Is Realism Dead? Academic Myths and Asia’s International Politics

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Abstract: The author contends that prominent strands in the recent literature on Asia’s international relations reflect a lack of appreciation for the actual policy of regional states, which is deeply realist in orientation.

The academic ideal, often sought, but rarely achieved, is to be both theoretically innovative and policy relevant. A careful examination of the academic debate on Asia’s international relations over the past decade shows the attempt to reconcile theoretical innovation with policy relevance on a non-realist basis to be a somewhat futile exercise. To demonstrate this, this article will analyze two theses with immediate policy relevance that have occupied center stage in the academic literature devoted to explaining the region’s foreign policy since the beginning of the new millennium.

The first thesis, endorsed by a significant body of scholarship, proposes that China’s rise has not prompted fear or alarm among its Asian neighbors.¹ From this perspective, regional states have not acted in accordance with balance of power politics. Instead, they have largely accommodated, rather than balanced against, Chinese power. State interest and China’s emerging identity explains this accommodation. Thus, author David Kang argues, in terms of interest, that China’s


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rise presents more of an opportunity than a threat to Asian states. Moreover, in terms of identity, Kang avers that since the 1980s, China’s identity has developed in a way that promotes reasonable sovereignty claims and an absence of territorial ambition, rather than a defensive nationalism adumbrated by a sense of resentment.²

The second thesis specifies that a nascent security community is emerging in the Asian region.³ In this evolving dispensation, states are increasingly interconnected via the development of a regional identity through practices of socialization. In this view, a smaller and economically and militarily less powerful region, Southeast Asia, via the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has assumed a crucial role in driving the development of Asia’s regional institutions. The influence of this process is such that one scholar contends that “East Asia” has “been ‘ASEAN-ised’ in content and form.”⁴

Interestingly, both these dominant academic perspectives share the perception that state-centric realpolitik is increasingly passé and a poor guide to international conduct in twenty-first century Asia. Instead, these theorists of international relations further contend that Asian actors “construct” regional arrangements in accord with non-realist concepts and in ways more conducive to regional stability. Closer scrutiny of these arguments, however, reveals them to be a triumph of advocacy over understanding. They offer a flawed basis for interpreting regional politics. Indeed, developments during the Obama Administration (2009-present) demonstrate these theses to be falsifiable on empirical grounds. By contrast, as I shall further argue, realism, in theory and practice, continues to offer a more accurate insight into inter-state conduct in the Asia-Pacific. Ignoring the lessons realism offers, as the proponents of both the “no fear, no balancing,” or robust Asian regionalism counsel, by contrast leads only to inept predictions based on flawed hypotheses.

Myth 1: The Myth of ‘No Balancing, No Fear’

The core puzzle animating David Kang’s influential study on China and East Asia’s international relations is a simple one: namely, why has there been no balancing of Chinese power?⁵ The author argues that a region-wide understanding that China is simply resuming its traditional role as the “dominant state in in East Asia,” has accompanied China’s rise. Thus, there is “a lack of fear” on the part of regional states. According to Kang, fears over China’s rise are “empirically unfounded.”⁶ In this view, present-day Asian actors atavistically return to pre-

² Kang, China Rising, pp.81-83.
⁴ Ba, [Re]Negotiating, p. 245.
⁵ Kang, China Rising, pp. 2-3.
⁶ Kang, China Rising, pp. 4-10.
colonial era conduct that identified Chinese regional hegemony with stability. What causes this development, which, if true, contradicts realist balance of power theory and undermines its prescriptions for regional diplomacy?

For Kang, the critical development in post-Cold War era Asia has been a convergence of national identities, complemented by inter-state interests in an increasingly China-centric region. Consequently, a shared regional understanding about “China’s preferences and limited aims short-circuits the security dilemma.” On this basis, Kang generates insights into the region’s future international relations. Thus, he predicts a regional dynamic toward “accommodation” of China’s central position, rather than a posture of balancing against it. Significantly, in this interpretation of regional dynamics, China is seen as “increasingly becoming the regional hierarchy,” displacing the United States.10

The acid test of any claim concerning Asia’s international politics is the developing relationship between China and Japan. On this score, fear, rather than acceptance, of China’s rise is an empirical reality in contemporary Asia. More particularly, fear increasingly animates Japan’s posture toward China. An authoritative 2006 PEW Global Attitudes Survey Report found that “roughly seven-in-ten Japanese expressed an unfavorable view of China,” and that “anxiety about the growing strength of China’s military is nearly universal in Japan.” Japanese respondents considered China to be a greater threat “than any other country,” even more than North Korea. Indeed, 93 percent of the Japanese surveyed expressed fears of China’s growing military power.”

More recent survey data is broadly consistent with the Pew survey findings. In a December 2009 Yomuri Shimbun/Gallup opinion poll, 64 percent of Japanese respondents believed that China will become a military threat to Japan. A November 2009 Yomuri Shimbun Japan-China Joint Public Opinion Poll found that while 62 percent of Japanese believed that “Japan has walked the path of a peace-loving nation since World War Two over 60 Years ago,” only 18 percent of Chinese surveyed expressed agreement with that opinion. Asked to choose from a

12 PEW Report, China’s Neighbors Worry, p. 4.
13 PEW Report, China’s Neighbors Worry, p.1.
menu of words to describe their perception of China, 56 percent of the Japanese respondents chose the phrase “military expansion.”

Elite opinion in Japan largely parallels public opinion. A 2009 study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) collected data from policy elites in Japan and eight other Asia-Pacific states. When asked to respond to the question “which country poses the greatest threat to peace and stability in the next 10 Years?” 51 percent of Japanese elite participants identified China as the principal threat. The survey concluded that “both Japanese and Korean elites are more worried about China as a threat to peace in 10 years than they are about North Korea.” Thus, as China’s military capabilities have risen, Japanese public and elite opinion has expressed growing levels of fear about China’s rise. As a result, the Japanese have increasingly come to emphasize the value of their alliance with the United States.

Of course, a critique of this view might contend that it is unrealistic to expect the Chinese to resolve easily their historically-challenged relationship with Japan. However, this is precisely the hard test of whether China has the necessary diplomatic gravitas to lead the region. Instead, over the last decade, China has escalated conflict with Japan, and, in the process, disrupted the regional status quo. This practice has only further consolidated Japanese fears of China’s rise.

Three episodes demonstrate this escalation. The first occurred in the fall of 2010 when a Chinese trawler collided with a Japanese coast guard vessel near disputed islands in the East China Sea, leading to the imprisonment of the trawler’s crew for twenty days. Beijing subsequently cancelled scheduled talks on the joint exploration of a gas field in the East China Sea, summoned the Japanese ambassador on repeated occasions, and demanded an apology.

As tension flared, China reportedly blocked the shipment of rare earths to Japan, which are critical for the manufacture of high technology products. This served to amplify a Japanese sense of vulnerability as China controls approximately 95 percent of the global rare earth supplies. Interventions by Chinese and Japanese government officials merely exacerbated tension. Japanese Foreign Minister, Seiji Maehara, accused China of “extremely hysterical” counter-measures. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ma Zhaoxu claimed that Maehara’s comments were “absurd,” and that “China is not to be blamed.” A short ten-minute meeting

16 Data was collected from elites from the following countries: United States, Japan, South Korea, China, Thailand, Indonesia, India, Australia, and Singapore. Bates Gill et al., eds., Strategic Views on Asian Regionalism: Survey Results and Analysis (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009).
17 Gill et al., eds., Strategic Views, p. 7.
22 “Japan’s Hawk’s Remarks,” Associated Press.
between the Chinese and Japanese Prime Ministers at the East Asian Summit in Hanoi at the end of October failed to soothe bilateral tensions. China’s Assistant Foreign Affairs Minister, Hu Zhengyue, further exacerbated the situation. Referring to an October 27th meeting in Hawaii between Japanese Foreign Minister Maehara and then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton prior to the Hanoi Summit, Hu asserted that “Japanese diplomatic authorities have partnered with other nations and stepped up the heat on the Diaoyu (as the Senkaku islands is known in Chinese) island issue.”

Nor was Japan’s alliance partner, the United States spared. Ma rejected Clinton’s proposal to host trilateral talks as a way of ameliorating Sino-Japanese tensions. Commenting on Clinton’s view, expressed at the meeting with Machaira, that the Senkaku islands were covered by the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang asked her to “avoid irresponsible remarks.” This merely served as fodder for Japanese right-wing groups, whose subsequent protests included throwing flares into the compounds of the Chinese consulates in Fukuoka and Nagasaki. On the Chinese side, anti-Japanese protests persisted, both on the internet, and on the ground, even after the Chinese authorities attempted to quell them. At one point, an estimated 30,000 people took part in protests in Chengdu in Southwest China.

In reaction to these events, Japanese public opinion turned increasingly negative. An October 2010 Yomiuri Shim bun poll found that 89 percent of Japanese interviewees felt that in its reaction to the trawler incident, “China’s series of measures went too far.” More specifically, 94 percent of the Japanese interviewed did not agree with China’s demand for an apology from Japan. A Japanese Cabinet Office poll also conducted in October 2010 found the number of Japanese respondents who said they did not have friendly feelings toward China jumped 19.3 percent to 77.8 percent from a similar Cabinet Office survey conducted a year earlier. By December 2010, the Japanese National Defense Program guidelines described Chinese military actions as “a matter of concern for the region and the international community.” Reflecting its own concerns about China, ahead of the release of the guidelines, the Japanese Defense Ministry announced that it was expanding its submarine fleet from 16 to 22 submarines, the first expansion since 1976.

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28 Vent Anti-Japan Sentiments Rationally,” Associated Press.
The second episode in this escalating drama occurred between August and September 2012. Once more the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands served to dramatize Sino-Japanese tensions. It began when Tokyo mayor and right wing nationalist, Shintaro Ishihara, sought to purchase three of the islands in the chain from a Japanese family. Seeking to forestall this purchase, which would have further destabilized Sino-Japanese relations, the Japanese government instead nationalized the islands in question. However, the move backfired. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) interpreted it as a calculated insult. The Chinese Foreign Ministry demanded that the Japanese government “stop actions that violate Chinese sovereignty.”

These developments catalyzed anti-Japanese resentment across China. Throughout September, Japanese-themed shops, restaurants and consulates were vandalized. When the Japanese ambassador to China, Uichiro Niwa, was being driven in his diplomatic car through Beijing, Chinese protesters ripped the Japanese flag from it. The publication of images of these actions on the front pages of leading Chinese newspapers, including those of protests outside the Japanese embassy in Beijing, suggests that elements in the Chinese leadership approved the protests. As with earlier demonstrations in 2005, the Chinese authorities eventually suppressed the protests. Nevertheless, at the same time, then Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, delivered a speech asserting that China “will never budge, even half an inch, over the sovereignty and territorial issue.” Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman, Geng Yansheng, reinforced the message, observing that China was “watching closely…and reserve[d] the right to take reciprocal measures.” After the protests dissipated, the ministry dispatched patrol ships from China’s Marine Surveillance fleet to the vicinity of the disputed islands. In late September, Chinese Foreign Minister at the time, Yang Jiechi, raised the issue at the United Nations provoking a response from Japan’s Deputy Ambassador Kazuo Komada. The Chinese ambassador to the United Nations, Li Badong, subsequently accused Japan of having an “obsolete colonial mentality.” Then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta deemed the situation sufficiently troubling to express official concern that the accidental use of force could occur.

More recently, a third episode occurred, highlighting the seeming intractable state of bilateral relations. In December 2012, eight Japanese F-15 fighters scrambled to intercept a Chinese marine surveillance aircraft from the State Oceanic Administration, which was flying over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. This happened again on January 11, 2013, when the Japanese Air Self Defense Force responded to Chinese Air Force J-100 fighters operating near the islands. On

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37 Harlan and Yang, “China Sends Patrol Ships.”
January 19 and 30, 2013, the Japanese Defense Ministry claimed that a Chinese PLA navy vessel had activated its missile guidance system and “painted” a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force vessel with its radar system. Japanese Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera considered that these actions amounted to threatening the use of force.

The situation intensified further when China released a White Paper on April 16, 2013 which identified Japan as “making trouble over the Diaoyu islands issue.” The next day, a PLA Type-052 Lanzhou missile destroyer and Type-054A Hengshui missile frigate entered waters near the contested islands. This occasioned an escalating process of action-reaction. On April 21 members of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s cabinet visited the Yasukuni shrine which contains the remains of Japanese war criminals executed in 1945. Meanwhile on April 23, 170 members of the Japanese Diet, and a small flotilla carrying 80 Japanese nationalists visited waters off the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Reacting to this provocation, on April 26, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman allegedly asserted that “The Diaoyu Islands are about sovereignty and territorial integrity. Of course, it’s China’s core interest.” The official transcript of the conference was subsequently revised to affirm that “China would resolutely safeguard the country’s core interests, including the national sovereignty, national security and territorial integrity. The Diaoyu Islands involves China’s territorial sovereignty.”

Finally, at a two-day informal meeting in California, President Barack Obama urged his counterpart President Xi Jinping to “deescalate” the conflict with Japan.

However, neither side has demonstrated an interest in following Obama’s counsel. In a sign of increasing Japanese frustration, the Japanese Defense Ministry’s annual White Paper, released in July, proposed an increasingly hard line towards China. This led the Chinese Defense Ministry to contend that Japan was compromising regional stability.


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That Japanese accept that there is a

Brookings Institution in Washington D.C., that the Japanese accept that there is a territorial dispute, since this implies that a question exists over Japanese sovereignty of the islands. 46 Interestingly, the scope of the Senkaku/Diaoyu conflict now involves the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) on the Chinese side, which reportedly occurred on the first anniversary of the Japanese purchase of the three islands in early September. 47

In reviewing this record, the increasing prominence of multiple Chinese actors at the provincial and ministry level with a vested interest in expanding China’s claims in the East China Sea and South China Sea has evidently exacerbated bilateral tensions. 48 A restructuring promulgated at the National People’s Congress in March, and taking effect in July, is therefore a potentially helpful development. 49 In theory, the merger of four Chinese agencies under a State Oceanic Administration reduces the potential for inadvertent conflict between China and rival claimants. However, this reform does not mitigate the potential for deliberate conflict, which is increasingly the key issue.

Ultimately, the recent dynamic interplay in Sino-Japanese relations suggests that Japanese fears concerning China’s rise are real and gaining in intensity. At the same time, the Japanese polity contains elements that are not averse to provoking the PRC and vice versa. Therefore, Kang’s claim that East Asians (including Japan) view Chinese hegemony as natural, and that “East Asian states prefer China to be strong rather than weak because a strong China stabilizes the region” evidently requires revision. 50 Further developments in South East Asia described below intimate that Japan and its Asian neighbors are far from complacent about how China will use its increased capabilities. Consequently, East Asian states overwhelming support the United States maintaining its role as the most powerful state in the region, balancing rising Chinese power. This fact explains the near universal regional support for the Obama administration’s rebalancing policy, announced in late 2011.

Myth 2: The Myth of Robust Regionalism

For the last two decades, the study of Asian regionalism has assumed increasing prominence in the academic literature. The core theme in this research has been one of how regional states have managed to transcend the pessimism of realpolitik and develop regional institutions, forging a regional identity and security community via processes of socialization. 51 As one advocate tells it, to understand

50 Kang, China Rising, p. 4.
these processes “one needs to look beyond the material interests and rational utility-maximizing behavior of regional actors.” 52 In this view, “the norms and processes of ASEAN such as inclusiveness, dialogue, moderation, non-confrontational posture, and consensus building—have helped to draw other more powerful Asian and non-Asian nations into a framework of regional socialization. Realism has difficulty appreciating this.” 53 Analogous to the discourse of China’s peaceful rise, empirical evidence challenges this understanding of Asian regionalism. For the purposes of our analysis, we will focus on two aspects of this phenomenon: intra-ASEAN diplomacy; and the role of ASEAN and closely-related regional institutions like the East Asian Summit in diplomatically engaging with China.

The central question driving both the diplomacy and academic debate over the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) since the Asian Financial Crisis (1997-98) is whether the organization constitutes a “security community.” At the Ninth ASEAN Summit in October 2003, the leaders of the organization formally declared their aim to establish an ASEAN community based on a tripartite economic, security and socio-cultural framework. ASEAN declared the year 2015 as the date by which it would realize this promise. Given that a supportive security environment underpins economic and social integration, the security community aspect of this project assumes particular importance. Here, the problematic interaction between ASEAN policy makers and academic proponents of Asian regionalism becomes increasingly clear.

The felt need to transform ASEAN into a security community represents the successful culmination of an effort by a number of analysts stretching back to at least the early 1990s, to advance the security community concept. This was intended as a means of understanding the dynamics of Southeast Asia’s international relations. 54 Karl Deutsch first developed the concept in the 1950s to explain European integration. 55 In formal terms, a security community of states is characterized by the absence of war and the absence of significant organized preparations for war, such as military contingency planning. Competitive military build-ups or arms races between members of the security community should also be absent.

Is ASEAN then, a security community? By Deutschian standards, the answer is resoundingly no. Two factors illustrate why this is the case. The first is empirical and relates to intra-ASEAN state behavior. Evidence that ASEAN states have organized preparations for war, such as military contingency planning

facie demonstrates ASEAN is not a security community. Take for example, the relationship between two founding members of ASEAN, Singapore and Malaysia. According to Tim Huxley, a specialist on the Singaporean Military, the Singaporean Armed Forces’ “order of battle appears to be designed for the possibility of war with Malaysia,” aiming to “disable” the Malaysians in “a brutal and fearless preemptive strike.” ⁵⁶ This is a deterrence-based security relationship, and does not resemble anything which could form a meaningful component of a security community. Elsewhere, the situation is even worse for security community advocates. A cursory familiarity with the Cambodia-Thai relationship suggests that the use of the security community concept to describe this relationship only brings the concept into disrepute. Recent history demonstrates this. In early 2003, bilateral tensions escalated to the point that Cambodian demonstrators burnt the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh to the ground. Indeed, since 2008 both sides have repeatedly resorted to outright military force, over disputed temple sites on the Thai-Cambodia border, further negating the utility of any security community approach. ⁵⁷

The dissonance between scholarly support and the absence of empirical validation for the security community concept requires explanation. Closer scrutiny of the reasons put forward, in making the case that ASEAN is a security community, suggest that the entire enterprise rests on tenuous but academically fashionable theoretical foundations. Since Amitav Acharya has advanced the most assertive case for ASEAN as a security community, we will address his account of ASEAN dynamics. In Acharya’s view, norms constitute the independent variable explaining ASEAN’s development into a nascent security community. ASEAN’s core norms inter alia include: non-interference; non-use of force; the pursuit of regional autonomy; the avoidance of collective defense; and the practice of a distinctive ASEAN Way. ⁵⁸ A cursory review of ASEAN’s respective bilateral relationships suggests that empirical evidence shows that these norms are either not strong, or are contradicted by the evidence. Interference rather than non-interference in the internal affairs of neighboring states is, in fact, a regular feature of intra-ASEAN behavior, reflecting the realist logic that stronger powers do what they must when their interests require it.

To cite the Malaysia-Singapore case once more, a commitment to intervention is a defining feature of the bilateral relationship. Both states have commented freely on the other’s internal affairs since Malaysia expelled Singapore from the Malaysian Federation in 1965, so much so that they now appear “the best of enemies.” A brief review illustrates this. In 1986, the visit of Israeli President Chaim Herzog to Singapore provoked the ire of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir who claimed the visit offended regional Islamic sensibilities. Further outrage followed when then Singaporean Deputy Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, publicly

questioned the loyalty of ethnic Malays in Singapore. In March 1997, diplomatic ties were severed when former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew made derogatory remarks about the neighboring Malaysian city of Johor Bahru. Worse was to follow in the aftermath of the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98, as bilateral ties dissolved into mutual recrimination. Malaysia criticized Singaporean banks for aiding capital flight from the country. Malaysia even threatened to terminate treaties guaranteeing Singapore’s water supply and airspace access. These threats indicate mutual suspicion rather than community integration. This is ultimately reflected in Singapore’s defense posture, predicated as it is on securing water supplies in Southern Malaysia if a worst-case scenario arose.

Nor is the Malaysia-Singapore relationship atypical. Regional relations have been regularly disturbed by a litany of bitter diplomatic spats that far from being dealt with “quietly” by a “community of friends,” have been conducted with rancorous public hostility, regular intervention both rhetorical and real, in ASEAN neighbors’ internal affairs. More recently, ASEAN applied its non-interference norm somewhat haphazardly in its dealings with the egregious military regime in Myanmar before it embarked on a process of reform after 2011. Initially, ASEAN advanced the non-interference norm when it admitted Myanmar into the organization, against international opposition, in 1992. Later, in 2003, however, then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir violated this norm declaring that the military junta’s continued repression of the democratically elected “opposition,” led by Aung San Suu Kyi in defiance of international opinion, damaged ASEAN’s standing. Mahathir intimated that Myanmar might face expulsion from the Association. Indeed, if the Myanmar government of the time, the euphemistically named State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), took at face value ASEAN’s commitment to the non-interference norm, they would have been seriously misled.

Although ASEAN’s achievements intra-regionally are both exaggerated and misunderstood, this reality has proven to be little impediment to the association projecting its norms of conflict resolution onto a wider regional canvas. In particular, ASEAN assumed the self-appointed task of socializing China into a “responsible regional power.” In 2002, ASEAN and China notably subscribed to a Declaration of a Code of Conduct to address the conflicting littoral claims the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Brunei, Taiwan and China advanced to maritime exclusion zones in the South China Sea. The Declaration coincided with—and seemed to reflect the promise of—China’s peaceful rise. It thus presents a critical test of whether Asia transcends “western” realpolitik and resolves its diplomacy by recourse to ASEAN’s distinctive process.

A decade after the Declaration, ASEAN and China have made no meaningful progress to resolve their competing claims. More precisely, relations

59 Mahathir cited ASEAN’s credibility as a rationale for threatening to expel Myanmar from ASEAN. “We are thinking about ourselves as ASEAN, we are not criticizing Myanmar for doing what is not related to us, but what they have done has affected our credibility. Because of that, we have voiced our views.” Agence France Presse, “Myanmar Might Have To Be Expelled From ASEAN,” July 20, 2003.
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have dramatically deteriorated. In 2006, ten years after subscribing to the United Nations’ Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), China opted out of UNCLOS’s dispute settlement mechanism. An attempt in 2008 by China, the Philippines and Vietnam to conduct a joint seismic survey of disputed areas in the South China Sea collapsed. In May 2009, Malaysia and Vietnam made a joint submission to UNCLOS on their territorial claims in the South China Sea. In response, China submitted a map to UNCLOS that appeared to assert Chinese sovereignty over most of the South China Sea, including not only land features, but also the waters inside the line. Responding to the Chinese government’s seizure of a Vietnamese shipping vessel in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands in September 2010, the Vietnamese government used its chairmanship of the ASEAN Defense Minister’s Meeting (ADMM) Plus Eight Meeting in Hanoi in mid-October 2010 to place the issue on the agenda for discussion. This was a direct challenge to China, which consistently refused a multilateral approach to the dispute, insisting instead on settling claims bilaterally. Shortly before the ASEAN meeting, Vietnam marked its millennium celebrations with a mass military parade. President Nguyen Minh Triet, referring obliquely to China, asserted that “the Vietnamese people love peace…but do not submit to brute force and violence.”60 Beijing responded in the first week of November 2010 by staging a major naval exercise in the South China Sea involving 1,800 troops and more than 100 ships, submarines and aircraft. At the end of December, Beijing announced plans to increase both its naval surveillance fleet, as well as the number of maritime patrols in the South China and East China Seas. More was to come. In March 2011, two China Marine Surveillance ships aggressively approached a Philippine vessel conducting a seismic survey in the natural gas-rich Reed Bank. Manila claimed that four similar skirmishes occurred between April and May. The Aquino government subsequently began referring to the South China Sea as the ‘West Philippine Sea.’

In a belated attempt to reverse this confrontational trend, in July 2011, ASEAN and China agreed upon a set of guidelines for implementing the 2002 Declaration of a Code. In August, President Hu Jintao stated after meeting with Philippine President Aquino that “the countries concerned may put aside disputes and actively explore forms of common development in the relevant sea areas.”61 On 6 September, the Chinese government released a White Paper that suggested further moderation in its approach to disputed waters. The document reaffirmed Deng Xiaoping’s well-known guidance on “setting aside disputes to pursue joint development.”62 In January 2012, a Sino-ASEAN meeting led to the establishment of four working groups to explore marine environmental co-operation, marine scientific research, search and rescue operations, and ways to combat transnational crime.

However, at the same time as the PRC appeared to embrace a more accommodating stance, it was also prepared to act intransigently. A stand-off

62 Stirring Up the South China Sea, ICG, p.35.
between Chinese and Philippine naval vessels over the Scarborough shoal (Huangyan Island) in the Spratly Island chain in April-June 2012 revealed the potential for naval conflict. Meanwhile, China protested Vietnam’s passage of a June 2012 maritime law declaring sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. In that same month, China unilaterally established a municipality called Sansha (three sandbanks in Chinese) in the South China Sea, with Yongxing (or Woody) island serving as the administrative hub. According to the official Chinese Xinhua news agency, Sansha’s jurisdiction extends over 13 square kilometers of land and 2 million square kilometers of surrounding water, effectively establishing Chinese control over much of the South China Sea. In a direct challenge to Vietnam, China invited foreign bids for oil exploration inside Hanoi’s Exclusive Economic Zone. China also out-maneuvered the Philippines over the Scarborough shoal dispute in June 2012. With a typhoon approaching, both sides agreed to withdraw from the area. The Chinese, however, quickly returned to occupy the shoal, claiming ownership without firing a shot.

At ASEAN’s June 2012 Summit, held in Phnom Penh, these disagreements spectacularly exposed ASEAN’s limitations as a multilateral framework for peace and security. The Summit failed even to agree on a Code of Conduct to address overlapping claims in the South China Sea. For the first time in its 45-year history, the Association failed to agree on a post-summit communiqué. This was because Cambodia, China’s proxy and chair of the meeting, refused to include a reference to the South China Sea disputes in the final communiqué. One Filipino official claimed that Cambodia used its position to exercise a de facto veto over proceedings. At the November East Asian Summit, also held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and China again tried to neutralize debate over the South China Sea dispute. Chairing the Summit once more, Cambodia unilaterally announced that ASEAN had agreed with China that “they would not internationalize the South China Sea,” and focus instead on “the existing ASEAN-China mechanisms.” Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao clarified China’s position at a closed-door Summit session, asserting that the islands in the South China Sea were China’s and “there is no question over… sovereignty.” In response, Philippines’ President Benigno Aquino III, repudiated both his Cambodian hosts, and China. Somewhat ominously for the continued practice of the ASEAN Way, Aquino observed “that the ASEAN route is not the only route for us. As a sovereign state it is our right to defend our national interests.”

In the wake of the Summit, Beijing announced that all new Chinese passports would include a map outlining China’s maritime claims. That these claims contradict the United Nations’ Convention on the Law of the Sea does not appear to concern the PRC leadership. At the same time, the government of the Philippines refuses to kow tow to China’s worldview. In January 2013, Foreign Minister Rosario informed Chinese Ambassador Ma Keqing that Manila would take the conflict to UNCLOS for resolution. Rosario also called for an increased Japanese presence in the region. He stated that “we are looking for balancing factors…and Japan could be a significant balancing factor.”68 Significantly, the Aquino government is also deepening the once estranged U.S.-Philippines military relationship. Both countries started negotiations in July 2013 on the establishment of a rotational air and naval agreement that allows for an increased U.S. military presence.69 As with the Japan and Vietnam case, a trajectory of escalating conflict appears in place. In August, China cancelled President Aquino’s scheduled visit to China. Subsequently, in early September, the Philippine military provided evidence of China building additional structures in the Scarborough Shoal in violation of the 2002 Declaration.

**The Return of Power Politics in Asia: Policy Implications**

Surveying the academic literature on Asia’s international relations in 2012, Alastair Johnston concluded that “there is a fairly common view among specialists in East Asian IR” that “structural [realist] approaches do not work well in the region.”70 Not surprisingly, these soi disant specialists consider inter-state balancing in the face of China’s rise to be a fiction. The rise of this anti-realist stance coincided with the equally misplaced view that Asian regionalism could transform the dynamics of regional inter-state politics. Those who subscribe to these frankly utopian views of the region either self-identify as, or are deeply sympathetic to, the fashionable academic theory of constructivism. Relatedly, those who advance the claims of a transformational post-nation state politics in the region either openly identify as critics of realism, or are deeply sympathetic to the constructivist critique of the modern state. Yet in the course of a decade, the empirically testable dynamics shaping the region has exposed the poverty of constructivist historicism. This approach evidently confuses advocacy with understanding, and functions not as a falsifiable theory, but as an un-falsifiable ideology.

The ideological dimension of this scholarship reveals itself in its rejection of the view that realism plays any role in the analysis of Asia’s international politics. Thus, David Shambaugh contends that “realist theory seems particularly incapable of explaining such a complex and dynamic [Asian] environment, and it thus tends to

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offer oversimplified (and sometimes dangerous) policy prescriptions.”

Elsewhere, Amitav Acharya adopts an even more Olympian stance, averring that ASEAN’s approach to security is a “damning indication of the limitations of the realist framework.” More shrilly, Acharya claims that “Realist perspectives on Asian security” demonstrate an “exaggerated, almost vulgarized faith in the balance of power.”

He further asserts that, “one must seriously doubt the realist tendency to hype the role of the United States in the maintenance of regional order at the expense of regional norms and institutions.”

By contrast, I contend that the actual practice of Asian states contradicts such analysis of Asia’s international politics. In fact, what has occurred across the region over the last few years is an acute case of Power Politics 101. What the region now needs—as a matter of urgency—is a return to realist-informed policy analysis. More precisely, we should return to the first principle of realism, namely that a great power can only be balanced by a great power. Japan and the ASEAN states, as the disputes over the Senkaku Islands and the South China Sea starkly demonstrate, cannot balance China alone. The smaller states in the region require an actively engaged United States. On that score, contrary to the more strident claims of Chinese nationalists, since Nixon’s China demarche in 1972, the United States has never sought to contain China’s emergence as a regional power. Rather, maintaining a stable Pacific order underpins U.S. regional strategy. The majority of regional states accept this posture. With regional tensions making regular headlines, the United States remains the go-to power to maintain regional peace. In this context, the Obama Administration’s pivot to Asia, demonstrates an enlightened interest in sustaining regional peace, reassuring its allies, and protecting its trade with the most vibrant part of the global economy. In practical policy terms, the Obama Administration now needs to match the rhetoric of the pivot with an appropriate budget.

Paradoxically, the Chinese also recognize the necessity of a United States that engages and balances their rising power. Hyper-nationalists aside, the PRC realizes that a stable regional order requires a U.S presence. A counter-factual may help clarify this point. If the United States disengaged from Asia, can anyone doubt that Japan would re-militarize, and necessarily acquire nuclear weapons, particularly given that it faces a proven North Korean nuclear threat? In such circumstances, Chinese confrontation with Japan would surely intensify whichever party was in power in Japan. As this struggle for security in Asia developed, the South Koreans would try to hedge between China and Japan, while the North Koreans would be...

emboldened. Most significantly, from the Chinese perspective, an assertive regional nationalism and consequent decline in trade and regional economic integration would have serious implications for China’s growth and internal stability. Such regional imbalance would significantly threaten China’s national interests.

Conclusion

If what has been argued in this article seems like common sense, it should be noted that this has been in rather short supply in recent years. As we have shown, an influential group of scholars in the United States and Asia have promulgated perspectives that obfuscate rather than illuminate the realpolitik features that characterize inter-state behavior in the Asia-Pacific region. An appropriate attention to the empirical facts has not accompanied this fashionably abstract theorizing. Meanwhile, regional states have prioritized economics over the dictates of strategy and politics. In the process, they have underestimated the security dilemmas that could affect the region deleteriously.

Lulled by a decade and a half of post-Asian Financial Crisis economic growth, regional elites developed a form of collective amnesia. Recent events in the East and South China Seas have rudely awakened them to the verities of power politics. Power balances power. Judiciously applied U.S. pressure could persuade the Chinese leadership to resolve regional conflict, rather than embark on an ultimately futile policy of expanding its influence at its periphery. If China’s rise and Asia’s future is to be peaceful and prosperous, it requires a more realist appreciation of power and its contemporary application to the Asian sphere than currently exists among both scholars and the region’s political elites.