

Review: Withering Realism? A Review of Recent Security Studies on the Asia-Pacific Region

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Jörn Dosch

and Manfred Mols; Japan and the Security of Asia by Louis D. Hayes; Major Power Relations in Northeast Asia: Win-Win or Zero-Sum Game by David M. Lampton; The Many Faces of Asian Security by Sheldon W. Simon; Strategic Asia: Power and Purpose, 2001-02 by J. Richard Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg

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Withering Realism? A Review of Recent Security Studies on the Asia-Pacific Region

Review Article*

Contemporary security studies on the Asia-Pacific region as part of the study of International Relations has become a growth industry since the early 1990s. Although it had previously attracted little theoretical reflection, the region has now forced scholars and policymakers to debate vigorously on the nature and future of its security. They have yet to reach consensus, however, on how to answer the following questions: What is being secured, and against what? Who provides for security? How is security to be achieved? One thing is clear, though: the political realism that once dominated the discourse on security is no longer the only voice. The end of the Cold War witnessed the rapid rise of other perspectives on security, including liberal, postpositivist and unconventional approaches, although none threatens to eliminate realism from debates on contemporary security issues. From an epistemological standpoint, however, the material determinism of political realism is no longer defensible.

In his contribution to *The Many Faces of Asian Security*, Sheldon Simon acknowledges that, "So far...the dominant paradigm remains realist—that is, first and foremost, that states continue to protect their sovereignty" (p. 3).

***THE ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY LEXICON.** By David Capie and Paul Evans. *Pasir Panjang (Singapore): Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.* 2002. xi, 224 pp. US\$44.90, cloth, ISBN 981-230-150-X; US\$24.90, paper, ISBN 981-230-149-6.

CAN ASIANS THINK? By Kishore Mahbubani. *Toronto (Ontario): Key Porter Books.* 2001. 208 pp. Cdn\$24.95, paper, ISBN 1-55263-313-6.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC: New Patterns of Power, Interest, and Cooperation. Edited by Jörn Dosch and Manfred Mols. *New York: St. Martin's Press.* 2000. 258 pp. (Tables.) US\$59.95, cloth, ISBN 0-312-23980-7.

JAPAN AND THE SECURITY OF ASIA. By Louis D. Hayes. *Lanham (Maryland), Oxford (UK): Lexington Books.* 2001. xvii, 196 pp. US\$75.00, cloth, ISBN 0-7391-0295-8.

MAJOR POWER RELATIONS IN NORTHEAST ASIA: Win-Win or Zero-Sum Game. Edited by David M. Lampton. *Tokyo and New York: Japan Center for International Exchange.* 2001. 135 pp. US\$20.00, paper, ISBN 4-88907-047-8.

THE MANY FACES OF ASIAN SECURITY. Edited by Sheldon W. Simon. *Lanham (Maryland), Boulder (Colorado), New York, and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (in association with The National Bureau of Asian Research).* 2001. x, 259 pp. US\$69.00, cloth, ISBN 0-7425-1664-4; US\$22.95, paper, ISBN 0-7425-1665-2.

STRATEGIC ASIA: POWER AND PURPOSE, 2001-02. Edited by J. Richard Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg. *Seattle (Washington): The National Bureau of Asian Research.* 2001. viii, 378 pp. (Charts, figures, tables, graphs, maps.) US\$19.95, paper, ISBN 0-9713-9380-X.

Realist-inclined security experts who have studied the Asia-Pacific region remain convinced that their gloomy assessments of security remain valid, painting a grim picture of states locked in a competition for power and behaving according to balance-of-power logic. They thus insist that the Asia-Pacific region remains one of the most dangerous in the world.

Aaron Friedberg, Paul Bracken and Thomas Christensen are among these neo-classical realists. In his contribution to *Strategic Asia: Power and Purpose 2001-02*, Friedberg sounds a clear warning. The Asia of our new century will draw the US's attention away from Europe, as it gains importance through deep and long-term shifts in the global distribution of wealth and power. The international system today is "unipolar," and "is likely to remain so for some time to come" (p. 17), but it will eventually become dangerously multipolar. Based on theoretical insights similar to those of Kenneth Waltz's defensive realism and John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, Friedberg's prediction is that multipolarity is more prone to war than bipolarity. "If five hundred years of European history are of any guide" we are told, "the prospect of a multipolar system emerging in Asia cannot be an especially comforting one" (p. 11). The reality is that "twenty-first century Asia may come to resemble nineteenth century Europe. Asia, like Europe, will probably contain a group of big powers (including China, India, Russia and Japan, with the United States playing a role from across the Pacific) as well as several somewhat less powerful, but still potentially quite capable actors" (p. 11). And "China is both the single biggest factor, and the single largest question mark in the Asian geopolitical equation" (p. 18).

In his contribution to *Strategic Asia*, Christensen devotes much of his attention to the role of domestic politics and elites in the Sino-Taiwanese rivalry, which threatens to escalate into war. China remains weak—economically, politically and militarily—but its leadership might find it justifiable to take action against a recalcitrant Taiwan. Beijing still perceives "[t]he need to preserve national integrity, to prevent domestic chaos in China, and, most of all, to preserve the reign of the CPP, which could easily be threatened by a blow to its reputation as a defender of national sovereignty" (p. 59).

In *The Many Faces of Asian Security*, Paul Bracken's chapter strengthens Christensen's strategic analysis, as he continues to build on his early theme that Asian nuclear powers will dangerously weaken their Western counterparts. The ballistic missiles and other precision-guided technologies acquired by Asian armed forces could destabilize the post-Cold War regional order. China, for instance, has built increasingly accurate ICBMs and hardened silos and could be tempted to escalate its conflict with Taiwan once its leaders become confident that they could now deter the US. The US itself would find it increasingly difficult and costly to maintain its troops in Asia. Asian states now have the military capability "to reach each other with long-range forces, quickly, efficiently, without mobilizing millions of

soldiers” (p. 87). There is thus no reason to believe that “major conflict is once and for all behind us” (p. 86).

In *Strategic Asia*, other contributors also present classic geostrategic dilemmas that the great powers in the region continue to face. In his chapter on Russia, Rajan Menon identifies China as a rising power that would not be restrained by any one great power, including the US. But neither Japan nor India will be drawn into forming a formal military alliance with the US against China. The US would be unable to count on a weak Russia to counter China’s growing power, either. In Menon’s words: “During the Cold War, the United States coped with Russia’s power and ambitions. Russia’s weakness and limitations are now the problem” (p. 213). In his chapter on India, Ashley Tellis also makes the realist case that the country’s economic growth since the reform of the early 1990s will enable it to expand its military capabilities and to widen its geopolitical vision and ambition.

Realism has several weaknesses, one of which is that its proponents have yet to agree on whether unipolarity, bipolarity or multipolarity is most prone to war. Friedberg views multipolarity as dangerous, but Menon seems to believe that “China’s incentives to be constrained and to avoid risks and confrontation will be increased by an Asia in which there are several independent centers of power” (p. 213). Another general weakness is that it is unclear why ‘bipolarists’ seem to view China’s growing power as a threat rather than as the main contribution to peace, since their logic suggests that two dominant poles in the world make for the best international security system. As shall be pointed out, the materialist foundation of realism has also been badly shaken.

That said, security experts who continue to study the Asia-Pacific region still possess insufficient empirical data to eliminate realism from the debate on security. Fair-minded realists will take note of what their critics have said but can quickly offer more persuasive arguments, because almost all non-realist perspectives have even more weaknesses than realism itself.

There are liberal-minded scholars who continue to defend the concept of ‘concert of power’ (based more or less on the liberal framework) as the best mechanism to ensure regional security in the Asia Pacific. In *Major Power Relations in Northeast Asia*, the contributors identify several security challenges, but not a single essay takes the realist position. In her chapter, Amy Celico acknowledges that the Chinese and American views on national security are not so different in that they see the same transnational sources of threat and advocate greater multilateralism, economic security, better bilateral relations and the maintenance of robust national defense capabilities. Their differences on security issues have made it more difficult for them to find areas of cooperation, but the two countries can amend their security strategies to include policies that enhance mutual security. According to Gregory May, the US, Japan and China can play a useful trilateral role in preventing conflict between China and Taiwan. Both the US and Japan must assure China that

they support a peaceful settlement between the two Chinese states and that they would not encourage Taiwanese independence. In his chapter, Michael Green makes a similar argument that the trilateral China-Japan-US relationship is essential to peace and stability in the region. The two areas that the three powers can work out together are economic cooperation and cross-strait dialogue. Daniel Rosen's chapter adds that the trilateral relationship among the three powers requires substantial regime building to help nurture and maintain economic growth.

In his chapter, Evan Feigenbaum gives two other reasons why the three powers could coordinate their activities: interstate conflict is no longer the only source of insecurity, and neither is the Taiwan-China conflict (which is not an interstate conflict). Two other sources of insecurity are state collapse and international ethnic, political, religious or humanitarian emergency-related violence. It remains difficult for them to coordinate their efforts in these areas, but they should initially focus on two other, less controversial, more agreeable areas: counter-terrorism and humanitarian relief.

Still, the theoretical proposition that the US, Japan and China can form a trilateral relationship based on economic issues, counter-terrorism and humanitarian relief does not threaten the foundation of realism. It is not clear if terrorism has now transformed international politics. It is also possible for the three major powers to work together in 'low-politics' issue areas such as humanitarian relief, but realists would argue that their theories only emphasize the primacy of military security.

Realism can also subsume neo-liberal institutionalism, which in the immediate post-Cold War period made headway with the assumption that great-power politics can be mitigated by rules-based international institutions—an assumption that is harder to defend at present. The contributors in *International Relations in the Asia-Pacific* (mostly German academics) make no bold claims about the triumph of liberalism over realism. In their "Introductory Remarks," both Jörn Dosch and Manfred Mols acknowledge that "a certain degree of Neo-realism is currently prevailing in the Asia-Pacific—at least as a self-fulfilling prophesy—in the real life of the states and actors involved in the Asia-Pacific world on the eve of the new and the end of the old century" (p. 5).

The other chapters in the book bear this point out. Carsten Otto concludes that the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) organization is still more a declaratory regime than a full-fledged one. Vinod Aggarwal simply describes the institution as a nascent regime whose "mission to promote trade liberalization by the year 2025 has faltered" (p. 83). In his neo-functionalist assessment, "the APEC summit provides an excellent forum for politicians to 'look good' for their prospective countries, without actually accomplishing anything beyond mere political rhetoric and talk" (p. 83). In his chapter on Asia-Pacific multilateralism, Dosch even identifies a disturbing trend against multilateralism: a "growing US reluctance toward APEC" and "a fading US

interest in the ARF” (p. 106). American bilateralism has become stronger; Washington only promotes multilateralism when it is seen as “a general vehicle to secure American primacy” (p. 103).

Another challenge to realism is presented in a chapter by Donald Emmerson in *The Many Faces of Asian Security*. He broadens the concept of security by proving that the principle of state sovereignty has come under challenge from within and without. Indonesia, for instance, faces centripetal forces in several provinces. Multilateral institutions, such as the UN and ASEAN, matter. Neither of them employed military force to get the Vietnamese occupation troops out of Cambodia; they used diplomatic pressure as a means to achieve this objective. Sources of threat to state autonomy can also be non-military, such as conditions imposed on troubled states like Indonesia by international financial institutions, which provided them with needed loans.

But none of these critical points poses a serious threat to realism. States in Asia, as noted in Emmerson’s chapter, continue to assert the classic version of state sovereignty. On the influence of major international institutions (such as the IMF and World Bank) on states’ domestic and foreign policies, realists would be able to ask tough questions. How much influence could such international institutions exert on countries like Malaysia and how often do states bow to such external pressures? Even if such institutions can exert considerable influence on states, realists could still raise the question of where the real power comes from. If the Western powers dominate these institutions, realists could make the case that it is power that matters and would also point out that the UN and ASEAN did not succeed in ending the Cambodian conflict. Post-Cold War great-power relations—China, the declining Soviet Union and the US as the world’s only superpower—made all the difference in Cambodia.

A tougher challenge to realism comes from postpositivist perspectives, but postmodernism remains a weak opponent. In *Can Asians Think?* Kishore Mahbubani has assembled a collection of his provocative essays (previously published in journals). A staunch critic of the liberal orthodoxy in general and Francis Fukuyama’s liberal triumphalism in particular, he is not a defender of Samuel Huntington’s ‘postmodern realist’-inclined clash-of-civilization thesis. The author attacks the assumption that Western civilization represents the only universal civilization and seeks to open new spaces for thinking about other civilizations. The liberal world has not triumphed, but neither has Asia. He bets on the relative decline of Western civilization and the relative rise of others, but does not share the pessimistic prediction that the various civilizations of the world are going to collide. He envisions a more secure world that resembles a cosmopolitan community without any cultural hegemony. All civilizations are urged to engage in dialogue based on mutual respect by adopting the principle of “live and let live.” But it remains unclear how this postmodernist vision (inspired by the author’s

experience as a Singaporean citizen whose country is said to be successful in promoting multiracialism or multiculturalism) would materialize. If Singapore serves as a model for cosmopolitan community building, it begs the question: Has the city state really set itself free from the domination of both Chinese Confucianism and a non-democratic government?

Another postpositivist perspective on security—constructivism—seems to pose a much greater challenge to realism. *The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon* by David Capie and Paul Evans offers some profound constructivist insights into the conceptual debates on security in the region. Unlike the various perspectives found in the rationalist traditions, such as realism and liberalism, social constructivism proves that multilateral cooperation among states within the region is possible and that this progress has not simply resulted from states' enlightened interests driven by a rationalist vision. This sociological perspective shows trends in favor of multilateralism bridging ideational gaps between countries from different regions. In the early 1990s, for instance, both the US and China treated multilateral instruments and frameworks with suspicion, but their attitudes toward them have changed in a positive way since the mid-1990s.

The main strength of constructivism does not lie in showing that peace in the region will last forever or that states no longer behave according to any realist logic. Capie and Evans only make a modest claim concerning progress. Still, they caution critics of multilateralism by saying that it is too early to write off existing multilateral institutions. In their optimistic view, “[t]he challenge for advocates of multilateralism will be to find new ways to build on the foundations laid down in the past decade” (p. 7). Meanwhile, they acknowledge that the culture of *realpolitik* is far from dead and that the realist world still exists: “[S]elf-help and bilateral security arrangements remain the cornerstones of regional security practice” (p. 7). The question that confronts us now is how many more “new ways” are needed before the existing multilateral foundations can be strengthened enough to overcome the so-called culture of *realpolitik*.

Additional insights on regional security are provided by Seng Tan and Ralph Cossa. In *The Many Faces of Asian Security*, they contribute a chapter that defends Sheldon Simon's thesis that regional security in Southeast Asia can be best explained only by integrating realism and liberalism or by recognizing their co-existence. They advance the concept of a “cooperative balance of power” to make sense of the realities that states in the region have formed an international society based on “communal relationships” and “moderation.” States remain the key unit of analysis, but they seek to cooperate by building additional security institutions, such as ASEAN and the ARF. The overall discussion points to the fact that cooperative balancing has largely resulted from the process of socialization among political elites, who share a communal identity of some sort. The concept of communal identity, however, seems to fit more appropriately with the constructivist

approach to security. The main strength of this perspective is that the authors draw inspiration from constructivism without ignoring realism.

If the sociological process of communal identity building serves as the pillar for a cooperative balance of power, the question is why such multilateral institutions as ASEAN and the ARF remain weak, or at least much weaker than the EU. Seng Tan and Cossa would make a more forceful argument if they could draw more insights from Kantian internationalism. If the US threatens China or North Korea, it is mainly because Washington finds it more convenient to blame their authoritarian leaders for threatening its security. How else can we make sense of the fact that a few underdeveloped North Korean nuclear weapons pose a greater threat to US security than a larger number of nuclear weapons possessed by other democracies, such as Britain? Even Friedberg seems to rely on Kant—that “war between democracies has been less common than between democracies and non-democratic states, or among the non-democracies” (p. 9)—for theoretical guidance. The argument that “Asia’s future will resemble Europe’s past” clearly suggests that yesterday’s Europe was marked by competitive power politics; that Europe today exemplifies cooperation; and that Asia can eventually resemble today’s Europe. If this is the case, polarity based on material power distribution alone is not the critical explanatory variable unless realists can agree on the kind of polarity Europe now has. But if democracy matters when it comes to explaining cooperative European politics, realism based purely on material determinism has lost much of its strength.

For it to become a powerful theoretical approach, however, social constructivism needs to achieve some form of reconciliation with realism. Socialization among democracies may make it easier to foster cooperation, but it might be inadequate as a force to dismantle a balance-of-threat system. Without sharing a common perception of threat from without, democracies would find it more difficult to cooperate. Relations between Japan and the US may shed more light on this point. In *Japan and the Security of Asia*, Louis Hayes argues that Japan will continue “an uphill struggle to reassert itself” in this century. As an economic power in a patron-client relationship with the US, Japan can no longer depend on the factors that generated its economic strength. Japan’s economic revival and international success took place during the Cold War, when it could greatly profit from the US war objectives, maintain access to Western markets and receive trade concessions from the West. These favorable conditions no longer exist. According to Hayes, “the good old days are gone forever.” For Japan, there are few choices left, but the “military option is, of course, out.” Neither is Japan a “commercial trendsetter,” nor will it “dominate Asia by its culture, language, or religion” (p. xvi).

Since the end of the Cold War, the US has not done much to help lift Japan out of its economic slump, but has instead allowed non-democratic China to prosper. In recent years, Japan has taken independent foreign policy

initiatives that diverge from those taken by the US. We have to wait and see if the two democracies remain close security allies, if and when either of them no longer perceives China or North Korea as a potential threat. What we do know is that the 'North Atlantic Security Community' (whose members include the world's major democracies, particularly the EU members and the US) is no longer as cohesive as it once was. EU members and the US disagree on several major issues, including the environment and international criminal justice. EU members, particularly France, have sought to balance US threats to their interests. This is not to say that they are now bent on waging war against each other, but that balances of threat among such mature democracies are unlikely to cause them to wage war against each other.

Constructivism's main strength thus lies in its attack on realism's epistemological foundation. By detecting the inadequacies of realism's material determinism, constructivists can make a strong case that ideas, ideology and identity all shape politics, but will not put an end to it. The new round of strategic competition between China and the US, as Capie and Evans note, was not driven by anarchy per se or any other structural factors, but by a change of administration in Washington. George Bush came to power and embraced unilateralism in a more threatening way than the previous administration led by Bill Clinton. But this insight should serve as a strong reminder that no 'good' ideas can last forever nor will they completely prevail over 'bad' ones or lead to the eventual demise of all necessary balance-of-threat systems. Even the most stable democracies in today's world rely on effective systems of checks and balances.

Other new theoretical challenges to realism come from those who have advanced the concept of human security defined in non-military terms, focusing on such issues as human rights, transnational crime, economic security and environmental security. *The Many Faces of Asian Security* seeks to shed light on this intellectual effort. Clark Neher's chapter on "Democracy, Human Rights, and Security in Asia" reveals that Asian governments rely on economic development and political stability as the main sources of their legitimacy. "Asian democracy is defined in community rather than in individual terms," and "Asian human rights stress economic needs" (p. 166). But in his chapter on "economic security" in Asia, Leif Rosenberger appears to be less optimistic about economic security in the region. While siding with liberals in making the argument that globalization has made Asian states prosperous, he contends that the process of economic transition has also threatened their economic well-being. Even Japan, whose economy remains the world's second largest, now faces economic insecurity based on a huge public debt (the largest among the developed countries) and the need to increase spending on social security to cope with an aging population in the new century.

In his chapter on "Transnational Crime and Asia-Pacific Security," John McFarlane writes, "Transnational organized crime and terrorism can no

longer be written off as 'boutique' regional security issues. These issues have become central to security and international policy concerns in the post-Cold War era..." (p. 219). Globalization has contributed to the worldwide spread of this criminal activity. Even state actors, such as North Korea and Burma, have been involved. Such crime is a threat to human and societal security dependent on economic and environmental security.

But have social, economic and environmental security issues now prevailed upon threats to military security? In his chapter on "Environment, Development, and Security in Southeast Asia," Donald Weatherbee proves that the environment is still a low priority for the leaders of ASEAN states. At the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, they took a position that remained self-centred: if Western countries wanted developing countries to adopt environmentally friendly policies, they should cover the costs. ASEAN states have also failed to overcome the principle of state sovereignty. Whether states will become more willing to tackle environmental insecurity collectively remains to be seen. According to Paul Bracken, "Broadening the security debate about Asia beyond 'traditional' military security considerations to new security issues [greatly] *benefits* the status quo powers," such as the US and Japan (p. 73). Unless they can see far beyond what he now can, states in the region will not pursue a security agenda seen to benefit the status quo powers. China, for instance, would not adopt a costly environmental policy that inhibits its race toward economic development and military modernization. There is no guarantee that the US will never again elect a unilateralist president.

Environmental problems may even threaten national and regional security. In Weatherbee's words, "Perhaps more than any other region...Southeast Asia illustrates the way in which environmental concerns can be translated into traditional security concerns: threats and challenges to state authority and sovereignty" (pp. 141-42). Thailand's relentless pursuit of 'economic security,' for instance, has come at the expense of 'environmental security; and even threatens the environmental security of neighbouring states. Weatherbee sees more evidence of Thailand's "neighbors...becoming less compliant and more militant in their defense against the illegal aspects of Thai penetration of their resource base," and contends that "Thai 'economic security' will be at risk if its record of exploitation leads to a denial of access" (p. 147).

In short, the literature under review reveals that there is a general consensus that the Asia Pacific is far from secure. But the basic questions (what is being secured, what is being secured against, who provides for security, and how?) have received different or competing answers. Political realism—based on material factors alone, such as human nature, military capability/power distribution and international anarchy—no longer rules unchallenged, but its opponents remain weak. Among the postpositivist perspectives, constructivism has the greatest potential to subsume realism, but only if its proponents adopt analytical eclecticism to soften realism's

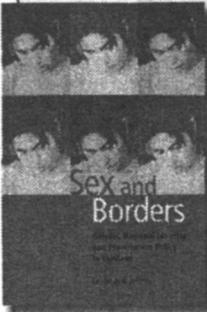
materialist foundation, yet do so without also making a premature claim that states will soon stop balancing against threats. Unconventional, non-military sources of human insecurity have also challenged realism, but they have yet to be translated into concrete policy action and might even intensify the need for threat balancing among states.

Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan, October 2002

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