

【연구논문】

# Myths of the Return of the United States to East Asia: A Theoretical Review of the Realist Paradigm\*

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## 1. Introduction

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 superpowers. Not just small and middle-sized countries such as the two Koreas and Taiwan, but great powers such as China and Japan had to adjust themselves to the dramatic changes of surrounding political configurations. The change became an opportunity as well as

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\* This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea Grant funded by the Korean Government (NRF-2012S1A3A2033665).

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 policy options available for them to get out of the previous ideological trap imposed by superpowers. Countries in the region might have expected a new breakthroughs toward a more peaceful and cooperative relationship between themselves.

The second paradigmatic change was encroaching 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 empire had made the United States to revamp its own grand strategy 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 had long been overshadowed by the offshore hegemony. Military operations in the Middle East by the United States after the 9/11 attack have had serious 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 a new foreign policy initiative by the Bush Administration. While East Asian counties could not choose but supporting the aggressive American posture against new enemies, they had to feel misgivings about any possible abandonment by the old friend. As such, beginning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the United States seemed to have disassociated itself from East Asia for a decade.

As decade-long missions of the United States have been dragged on with no definite victory in the Middle East, the new Administration by Barack Obama decided to wrap up those national missions soon.

He ordered the U.S. army to retreat from Iraq in the end of 2011 and was planning to finalize the bloodshed in Afghanistan by 2016. The situation in East Asia had to face another paradigmatic change in power dynamics, this time with the re-entry of the United States into the region in a more vigorous way. The “lost decade” of the United States in East Asia, during its War on Terror, has nourished China to become a challenger to the hegemonic role of America in the region. China, while having self-contained itself against adversarial environments, began projecting its power to neighbor countries. Although economic interdependence and cooperation between China and neighbor countries have doubled every year, the rise of assertive China and its military threats have caused the United States and its allies in East Asia to feel more uncomfortable. This is the political background for the Obama Administration to return to East Asia with its emphasis on the catchphrase “pivot” or “rebalancing.”

Now is the right time for East Asian countries to evaluate this return of America to the region, whether they welcome it or not. Scholars of international politics have discussed about the implications of the American “pivot” in East Asia. They have also drawn many scenarios that are related to important issues such as hegemonic transition, balance of power, realignment of allies, territorial disputes, and cooperative and competitive regionalism in East Asia. This paper, while acknowledging the relevance of the realist paradigm in general international politics, interprets the paradigm change of East Asia in a more critical perspective. The next section reviews what has happened in East Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when America decided to return to the region. The “Pivot to Asia” by the Obama Administration

and its implications will also be introduced in the section. The third section, as a theoretical counterpart of the previous section, is devoted to explaining the “bias” of great power politics in the realist paradigm when it is applied to East Asia. The fourth section illuminates three realist myths that have been frequently proposed in the discourse of East Asian international politics. Theoretical implications of these myths will be discussed in order to fill the gaps between the realist paradigm and the reality.

## **2. Pivot or Trap? Backgrounds of America’s Return to East Asia**

The “Pivot to Asia” was a foreign policy trademark of the new administration that reoriented its attention back to East Asia as the most vital interest to America. The *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR)*, which was published in 2010, focused on reforming Bush’s foreign policy framework and changing the order of the United States’ top priorities from the Middle East and Europe to East Asia. The *QDDR* also proposed the triple axis of American foreign policy composed of defense, diplomacy and development.<sup>1)</sup> The United States would have to take a smart approach in order to adapt to changing political environments of the

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1) 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 3).

21<sup>st</sup> century and to encourage civil participation and their capacities in crisis management and conflict resolution. A full spectrum of public diplomacy for the strategy of engagement towards other countries was declared in the *QDDR* as the prime target of the Obama Administration.<sup>2)</sup>

Europe had been distanced from the American concerns since the 9/11 attack, while the civil war in Ukraine and consequent energy problems have retaken them. During the first ten years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the NATO had been the last test case for America to decide to intervene in European affairs when any of its allies are attacked from outside. However, the problem for the United States is not so much a security commitment for Europe as the internal division among allies over burden-sharing. As the continent has lost its motives for a strong security alliance after the Cold War, more countries have tended toward a “free-riding” strategy in providing collective goods.<sup>3)</sup> For the Middle East, on the other hand, 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 with their disadvantageous and worsening situations. Even after the United States’ army withdrew from Iraq, political and military struggles in the country have been exacerbated. Whereas it may be too early to evaluate the American

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2) Remarks at the *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.

3) Britain was the only European member of the NATO who has kept the guideline that any member country should spend more than two-percent of GDP (*Economist*, “What China Wants”).

policy in the Middle East as a failure, the status of the United States in the region seems to have been eventually weakened since the Bush Administration.

In East Asia, the dramatic 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 cooperative 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.<sup>4)</sup> America has revealed its interests in several regional forums and arrangements in Asia, such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asian Summit (EAS), ASEAN+3, and the Trilateral Security Dialogue (TSD).<sup>5)</sup> The Six-Party Talks for the North Korean nuclear issue and the idea of “minilateralism” have disclosed a new type of American involvements in the region. As such, the United States has started to display its own big stakes in the East Asia.<sup>6)</sup>

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4) 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 58).

5) For a detailed discussion on the institutions of regional cooperation in Asia, see Wesley.

6) 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

America had 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 management, unlike the multilateral architecture of the NATO (Dittmer 40-41). Its legacy has started to bounce back to America as it was facing serious challenges never expected before. The most serious among them was 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 against the assertive China claiming the regional hegemony in East Asia. Not just the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island 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. While the U.S.-Japanese alliance relationship and the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 are still effective, nobody is sure about whether America will provide security commitments to Japan or Taiwan if China invades disputed islands.

Whereas the relationship between the United States and South Korea has frequently been shaken due to domestic regime changes of both countries in the post-Cold War period, it seems that Japan has remained as the only secured geographic stronghold for the American presence. One regional issue is that Japan, regardless of American preference, has wanted to re-establish its global and regional roles,

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resolving the problem of global commons (Naim 134-135; Brummer 2-3).

but in a way that's not compatible to neighbors' expectations. China, Taiwan, two Koreas and a couple of Southeast Asian countries have claimed against Japanese incessant movements toward a regional power with rearmaments. As such, the United States may have to choose which side to support when any serious conflicts happen between China and Japan, or between regional powers. Then East Asia may not be so much a "pivot" as a "trap" to America like Vietnam or Afghanistan. The final choice might be contingent upon any grand strategy of the United States, which seems not have been so clearly declared by the Obama Doctrine.<sup>7)</sup> In addition to its ambiguities, American has opposed to China's proposal of the "New Type of Major Power Relations," which implies that it is not yet ready to fully design and implement any practical foreign policy in the region (Chen; Erickson and Liff).

The political posture of America returning to East Asia has caused fierce debates over its goals and grand strategies, especially over those against rising China. One group of scholars who advocate the "engagement" strategy have argued that the United States should maintain the role of global leadership 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

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7) 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 52).

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 role of American hegemony in the world, have contended that the country should retreat from abroad as its grand strategy has become counterproductive and unnecessary. Because the geographic environments of the United States keep the country safe from foreign threats, it needs not to spend resources abroad too much to undermine its relative power position. So these scholars have proposed that the United States should pass the bucks to foreign allies as much as possible rather than rush to aid them (Montgomery 118-121).<sup>8)</sup>

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 yet clear about America’s goal in the region: some are arguing for America to contain rising China in order to keep it from challenging hegemony; others are proposing the thesis of balance of power that legitimizes American balancing the threatening power of China in the region; still others argue, in the perspective of rational strategy, for America to deter China not to do what it does not want. We are not yet sure about the nature of American presence and strategic posture in the region without full theoretical discourses. Existing discussions over the American Strategy in East Asia have been dominated by the realist paradigm. Many concepts of it, such as power, interests,

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8) 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.

strategy, hegemony, balance, bandwagoning and deterrence, have been used for analyzing international politics of East Asia. Also existing dialogues on the theme have focused on the roles and functions of great powers such as the United States and China.

### **3. The Bias of Great Power Politics in East Asia**

According to Kenneth Waltz, great powers “write” 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 72-73). The 1990s also witnessed the relevance of great power politics since there have been no big changes in the behavioral pattern of great powers and the structural attributes of international anarchy still remain intact. However, the brief history of the post-Cold War seems not to have shown any special signs for the future regarding 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, probable challengers to America in East Asia might have been China, Japan or Russia. However, none of them has been regarded as a potential “hegemon” or a “global” challenger to America (Mearsheimer 396).

As such, despite of its messy situations, the power configurations in East Asia since the 1990s have been explained only by an offshore hegemony and its relations to some great powers. The new

factor that has eventually transformed this structure was the rise of China with its huge scale of economic and strategic capabilities. Realists have suggested two scenarios for the future of East Asia with rising China: (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 shake the power structure in the region (Mearsheimer 400). However, the history shows a rather crooked and mixed result: while America has chosen the second scenario, it has been committed to engagement in rather than containment of China. This mixed strategy was embedded in the neoliberal self-esteem over democracy and market economy: the primary goal of America over the rise of China has been to change it into a "responsible stakeholder" in the global community (Etzioni 541).<sup>9)</sup>

The biased framework of great power in explaining power relationships in East Asia seems relevant. However, in many aspects, East Asia is quite distinctive in applying the framework of power politics without any revisions. First of all, we have to understand 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 its global interests and its will to protect those interests (Neack 140).

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9) 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 402).

Thus, great powers are defined as the “organizations for power as the last resort for war” (Taylor xxiv). A club of five to six great powers had been organized in Europe since the Napoleonic War, which worked as the main moderator of power politics. The great power club had sustained itself not so much upon global motivations as upon their own self-interests. Britain, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Prussia, Russia and France were members of this club. Great powers had frequently used forces to promote common goals among themselves, so that they were regarded as strong enough to effectively wage war without calling on other countries or allies. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of “great powers” emerged as representing the states which are ready to use force whenever they want 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 prospects of predictable casualties and material costs within limits (Luttwak 23).

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, great powers in Europe had claimed special privileges for themselves and responsibilities which they would not share with small countries. They assumed their role as the protectors of the Peace of Europe, and they were willing to take the responsibility of maintaining order in the post-War Europe. The history of this “exclusive club” among great powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe pushes us to rethink about the status and role of great powers in contemporary world politics. What this story of the great power of Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century tells is that the relative size of population, economic and military capabilities is not the only indicator of great power. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of “great

power” assumed the “exclusiveness” of the club or a common identity as well as a role recognition for the system stability even though it was not like a hegemonic system. That’s why small states of Europe accepted the preeminence of great powers and placed themselves under the patronage. As great powers had taken special responsibilities for small members’ safety and well-being, it was natural for those clients to expect special commitments by strong powers against external threats, domestic instability and financial troubles (Bridge and Bullen 2).

What if we apply the notion of great powers to East Asia? As many scholars have accustomed themselves to explaining power dynamics of the region between the United States, China, Japan and Russia, the existence of “great powers” in the region seems to be relevant in discussing international politics of East Asia.<sup>10)</sup> At the least, East Asia is the place where these great powers have co-existed and competed among themselves for more than a century. The emergence of Japan and China in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has heightened the imperative for the region to be understood in terms of great power politics. However, the features of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe cannot be observed so well in East Asia, which was necessary for the club of great powers to hold a common identity. For example, the structure of opposition between the United States and China (or the Soviet Union) in the Cold War era had not been something like that of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. This makes us to be cautious in

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10) 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 246).

applying the “great power” framework to East Asia.

In terms of the relevance of the notion of great powers in East Asia, it makes sense if we apply it to the status of rising China. 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*, “What China Wants”). However, scholarly discourses and media coverage over China as well as politicians’ opinions have been dominated by the “great power bias.” However, those discussions have never distinguished a variety of great powers from a single hegemon to a group of parallel powers. For example, China has been described as a “challenger to hegemony” or a “great power” without clear definitions. Theoretically, a hegemon is assumed to hold both material capabilities and the willingness to maintain the order of a whole system. It assumes a leadership role at the global level with legitimacy and consensus. Therefore, it is more appropriate not to use the term “hegemony” to tell the threats and negative impacts of rising China. China can be recognized neither as a “hegemon” nor a “challenger to hegemony” because it has yet taken enough responsibilities at the global level. Also it has never been global in its ambitions for a greater influence; it has been and is so only at the regional level.

Therefore, it seems appropriate to call China a “great power” more at the regional level than at the global level. The term “great power” should not be applied to East Asia in its original meaning of the traditional European system. As its usage is so limited in explaining power dynamics of East Asia that we have to be careful in the bias

of great powers. We may have to replace “great powers” with “regional powers” in order to explain power dynamics in East Asia in a more appropriate manner. Regional powers are unlikely to seek allies out of fear that any global hegemon poses threats. Thus threats of rising China would be different between at the regional level and at the global level. 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 163-164).<sup>11)</sup> As such, the existing discussions over the rise of China have confused between traditional notions of great powers and a scaled-down version of regional powers. East Asia may need the latter notion for explaining the rise of China. However, unfortunately, East Asia has been treated as one of many regions like Europe, even though each of them hold unique experiences and histories of their own. This is called the “great power bias” of realism in which a common identity among great powers or the existence of small powers are ignored. In the next section, let’s get deeper into the details of the great power bias by discussing the three “myths” of the realist propositions in understanding the American return to East Asia.

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11) 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 countries, so the intention of a country is more important than power in estimating the dynamics of international politics (Walt 21-26).

#### **4. Myths of the American Return to East Asia**

The bias of great power politics has generated a lot of misunderstandings and under-theories of East Asian international politics. The case of the U.S. return to East Asia, in this context, would be interpreted as an example of balance of power between the declining hegemon, the United States, and the rising China as a challenger. This paper argues that this old frame cannot be applied to the region anymore because of its legacy rooted in the bias of the realist paradigm. As such, in this section, three myths of the realist paradigm in its dealing with the return of America in the region are discussed. The first myth considers the proposition by offensive realism as it explains the rise of China mere as a challenge to the existing hegemony. The second myth discusses the bias of the structural theory of realism as it ignores the micro-dimensions of world politics so much. The third myth, focusing on the simplicities of the rationality assumption, is related to the relevance of applying the idea of rational deterrence to the case of East Asia. The factor of emotions, as an alternative to the realist paradigm, will be discussed with its implications to theorizing 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 China has been recognized as a challenger to the American hegemony in the region, we have to acknowledge that both rising

China and declining America may not fit into hegemonic competition. Charles Kindleberger, who proposed the Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST), has distinguished “leadership” from “dominance” in the sense that the dominance means only a country dominating another. According to his theory, the dominated one has to consider what the dominant does while the latter does not so. 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 join in collective action for public goods. 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, or the hegemony, maintains the structure of economic systems and coordinates economic interactions at the global level (Kindleberger 243-247).

The idea of hegemony has been frequently applied to East Asia. One of the most popular analyses 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. Mearsheimer understands rising China of the 1990s in the same context as it was likely to dominate East Asia and challenged American hegemony in the region. Mearsheimer’s realist prediction that China would claim an Asian-type “Monroe Doctrine” was hailed by many realist scholars as well as political

decision-makers (Mearsheimer 401). Therefore, according to him, the best strategy against China is either containment or active engagement. While Mearsheimer's discussion of offensive nature of great powers has had great impacts on the academic circle, the real-world situations have not been so simple to explain because China has never been more challenging to America than Japan or Germany in the 1940s. China has not 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?

In discussing hegemonic competition, we may consider the configuration of power in world politics. Some realist scholars, such as Kenneth Waltz and Robert Gilpin, have focused on the dimension of power distribution in their discussion of power dynamics (Waltz; Gilpin). This makes sense as far as we do not distinguish the term *domination* and *hegemony*. While the former notion considers only the beneficial aspect for the stronger power, the latter presents a more sophisticated idea about the leadership with its willingness to keep system stability as well as enough capability to do so. This is particularly so in the phenomena of collective action which are not always conflicts among countries. In a collective action such as an alliance, small or weak partners tend to free-ride on system maintenance. This means that small countries do not contribute proportional to their capabilities, while large partners have to spend more resources relative to their powers. In any collective system composed of states with different power levels, no individual state 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 contributions 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 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 societies, the nature of “non-hegemonic” struggles between strong powers becomes clear. As the process of globalization has accelerated its speed, the scale of goods and assets has also expanded so that it has differentiated public and private goods from each other. Large countries tend to be more influenced by this trend, which will lead to the emergence of “residual states” that do not work like centralized nation-states anymore. The cost of large countries with more open, more globalized, and more democratic procedures cannot be motivated to work like small states in responding to outside pressures (Cerny 618-619). China and the United States, in this context, are not “residual states” but still centralized “strong powers” without any 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 diverse types of incentives. Many regions in the world have achieved cooperation through an 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.<sup>12)</sup> In this way, a cooperative hegemon seeks advantages from the strategy of institutionalization at the regional level, which comprehends power aggregation, economic and security stability, inclusion and access to resources, and diffusion of ideas (Pedersen 684-685). This is an 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 stress on the status of middle-to-small powers, scholars have added more on its theoretical applicability. These middle and small powers have taken

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12) A “cooperative hegemony” implies a soft rule within cooperative arrangements so that concept is based upon a hybrid approach between idealism and realism (Pedersen 683). As such, the concept of cooperative hegemony was intended to revise and narrow down the traditional notion of hegemony.

more parts 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 to a single leader. That is, the number of states ( $k$ ) who take responsibility is just one in case of the HST (Snidal 588-589). However, the emergence of cooperation through institutions "after hegemony" has pushed the number  $k$  to increase beyond one. The cases of G7 and OECD are good examples of successful cooperation when  $k$  is greater than one (Keohane 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 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 not only share 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, such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Turkey, are classified as the "global swing state" (Fontaine and Kliman 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." Rising China and declining America cannot stand still without considering the roles of the " $k$ -group" or "swing states" in their projects for the

supremacy in East Asia.

The pattern of “buck-passing” has been well known in foreign policy as the structure of world system becomes multipolar in the post-Cold War era. In a multipolar system, the number of membership is important in achieving system-wide cooperation. As 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 this multipolar and complex system, unlike in the bipolar system where power asymmetry does not allow superpowers to ignore their responsibilities (Posen 63-64). As such, the tendency of buck-passing by the United States in East Asia implies a paradigm change: It has tried to turn its East Asian alliance to an “intermediate group” which allows more than one members to have incentives to share the burden from a “privileged group” in which only one member takes that responsibility (Olson 50). In this way, we may loosen strict conditions of the HST and revise it in order to explicate East Asian power politics with the ideas of cooperative hegemony, *k*-group, swing states, and buck-passing behaviors of great powers.

## **Myth 2: Do Actors Structurally Balance Each Other?**

Balance of power has been an organizing principle and an ordinary rule in international politics. For more than three hundred years this principle has been working automatically among great powers, so that it has provided a way to predict major patterns of international

politics (Sheehan 163). That's why many realists have focused on analyzing the dynamic aspect of balancing behavior. They have witnessed the balancing behavior as an autonomous and voluntary system for equilibrium and harmony since the seventeenth century. In historical contexts, balance of power has been evolved as a behavioral pattern in international politics, like that of a market mechanism in economic relations. As such, in the eyes of realists, a stable and peaceful international system with autonomous balancing mechanisms among great powers would be possible. As every state follows its own interest, peace and prosperity would be guaranteed for all in a secured way. As such, the realist theory of international politics has relied so much on the "structural" mechanism of balancing among great powers that it has left some loopholes to think when we apply it to East Asia.

The biggest problem of the "structural" balancing model is that it has not existed in real-world situations. Scholars have investigated its history and found that a 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 late 1930s was only one of many examples of this type of "underbalancing" (Schweller 1-2).<sup>13)</sup> The anomalous case of America without any balancing in its unipolar moment was another

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13) 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 6-9).

counter-evidence against the balance of power theory. 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 140-141). In reality, we have observed so many cases in which balancing did not happen so that we feel obliged to search for a new theory.

One way to alternative paths for 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 motivations for identifying idiographic aspects of international politics. Now we may narrow down the level of analysis in order to overcome these structural bias. Then we may equip ourselves with analytic tools for non-great powers’ behavior. It would compel us to understand not as a product of structure but as that of individual choices.<sup>14)</sup> Political outcomes may be better explained, in this micro-level framework, as the combination of individual preferences and the influence of systemic institutions around diverse actors. Like any other political processes, international politics is also a “social choice” process (Morrow 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 as main phenomena in international political relations. These micro-level aspects also reveals how

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14) 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 461).

domestic politics of a country affects foreign policy (Schweller 99).

The focus on individual choice, than the theory of structure, will contribute to explaining the pattern of “bandwagoning” in international politics. 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 a side with rising powers rather than balance them (Sheehan 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. Any choice among diverse options such as nonalignment, bandwagoning, and balancing depends on specific situations and preferences of each state (Labs 389-392).<sup>15)</sup> Thus, balancing and bandwagoning are only parts of available options for individual states, particularly for weak ones. In many cases of real-world politics, both balancing and bandwagoning emerge in a mixed form against coming threats and chances.<sup>16)</sup> The picture taken by these ideas matches the situation of East Asia very well as Japan, two Koreas, and Taiwan may have impacts on the two superpowers’

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15) 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 393-394).

16) 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 119-120).

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” levels, but they can also be positioned in the horizontal structure according to their special “functions.” This is because states tend to become specialized in the path dependent international system which 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 125). This idea of horizontal specialization in the role of diverse states helps us explain the cooperative as well as competitive relations between America, China, and other East Asian countries who play relevant roles as a nuclear umbrella (America), a world factory (China), a regional financial axis (Japan), a buffer zone (South Korea) and so on. If we interpret international politics in East Asia in this way, we will find the logic and prediction of the balance of power theory less persuasive.

At the same time, the idea of the “Concert of Europe” among great powers, rather than that of a structural balance, may suggest another scenario for settling the role of the United States and China in East Asia. The notion has its origin in the European great power system of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While the period was characterized both

by balance of power and by the Concert system, the latter differs from the former in that there were highly self-conscious level of cooperation among great powers. Balancing between great powers may be either cooperative or competitive upon specific power configurations, but the Concert had had more effects on strong states' capabilities as it had institutionalized mutual and self-restrained methods of managing problems. For example, after a war against potential hegemon, allied countries may cooperate in maintaining good relations for the future. Then the system transforms itself from a balance of power to a Concert. This is an appropriate prediction as no great power would not 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 have restrained themselves in their territorial and material ambitions under the spirit of the Concert of Europe. So the leaders of great powers were ready to self-constrain themselves in implementing policies toward neighbors and the outside world (Rendall 524). Great powers are not always ready for infinite expansion of power, unlike the prediction of the realists. The case of Russia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was a good example: 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. This gives a meaningful lesson for responding to China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when

the West as well as America are so anxious about its rise. As such, in applying the European experience of great power relations to East Asia, we should take care not to ignore the cooperative relationships between them. The Concert of Europe may be a better model to import to East Asia than the conventional balance of power model.<sup>17)</sup> We may expect a more practical and optimistic prediction over the cooperation in East Asia as the region has accumulated enough experience in multilateral cooperation across diverse issue-areas than the old European balancing powers. The Six-Party Talks has been one of successful cases, despite its current deadlock, as all great powers and concerned parties have joined like that of the old Concert of Europe.

### **Myth 3: Are Rising Powers Rationally Deterred?**

Regarding the third myth of the realist paradigm in its application to East Asia, we may 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 15). The fundamental problem of deterrence is 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

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17) 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 170-172).

compelling but seriously deficient in its application to real-world situations. While the theory of rational deterrence has been well-established by the realist paradigm, it has been criticized for its rigorous assumptions: Actors are exogenously given their preferences and choice options; actors seek to optimize their subjective utilities; differences between actors' opportunities explain variations in outcomes; and states work as a unitary rational actor (Achen and Snidal 150-151; Paul 5-8). Although these simple assumptions make logical inferences consistent and coherent, they are so distant from the reality that we need adjustments.

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 emerge from ambiguous and complex interactions with combinations of capabilities and coercion between nuclear superpowers (Ayson 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 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 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, calculates costs and benefits of probable consequences, which is a type of instrumental rationality (Paul 2-3). Whereas realist theorists have provided the deterrence framework in an articulate way, their assumptions are too simple to apply them to the real world because of the sensitivity to dynamic changes, unpredictable consequences, the process of adaptation, and evolution over time.<sup>18)</sup>

Another point in evaluating the theory of deterrence in East Asia is that we have to pay more attention to the working mechanisms of deterrence which are non-rational. It does not mean that we need an “irrational” framework but that we have to investigate the role of

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18) 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 8).

“non-rational” factors such as passion and emotions. Then the understanding of deterrence between great powers may be so different from the conventional framework of rational deterrence. In reality, the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been changed so much since that of nuclear confrontation between very rational superpowers. Now we do not expect any situation in which great powers restrain themselves with uncompromising nuclear capabilities. More attention must be given to the way of asymmetric competitions, non-traditional warfare such as terrorism, and people’s propensity toward emotional reactions. These factors have been observed to work in the fields of international politics and foreign policy while we are short of any formal theories to explain their impacts.

Let’s compare the situations of the old type of deterrence with the new one at this complex time. 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 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 21<sup>st</sup> century holds retaliatory nuclear power as well as a threatening level of conventional weapons in East Asia. The status of China has been transformed from a material power to an emotional one as it has eventually accumulated enough capacities to challenge America's position in the region. This change has had impacts on the nature of balance of power between China and America because the element of "fear" has caused a game of "balance of terror" between them (Sheehan 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 cases of conflict between two countries, the patterns of actions and reactions between countries were different from the rational choice paradigm. 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 of plane clash was interpreted by both sides as mutually beneficial. This time, two countries interpreted the sign of apologies from the other as a

“victory,” which must have reflected cultural differences in assessing responsibility. The Chinese claimed that Americans admitted responsibility for the incident, while Americans claimed that the apologies by both sides were mere gestures of condolence (Gries 253-255).

These brief cases tell how much emotional factors work in foreign relations, even between great powers such as America and China. Anger, which was prevalent among the Chinese when conflicts happened, had guided the direction of diplomatic posture of China. In this sense, emotions became both symbolic and instrumental tools for diplomatic maneuver. 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 will be accelerated in the coming future. The Chinese have equipped themselves with a sense of their “past greatness, recent humiliation, present achievement and future supremacy” (*Economist* “Friend or Foe?”). Nationalism may frame every issue of foreign affairs of China even before their leaders get ready to deal with it. Political manipulation of national sentiments has created a context in which leaders cannot feel safe anymore as soon as any compromises with foreign countries are to be viewed as an act of “capitulation” or “humiliation.”

As China’s modern historical consciousness has been identified by the “one hundred years of humiliation” in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the emotional sentiments in China should not be ignored in understanding Chinese foreign policy.<sup>19)</sup> The same argument can be

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19) 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

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 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 200-201). What we need to supplement the conventional theory of rational deterrence, in this sense, is the factor of non-rational interactions like emotions. While these factors are still under-theorized in international politics, the people in East Asia have been quite familiar with the emotions and feelings about their nationalities and historical consciousness. The United States' strategy toward China should not ignore these emotional factors that are reproduced throughout everyday interactions and educational projects (Saurette 521-522).

## 5. Conclusion

America's interests in East Asia have been diversified at the global level in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 discussed in previous sections, the realist theory has been tainted by many biases. The

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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 206-207).

biggest of them is the bias of great power politics. This seems understandable if we consider the Cold War legacies 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 this paper emphasized is that the conventional paradigm of realism seems not much relevant in accounting recent changes, particularly the rise of China. This paper checks whether and how traditional notions of the realist paradigm can be applied to East Asian international politics with distinguishable limitations.

Three myths were investigated here as a test of the realist approach to East Asia. Special focus was put on the nature of American strategy by 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 hegemonic competition, balance of power, and rational deterrence, 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 a benevolent version of hegemonic cooperation and regional institutionalization. Also another way to improve the HST with the notion 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 adds more on existing models for the future agenda. The third myth on the rational deterrence was also revealed by scrutinizing the simple assumptions of rationality. While acknowledging theoretical merits of the rational choice approach, we have to overcome its limitations and extend its applicability to the reality. More stress on the role of emotional factors was suggested as an alternative framework for understanding the Sino-American relationship and regional international politics in East Asia.

International politics in East Asia has been frequently explained and accessed by the realist theories and practices due to its own path dependence for more than a century. While acknowledging the merits of realism in explaining power dynamics of East Asia, this paper suggested several ways to supplement its limitations. As the second decade in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 variants of hegemonic system, the role of middle and weak powers and the *k*-group, a mixed strategy of balancing and bandwagoning, and the factor of emotion may increase the explanatory power of the existing framework. More works on theoretical integration among new theoretical tools and empirical tests should follow this introductory discussions.

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■ 논문 투고일자: 2015. 04. 24

■ 심사 완료일자: 2015. 06. 12

■ 게재 확정일자: 2015. 06. 15

**Abstract**

**Myths of the Return of  
the United States to East Asia:  
A Theoretical Review of the Realist Paradigm**

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The “Pivot to Asia” has been one of the most popular topic in international politics of East Asia for the past years. It seems natural for scholars to rely on the realist framework and concepts—such as hegemonic transition, balance of power, realignment of allies, territorial disputes, and cooperative and competitive regionalism—when they explain the return of America to East Asia and the consequent conflict with the rise of China. This paper proposes a critique on this realist approach by evaluating its relevance in the region. First, the paper reviews the realist framework of the United States’ foreign policy and examining its paradigmatic change during the Obama Administration. Next, the paper explicates the bias of great power politics paradigm when it is applied to East Asian international politics. Then, the paper discloses three realist myths that have been frequently proposed in the discourse of hegemonic competition between two superpowers in the region. Theoretical implications of these myths are discussed in order to fill the gap between the realist paradigm and the reality.

**Key Words**

International Politics, East Asia, Pivot to Asia, Realism, Great Power Bias, Myths