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Beyond the Hub-and-Spoke Security System in East Asia: Australian and American Perspectives on East Asian Regionalism

Hamish McDonald

Hamish McDonald, in a far-reaching examination of the shifting geopolitical sands emerging from the six-party talks on North Korea-US security issues, offers a post-hegemonic vision of a new region-centered order in East Asia. Envisaging a region in which a China- or China-Japan centric structure emerges, it is premised on a withdrawal of American military force as the geopolitical core of coastal East Asia to a still powerful military position centered on Guam. But can the US-North Korea agreement hold, and is such a strategic withdrawal in fact in the cards? Is the predominance of Condoleezza Rice's State Department the future of US global policy? Can China and Japan work out a modus vivendi that accommodates both the two major Asian powers and lesser regional powers? Time will tell. MS

Australia's Foreign Affairs Minister, Stephen Smith, was well positioned in Tokyo on June 27 to pick up the strategic tremors from the detonation not far away in North Korea, where the regime blew up the most visible part of its contentious nuclear program.

Smith was taking part in the third "trilateral" strategic dialogue between Australia, Japan and the United States - a relatively new twist integrating two of the "spokes" in East Asia's post-1945 security system in which the US is the hub.

It would be interesting, but perhaps unlikely, if Smith, along with the Japanese Foreign Minister, Komura Masahiko, or the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, saw any challenge to that hub-and-spoke system in the pyrotechnic show put on by the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il.



Dialogue ... Masahiko Komura and Condoleezza Rice. Photo: AP

After all, the destruction of the Yongbyon reactor's cooling tower and the delivery of data on Yongbyon's extraction of weapons-grade plutonium are early steps in the schedule of denuclearisation promised in the September 2005 agreement at the six-party talks held under Chinese auspices.

Kim retains an unspecified number of nuclear weapons made from that plutonium, after one was tested with partial success in October 2006. He is also yet to account for the highly enriched uranium program started with help from the network of the Pakistani A. Q. Khan, or the apparent construction of a Yongbyon clone in Syria destroyed by an Israeli air strike in September.

His regime gets more lifelines with Washington's promised delisting of North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism, a stepped-up flow of food and fuel aid just as his unhappy population is threatened with more famine, and eligibility for some forms of multilateral aid. Regime change, and the possible reunification of Korea, are put off. But it keeps the six-party process alive and nudges East Asia further off the strategic foundations laid down by America's victory in the Pacific War.

Chinese power and influence are being steadily enhanced, and Japan's are being eroded. Japan's preoccupation with the story of its citizens kidnapped by North Korean spies is not being allowed to hold up the nuclear deal.

If the six-party agenda runs its full course, a denuclearised North Korea - possibly on the way to Chinese- or Vietnamese-style economic opening - will be a rehabilitated member of a new East Asian security arrangement alongside South Korea, China, Russia, Japan and the US.

Gavan McCormack, the Australian National University historian of modern East Asia, points out that it will not be just the "North Korean nuclear problem" that is addressed, but the whole agenda of the 20th century in the region, including the legacy of Japanese colonialism, the Korean War, and the Cold War.

"Out of it will come a different East Asian order, in which - in the mid to long term - the current hub and spokes security system dependent on the US will go, and

a China-centred order (or one centred on both China and Japan, if only Japan can move) will replace it," he said.

"The moral categories of 'good' and 'evil' states and the deep-embedded assumptions of subservience to Washington are in train to give way to rational national interest calculations, with the zokkoku, or client states, having to grow up and think for themselves."

Even ahead of the six-party plan, the Americans have been modifying their positioning of forces along the East-Asian coast, which was an application of the ocean-domination doctrines propounded by the American strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan. The unpopular US forces are being wound down in South Korea and Japan's Okinawa islands and relocated to Guam, a US territory. A lasting detente on the Korean peninsula will hasten the process.

Guam is still a forward position, however, and the looming strategic question for our side of the world is how a rising China and a "normalising" Japan can be accommodated without conflict. At the moment, Washington's policies, and implicitly those of Canberra, seem to be pushing the two East Asian giants into military-strategic rivalry.

In particular, strong US support for revision of the famous Article 9 of Japan's constitution, renouncing the right to belligerency, and its urging of the Japanese to "step up to the plate" as an ally and become "America's Great Britain in Asia", are seen as unwise and provocative by US strategic specialists such as John Ikenberry and Francis Fukuyama.

"This is not what we should want Japanese normalisation to look like in East Asia," Ikenberry writes in a collection of papers titled East Asian Multilateralism from the Johns Hopkins University Press. "[It] would continue to antagonise China and Korea, exacerbating and postponing the resolution of Japan's 'historical issues' and feeding nationalist passions on all sides.

"It is less important for Japan to put itself in a position to field combat forces in far-off places than to help provide global public goods and support aid, trade and development in troubled parts of the world. Japan should be a 'responsible' power but it is wrong to equate responsibility with the ability to use force."

Fukuyama, in the same book, argues that Japan's normalisation, including revision of Article 9, should be managed in the context of a new multilateral security pact and a conscious effort to "re-Asianise" Japan, to allay tensions with the Chinese and Koreans.

This still leaves the dilemma of China, which, unlike Japan or South Korea, has used the wealth gained from open access to the US to fund a military challenge to US sea control in the region. Ikenberry is not alone in looking at the rise of the post-Bismarck united Germany from a third of British economic power in 1870 to a lead in economic and military power by 1903.

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