative

The hardline narrative most common in Chinese journals on international relations and East Asia and presented to conference participants at various other meetings with Chinese officials and specialists was generally absent at this conference. This reduced the potential for confrontational exchanges, where narrowing the divide is rarely possible. Yet, it also created a disconnect between what was being assumed about China, based on familiarity with these other sources, and what was set forth

by Chinese participants. One possibility is that the powerful propaganda department has been orchestrating a distorted narrative, which is echoed in some circles, which leaves those who follow it poorly prepared to understand the thinking of Xi Jinping. As Xi consolidates power, pursues the anti-corruption campaign, and replaces those who have narrowed the debate that is aired in Chinese media, a different narrative may become ascendant. This is not to suggest convergence of thinking with the West or US allies in East Asia, but hints about variant thinking warrant exploration for the way they clear the way to searching for common ground and future joint research.

The dichotomous rhetoric that leaves little room for common ground posits “color revolutions,” regime change, and containment strategies as threats from the United States, which overshadow any interest in engagement. The alternative narratives see: China in transition with more inclination to engage, a way toward multilateral security that would, in stages, diminish the role of alliances centered on the United States, the prospect of increased cooperation in dealing with North Korea, and the invocation of history as a means to stabilize the status quo against those who seek to overturn it. These ideas favor the US officials and academics who call on Obama to intensify engagement and exercise restraint in tightening alliances, especially the one with Japan, One Chinese speaker said that such tightening pushes China and Russia closer together, taking account of the current effort by Moscow to forge a close strategic bond in sharp opposition to the United States, its allies, and the West.

The China in transition viewpoint minimizes the Chinese challenge to the current regional security order, anticipating working cooperatively to allow it to function better. It treats the November Xi-Obama summit as a significant achievement, which bodes well for coming period, reflecting a strategic imperative to work more closely together, which is appreciated in China. In this viewpoint, China prioritizes better relations with the United States, accepts the fact that a considerable power disparity still exists with it, and is prepared to stay patient in striving for a transition from the current US-centered strategic order to a multilateral security order. However this analysis is linked to internal developments in China, such as reforms to shift from the existing economic model to a new one befitting a more developed country, the main theme is that China is not in a hurry and is guided by national interests rather than recently showcased national identity rhetoric in its international relations.

The theme of multilateral security puts the burden on the United States as well. In contrast to the prevailing view in Chinese publications that the United States would not countenance this and it could only be realized as a replacement for the alliance system, it was suggested that this can be accomplished without undermining useful roles still being performed by the bilateral alliances—keeping Japan on a peaceful course, preventing proliferation, restraining an arms race, protecting the sea lanes, etc. In the transition, the US could play a positive role in maintaining order and stability, while facilitating steps to overcome problems that have emerged. Given the ups and downs of US domestic politics, the destabilizing effect of uncertainty about US intentions would be reduced. So too would the alienation of states not included

in the alliance system, whose suspicions are not good for forging multilateralism. In turn, China and Russia would feel that they have a greater stake in shared security, making them more cooperative on North Korea and maritime disputes. With this plan, as the balance of power keeps changing, adjustments would be more timely. The Chinese proposal is for an inclusive security architecture, which would reduce the role of bilateral alliances over time. Two steps in this direction, it was noted, are for the United States to stop surveillance flights close to China's borders and to not seek to expand missile defenses in Northeast Asia, which is making China anxious.

On North Korea, the theme of China in transition also raised hopes for cooperation. In contrast to many in China who argue that North Korea is still an ally and must be supported, in one way or another, in the context of the continuing Cold War or of rising polarization, speakers saw growing cooperation as feasible. Yet, differences over how to proceed punctuated the discussions at many points. Chinese objected to proposals that they characterized as outsourcing the problem to their country. They insisted that there are more things the United States can do to engage North Korea and reassure it. While not absolving it of serious blame, the way many writers from China do, the presenters did not contradict the standard Chinese position that US support for resuming the Six-Party Talks and bringing the IAEA inspectors back to Yongbyon. Despite objections from the US side that Washington has offered to meet all reasonable demands from North Korea (not reported in Chinese sources) and that North Korea has refused any verification (also not acknowledged in them), the Chinese vague insistence that somehow a new US initiative could unlock the door to

denuclearization (when many in China seem to agree that North Korea is insistent on keeping its nuclear weapons and delivery systems) is critical to this narrative.

History enters the Chinese narrative in ways that were not shared by US speakers. It appears in views of Japan's moves to strengthen its military, as if this is a threat to the security order since the end of WWII. The theme arises in objections to "legal fundamentalism," as Chinese insist that historical facts, such as when the 9-dash line was proclaimed and how Japan gained control over the disputed islands in the East China Sea, must be considered, even if some resist "historical fundamentalism."

They speak of unfinished historical reconciliation in Asia, not just with Japanese revisionism in mind. One speaker referred to "stolen territory," pointed to the Cairo and Potsdam treaties rather than the San Francisco Peace Treaty as the basis of the post-1945 order, and repeated the claim that Japan's nationalization of the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands demonstrates that it is the one breaking the status quo rather than China. A separate panel on History, Memory, and Enduring Conflicts in the Region left no doubt that the US preference to set history aside is not China's preference.

Hovering over the discussions were issues far from the agenda a year earlier that remained unclear in their implications for relations in 2015. The demonstrations rocking Hong Kong—perceived by some in China as an attempted "color revolution" encouraged if not orchestrated by the United States—were presumably seen as not likely to affect bilateral relations. Closer Sino-Russian relations along with a chasm between Russia and the United States did not figure into the Chinese narrative, but

they did arise in the US narrative and separately at the conference. Finally, there were hints that the sleeper issue of Taiwan, which had slipped below the horizon as a short-term danger for Sino-US relations, was reemerging as a priority for China in the wake of election results there at odds with plans for incremental integration. A full litany of challenges did not need to be showcased to grasp the essential divide.

With US speakers looking for more common ground and Chinese speakers seeing hope in a transition, a foundation for forward-looking exchanges was built. Yet, the divergence between Chinese and Japanese narratives made this foundation shakier. Given prevailing US views that China's approach to Japan undermines confidence in China's pursuit of cooperation and widespread Chinese views that the US approach to Japan is an indication of insufficient US interest in cooperation, it is important to add a triangular dimension in order to appreciate the dynamics of the conference.

The Japanese Narrative

Facilitating a productive exchange, the Japanese speakers were not defensive of the revisionist thrust of Abe's policies, as the LDP's success in the approaching elections was fully anticipated. Yet, their overall view of China's objectives was no less critical than the US narrative. Their vision is for Japan to be more strategic in its thinking, but, even as it continues to pursue China, to be realistic in tightening ties with the United States and standing firm against China's goal of splitting Japan and the United States and dividing the Pacific Ocean in ways that leave Japan exposed. Although some attention was given to divisions in China and uncertainty about its policies, the

thrust of the Japanese narrative is to expect little—even after the November Abe-Xi meeting at APEC, which is treated skeptically as a tactical move, not a gamechanger. There was an urgent need for crisis management after a near miss in the air. A rude reception for Abe would cast a shadow on China's halo from hosting this occasion. As China's economy slumps, the sharp drop in Japanese FDI poses a problem. The effort to draw the United States into a "new type of major power relations" is not going as well as desired. One more reason cited is that there has been a backlash against Chinese hardliners for a foreign policy toward China's neighbors that has not yielded adequate benefits. Meanwhile, China's stance has empowered Abe, making the Japanese public more receptive to him. These factors led to a tactical change.

The Japanese narrative on China finds it insistent on core interests, which keep expanding and include the East China Sea and South China as well as Taiwan. The goal of an Asian-only security architecture was mentioned, as were the persistent moves to test US will, as China proceeds in stages to replace the United States in Asia. While it is hard to object to China providing more public goods to nearby countries, as seen in a rash of initiatives in 2014, Japanese interpreted China's aims as divisive. Yet, what seemed to be most worrisome was China's attempts to draw the United States closer with calculated concessions, while marginalizing Japan. If divisions inside China—as between the Foreign Ministry and the PLA and between words and deeds—leave in doubt aspects of China's strategy, optimism was scant on the future of Sino-Japanese relations and on prospects for regional cooperation.

Much of the Japanese narrative was directed inward at a lack of strategic thinking. Although approval was given to realist moves to strengthen Japan's defense posture, establish a National Security Council, and reinterpret the Constitution, these steps were less effective because of Abe's obsession with historical revisionism, giving an excuse to China for marginalizing Japan. Acknowledging that criticism of Abe in Asia are not well targeted—confusing realism with revisionism--, speakers bemoaned the increasing tendency for members of the Diet to be out of touch. Recent denial of how Japan victimized Chinese, Koreans, and others in the war era, rejecting a more pragmatic approach that was especially showcased in the 1990s (although not much appreciated in China and South Korea at the time), is seen as harmful to Japan's role in the region. Yasukuni Shrine visits overshadow balanced alliance-building moves and expanded deterrence. Damaging relations with both the United States and South Korea, Abe seems to flail about for a breakthrough with Russia or even North Korea.

Despite their overall pessimistic tone, Japanese speakers proposed new steps for ameliorating tensions. There was talk of confidence-building measures, mainly of an incremental nature, not some dramatic turnabout. There was a proposal for arms control, although mention of the failure of the 1920s Washington Conference raised fear of a similar outcome. While TPP was welcomed as a short-range objective, the possibility was noted of using it as a foundation for an expanded FTA including China, which would set rules of trade and investment favorable for increased cooperation. One proposal after another sounded similar to Park Geun-hye's call for *trustpolitik*, i.e., small steps would test the other side's sincerity en route to bigger

steps. The general message is to avoid idealism, stick close to the United States, be less provocative on history, and test China skeptically but sincerely to improve ties.

While the panel on history devoted considerable attention to Japan-South Korea relations, strategic discussions mainly treated them as a loss opportunity rather than suggesting ways to boost a shared understanding of the strategic environment in East Asia. It fell to the South Korean participants to bring that country into the analysis. The South Korean narrative was critical to making this conference well rounded, putting the North Korean challenge in a clearer perspective and viewing China in a different light that complicated hopes for a wider alliance framework.

The South Korea Narrative

South Korean discussion of the nature of the problems in the region puts Japan more squarely into the picture, while proposals for addressing the problems put greater stress on multilateralism with promise to narrow differences. Various speakers had ideas for moving ahead: cosmopolitan solutions driven by NGOs, multilateralism in pursuit of South Korea's proposed Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative, a more intense US commitment to the region, and a negotiated freeze in the nuclear program of North Korea as a stepping stone to a wider agreement. All of these ideas offer Seoul a chance to play an active role in the midst of four great powers and the outlier North Korea. As Seoul is being pressed harder to choose sides (the US call for building the THAAD missile defense system, the Chinese push for close coordination

against Japan on history issues, US interest in a wide coalition for sanctioning Russia over its actions in Ukraine, etc.), speakers were hopeful that an opening still exists.

The Sino-US-Korean Peninsula triangle was understood to split South Koreans on how best to proceed. Whereas some propose a concert of powers with Washington and Beijing in the forefront, others emphasize closer ties with the United States as the only to preserve order. No matter how wide the gap between these two powers, the prevailing argument is to have it both ways. This would put Seoul in the position of a bridge, made easier by its frontline position with North Korea and its unique role at a time of increasing polarization between the US-Japan alliance and the Sino-Russian quasi alliance. Similar to ASEAN in Southeast Asia, South Korea stands as the champion of regionalism—the primary hope for multilateralism. Through its NAPCI proposals it is seeking both US and Chinese support for regionalism, while also welcoming Japan and Russia and leaving the door ajar for North Korea ahead. With the Xi-Obama summit in November, the atmosphere improved for regionalism, but it was unclear what role South Korea could play. Its centrality appears to depend on either some success with *trustpolitik* with North Korea or China's willingness to join in planning for contingencies on the peninsula without the North's presence. The promise of South Korea's narrative did not appear to be echoed in the US or Chinese narratives, neither of which suggested a prominent place for it as a bridge or in the absence of an unexpectedly new agenda for North Korea. The level of polarization in great power relations and tensions over North Korea cast a shadow on its approach.

Also at central to the South Korean narrative is the US-Japan-South Korea triangle. This figured most heavily in the panel on history and memory, but it also entered the discussion in more specifically security contexts. One suggestion was to avoid mixing history and security, given the threat from North Korea. Yet, neither Abe nor Park shows any inclination in this direction. Another was to take incremental steps without allowing clashing historical memories to prevent some US-led cooperation on security. This leads to consideration of whether Seoul and Tokyo have similar enough views of China and regional security to make alliances with Washington work more effectively in a trilateral context. With the US and Chinese narratives garnering the bulk of attention, this theme was left undeveloped at the conference.

Conclusion

A Russian narrative was briefly presented by one of the Singapore speakers. At times perspectives from Southeast Asia were voiced. Academic analysts, of course, do not feel under any obligation to stick to a particular national narrative. There was no wrap-up session to attempt to draw together various panels. While one outcome may be to search for ways to narrow differences among the various narratives, the challenge for the academic community is more likely to be to identify research that has the potential to clarify differences more fully and to predict where they may be heading. This synopsis and responses that may be elicited by it will be useful to the extent that they help to provide such clarifications and to generate research ideas.

